

# The PHOENIX FILES



## Teachers' Notes on *The Phoenix Files: Arrival* by Chris Morphey

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### Summary

Sixteen-year-old Luke's parents have divorced, and he and his mother have moved to a new town called Phoenix, 500 kilometres from Sydney, where she will work for the Shackleton Co-operative, a corporation that built Phoenix "from the ground up" for its employees.

From the outset, Luke feels that there is more to Phoenix than meets the eye, and that it is decidedly "weird", as he says to his mother. She seems (or chooses) to be oblivious to the circumstances: there are no cars, only bicycles; no mobile phone coverage, no internet, no television; no police force, only Co-operative security guards.

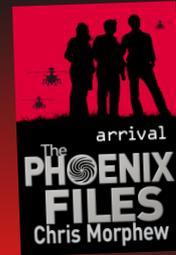
But the sinister undercurrent to Phoenix can no longer be ignored after Crazy Bill delivers a recorded conversation to Luke and his new friend Jordan. The recording details a plan to wipe out humanity with the aid of "Tabitha". Neither Luke nor Jordan is the type of person to sit back and hope for the best. Unable to appeal to any outside authority, they decide, with the reluctant participation of their classmate Peter, to find out what is planned and what they can do to prevent it.

There are 100 days to the end of the world, however, and this book occupies only 12 of them. Important setting up is taking place; it is early days.

*Arrival* is a suspenseful page-turner, so these notes suggest that there are three main ways of approaching its discussion in the classroom.

- The first is **plot**. Read it aloud as a serial with a class or group, pausing at strategic places to predict and problem-solve alongside the characters. This approach recognises that the story is plot-driven, and therefore focuses on the narrative choices of the author and how he creates suspense. Most of the early chapters end on 'cliffhangers', some of which foreshadow events. This could also be a powerful model for student writing.
- The second approach is to consider that the author is setting up a **dsytopia**. This invites readers to look beyond the story's narrative level to see it as metaphoric. Such an approach also invites comparisons with contemporary society. What is the author inviting us to think about? For instance, Peter is reading Thomas More's *Utopia*; a phoenix is the mythical bird that rises from the ashes.
- And finally, **world-building**. All good science fiction and fantasy depends on world-building, and readers might like to approach *Arrival* from that point of view. The town of Phoenix has to convince us of its reality. How does the author build a vivid, concrete, consistent world? How does he make it 'Pleasantville' on the surface, and yet sinister underneath?

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### Plot

Predicting and problem-solving are two pleasurable aspects of reading this book, and below are highlighted places to pause, discuss and speculate. These are only a guide and you may like to select others.

- (p11) 'Not the end of the world' - invite predictions about where the story is going.
- (p20) Luke gets the last locker, which Peter says means he is 'the last one coming'. What can that mean?
- (p32) Luke finds the envelope on his bed, which gives him a feeling of foreboding. It contains a memory stick with the initials J.B. P52 Jordan has one with L.H. on it - the plot thickens.
- (p56) What do Jordan and Luke have in common? Is it just what Peter calls an 'irrational paranoia that this whole town is out to get you?'
- (p59) What do you think Cathryn, Tank and Michael are excluding Peter from? Any predictions?
- (p62) What is on the memory sticks?
- (p65-68) What do you make of the recorded conversation?
- (p66) Why use the word 'candidates'? Why are there 2000? Why is the town 'secured'? Why can't they afford a 'bloodbath?'
- (p71-72) Luke's right, isn't he - why have a couple of "random high school kids" been told?
- (p84) They arrive at the now abandoned airport. What is going on?
- (p90-91) Before turning the page, ask readers to predict whom it will be and justify their answers.
- (p98) Crazy Bill is quoting the poem from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, which leads Luke and his friends to the library. Why do you think the author chose this poem?
- What do you make of what happened at the airport? Does Crazy Bill have superhuman strength?
- (p157) What do you predict is the significance of Jordan's mother's pregnancy? What might happen as a result?
- (p270) Luke, Jordan and Peter meet Officer Reeve outside the walls. What is going to happen to them?
- (p278) Then Reeve covers for them. Why?
- (p284) Ms Pryor says, 'if this [Crazy Bill's superhuman strength?] is a side effect of the fallout...' Fallout from what? Predictions?

