

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## On the Beach

by

### Nevil Shute

### Book Information

Nevil Shute, On the Beach

Quiz Number: 8666

Ballantine Books, Inc, 1954

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278 Pages

Book Level: 6.3

Interest Level: UG

This is the chilling story of small community doomed to nuclear destruction.

**Topics:** Adventure, Survival; Classics, Classics (All); Popular Groupings, College Bound; Popular Groupings, Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Science Fiction, End of the Earth

### Main Characters

Commander Dwight Towers an American man of integrity who imagines he is going back to his family in Connecticut

John Seymour Osborne a scientist who studies radiation levels while aboard the "Scorpion" and a man who is dedicated to racing his Ferrari

Lieutenant Commander Peter Holmes a dedicated Navy man, husband to Mary and father to baby Jennifer

Mary Holmes a loving mother and wife who pretends that the future is bright

Moira Davidson an outlandish, young single woman who falls in love with Dwight

### Vocabulary

**dissimulate** to hide one's true feelings, plans, etc.

**elucidate** to make clear; clarify; explain

**fortnight** two weeks

**fortuitous** happening by chance

**half-life** amount of time during which half of the atoms in a given sample of a radioactive element disintegrate

**rubicund** reddish; ruddy; flushed

### Synopsis

In his book, *On The Beach*, author Nevil Shute portrays life after a nuclear war. The story is set in Australia in the 1960s. A "short, bewildering war" in 1961 between China and Russia, with intervention by the United States and England, has devastated the world. The entire Northern Hemisphere's population has been annihilated by nuclear bombing. Scientists have informed Australians that it is only a matter of time before the Earth's winds will blow deadly radioactive dust toward their country. The world is coming to an end.

That truth is too horrible to accept. Most of the characters in Shute's novel live in denial. They attempt to carry on normal lives, refusing to acknowledge their impending deaths. Interestingly, each character copes with the imminent horror in a unique way.

The book begins with Lieutenant Commander Peter Holmes accepting a post with the Royal Australian Navy. From the submarine "U.S.S. Scorpion," under Commander Dwight Towers, U.S.N., Holmes and the submarine's crew study radiation levels near various coastal latitudinal points. Holmes befriends Towers and brings him home to meet his wife Mary and baby daughter Jennifer. To provide Dwight companionship, Mary introduces him to her friend Moira. The plot mainly revolves around these four adult characters and a scientist, John Osborne, who measures radiation levels on the "Scorpion."

Peter Holmes is a dedicated husband and father with a strong grasp of reality. On board the "Scorpion," he discovers that radiation levels are becoming increasingly higher in the Southern Hemisphere. Although he holds no hope for the future, he feels it is important to comfort his wife Mary. Mary is determined to plant a garden, which will bloom long after she is gone, and she also frets about her daughter's future. She is unable to face the reality of the blank future. Out of love, Peter carries out Mary's plans for the garden. In their last days, he buys a power mower and a bench for her garden.

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Moira is a flirty, outlandish single young woman with a heart of gold. To cope with her bleak future, Moira drinks to excess. She is both depressed and bitter that she will never be able to travel the world and see such places as Paris, London, and New York. In addition, she regrets her singleness and longs for love. Eventually, her relationship with Dwight gives her life meaning. His kindness and sensitivity encourage her, and the two find comfort in one another as they pursue activities such as dining, dancing, swimming, and boating. However, their relationship never goes beyond friendship. Dwight remains true to his wife Sharon. Although Peter understands his family in Connecticut is dead, he pretends they are alive--his way of coping with the crisis. He even buys his wife and children gifts for his return home.

Scientist John Osborne understands more than anyone that the end is coming. To deal with his feelings of despair, he races his Ferrari at daring, life-threatening speeds. Although it seems that Osborne has a death wish, his life-long wish comes true when he wins the Grand Prix.

Soon after Peter, Dwight, and the "Scorpion" crew investigate communication signals in Seattle, Washington, and discover that no human life exists in the area, radiation sickness is detected in several patients in the Australian city of Melbourne. When it afflicts Mary and Jennifer, Peter administers cyanide to them and to himself. Soon afterward, John Osborne likewise takes cyanide tablets in his car. After Moira parts with Dwight, she ends her life in the same way. Dwight takes the "Scorpion" out of Australian waters to sink it. He intends to end his life at sea.

Before Peter's family dies, Mary asks her husband if anything could have stopped the tragic nuclear war. Peter says, "The only possible hope would have been to educate them [the people who supported the use of the destructive cobalt bombs] out of their silliness."

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

On the Holmes family's last day of life, Peter goes to town to buy Mary a garden seat. Why does he make the purchase knowing that Mary will die?

*It is a gesture of love for his wife. He wants to please her one last time.*

### Literary Analysis

Dwight is a positive influence on Moira. Because of their relationship, Moira stops drinking heavily and takes secretarial classes. How is she a positive influence on Dwight?

*She gives Dwight companionship in a difficult time. She makes him laugh and helps him enjoy life. She makes his last days tolerable.*

### Inferential Comprehension

On the last day of their fishing weekend Moira speaks to Dwight and says, "I feel like John must feel--as if I've won a victory over something. But I don't know what." Why do you think Moira has won a "victory."

*She has come to grips with her relationship with Dwight. She understands that they will never be lovers and yet she is not bitter. She is able to appreciate their friendship.*

### Constructing Meaning

Think of someone who reminds you of Dwight. How is that person like him?

*Dwight is admirable for many reasons. He is hard-working, loyal to his family, sensitive and God-fearing. Although he is a serious man, he enjoys humor as well.*

## Teachable Skills

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**Recognizing Setting** To study radiation levels and their effects on coastal towns at different latitudinal points, Commander Towers and his crew complete several missions on the submarine "Scorpion." On one mission, the crew travels from Australia to Seattle. Throughout the book, many geographical places are mentioned. Post a world map on a bulletin board and have the students locate these places and put pins at each point.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** *On The Beach* portrays life after nuclear warfare. Explain to the students that Shute wrote his book in the 1950s, not long after the United States dropped two nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. Ask the students to research the aftereffects of these bombings. Discuss the ramifications of the nuclear bomb's invention and its use.

**Comparing and Contrasting** Both the novel and movie adaptation of Nevil Shute's *On The Beach* have been acclaimed. After the students read the novel, show them the movie. In a discussion, compare and contrast the two. Which medium do students think is the most effective in telling the story? Have them support their answers.

**Responding to Literature** A major theme of *On The Beach* is how people cope with the knowledge that the world will be ending. Many of the characters in the book often show signs of denial. Mary plants her garden; Moira's father talks of building a dam on his farm; and Dwight speaks of going home to Mystic. Other characters have a strong grasp of reality. For instance, John Osborne, knowing that he is going to die, is determined to fulfill his life's dream of racing his Ferrari. Knowing that the end is near, Peter visits the chemist to discuss how to administer cyanide. Ask the students how they think they would cope knowing that the end of the world was coming. In a brief paper have them describe how they would plan to spend their last days.