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### (Plot continued...)

- (p295) The narrative ends with a phone ringing. Write the opening chapter of the next installment and give it a title.
- Create a three-minute movie trailer for the film version of *Arrival* with a teaser for the second episode.

### Dystopia

The creation of a nightmare world. Invite readers to identify the elements of the world of Phoenix that make it a dystopia. Some are suggested below:

- (p135) The town is under curfew, supposedly because of the danger of Crazy Bill. Once he is locked up, the curfew remains. Loss of personal freedom.
- Is it a totalitarian regime? (p44) Peter refers to Stalin.
- (p193) Luke uses what is almost an utopian cliché to underscore the dystopia: ‘...families standing around barbecues, teenagers skateboarding and rollerblading, kids feeding ducks or getting pushed on the swings by their parents. Normal people doing normal stuff.’ Discuss how this heightens Luke’s unease and the sinister nature of Phoenix.
- Consider Officer Calvin’s name. John Calvin was a major religious figure in the Reformation. Why name a patently sinister character after him?
- (p216) Luke, Jordan and Peter discover the warehouse, which supplies Phoenix and stores the manipulated media.
- (p250) The road ends and so does any pretence about Phoenix being an “ordinary” town.
- (p260) The wall encloses the town.
- Dystopias often act as critiques of society, predicting where society might be heading. Discuss the parallels that readers make with contemporary society, such as value of material wealth (nice house, good job); the world of advertising; border protection - national/ personal security; control of the media, etc.
- Consider the meaning of the name: Shackleton Co-operative.
- The text they are studying at school is H. G. Wells’s *The Shape of Things to Come*. What is this book about? Wells wrote the screenplay for the 1936 movie. What are the connections the author is inviting us to make? An episode of the television series *Lost* is titled ‘The Shape of Things to Come’.

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### World-building

- The town has no roads, only bike tracks.
- (p9) Description of the identical houses. Luke thinks it is 'too perfect'. What does that mean?
- (p14) Wardrobe of school clothes in Luke's size.
- (p15) Security guards with guns
- (p15) Description of the Shackleton building: Luke thinks something is wrong about it.
- (p16) 'Phoenix version of McDonald's' - no outside companies.
- (p29) No police, only security forces - 'zero crime' says Peter, and yet everyone locks up their bikes.
- How did Shackleton Co-operative select people?
- Create a map of Phoenix, the town itself, the road out, the warehouse, the wall. Draw the map to scale according to information provided in the book. How much land does it cover? Where do you think it is in a radius from Sydney? How has it not been discovered?

### Mode of telling

- This is Luke's story and it is told by him in the first person, so the language is conversational and accessible. It also means the world view is limited to Luke's, so readers need to be aware of what others say and do.
- Is Luke a reliable narrator?

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### Characters

Readers might like to consider the importance of names and the associations we make with them.

### Luke Hunter

- Why is Luke suspicious from the start? What does that tell us about him?
- He has a sense of irony (p33) but seems serious most of the time. Is Peter the humorous foil to Luke's seriousness?
- Feels uncomfortable in the 'creepy display home of a house' (p42).
- Worried about his father, determined to do something. He doesn't seem to like his mother very much.
- Recognises his own limitations - his confidence is fed by Jordan's.

### Emily Hunter, his mother

- Human Resources Manager for Shackleton Co-operative.
- (p39) '[She] figure[s] out how [huge companies] can get the most out of their employees for the least amount of money' is what Luke says about her. Is his view coloured by his parents' divorce, or is Luke always cynical?
- We don't get any other view of Emily, so we have to make assumptions about her on the basis of her behavior: emotionally distant, she works long hours, rarely cooks, rarely spends time with Luke and seems used to throwing her weight around.
- Speculate on how is she persuaded by the company to move to Phoenix. Role play the interview. Then, interview her after the first week in Phoenix. Is she kidding herself?

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### Peter Weir

- He is in some ways a much more concrete character than Luke.
- Classmate of Luke's; goofy; fancies Jordan and has memorised her timetable.
- Good-natured, easy-going, doesn't question much. Is that perhaps why he is chosen to show Luke around, befriend him?
- Peter has a fine line in repartee, such as (p200): 'See, this is what people are reduced to when there's no TV.'
- (p71) He can't believe in a secret plot to wipe out the human race. Is his role to always play devil's advocate to Luke? Or is his the voice of reason? Or is he delusional. Can't face reality?
- Intelligent - reads widely, just not keen on school. He says he has an 'attitude problem'.
- (p244) Jordan says of him: 'You don't want any of it to be true, because then you might actually have to step up and do something about it!' Is that fair?

### Jordan Burke

- Feisty, also thinks there's something not right about the town.
- She shows the most courage and agency of the three: smashes into the airport; gets them into the warehouse and up on the wall.
- (p159) Her mother is aware that not all is right in Phoenix, too - different from Emily Hunter.
- (p173) Sees herself as strong.
- Is volatile, quick to anger.

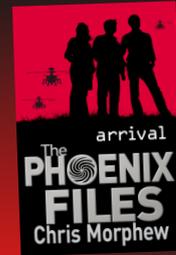
### Michael, Tank and Cathryn

- Used to be friends of Peter's.

### Crazy Bill

- Is a puzzle: an apparently homeless man in an otherwise "perfect" town. How can he exist in an invite-only town? Peter doesn't seem to care. Luke is more curious.
- Seems to have super strength. Wants help to get out of town. Why?
- (p93-97) Is Bill just plain frustrating? What do you make of him?
- (p176) Bill attacks Luke. Why? Why is he so deliberately obscure?
- Why do the three of them follow up on his clues when he attacks them and they obviously feel ambivalent about him? Jordan raises this (p189). Peter replies that Crazy Bill has his own agenda. Do you have any ideas what that might be?

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### Shackleton Co-operative employees:

- Towards the end of the reading, it might be useful to plot these characters in terms of their knowledge and support of the repressive company and its intentions

### Aaron Ketterley

- 'Residential Liaison'

### Bruce Calvin

- Chief of Security. Aware of the plans for the outside world.
- In cahoots with Ms Pryor. They visit Luke in hospital after he is attacked by Bill.

### Mrs Stapleton

- Deputy principal at the school

### Officer Reeve

- A security guard involved in the scuffle at the airport. Young - only about 25 years old. Equivocates about Crazy Bill incident.
- Finds Luke, Jordan and Peter outside the wall and covers for them so they are not killed by Calvin.
- What do you predict about his actions in the future?

### Ms Pryor

- School principal
- (p117) Luke doesn't trust her.
- (p120) '...getting paid to serve someone else's agenda.'
- She tells the three of them that there are no secrets in Phoenix (p121) and then lies to them.
- Plot out where characters, including the teachers, line up in terms of Shackleton Co-operative and its plans - for/against/neutral. Give reasons.

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### Follow on from reading

- (p30) 'How long would it take Dad to start worrying that he hadn't heard from us?' Imagine that you are Luke's father. What do you imagine he has been told about their relative disappearance? Consider that Luke and his mother did not travel on their booked flight from Sydney.
- You are the spin-doctor for Shackleton Co-operative. What do you tell the families/friends of those at Phoenix about their total lack of contact?

### Ideas

- (p81) 'Since when can you expect sense from an English teacher?'
- (p121) 'There are no secrets in Phoenix,' says Ms Pryor. Discuss the possible meanings. Is big brother watching?
- (p155-156) 'If there's a not-slightly-awkward way to meet your friend's parents, I'd love to know about it.'

### Intertextual references

- (p9) Brady Bunch and (p23) 'Days of our Lives make-up'. Why is the author making references to these television shows? What do you know about them?

### Related reading

1984 by George Orwell

Brave New World by Aldous Huxley

The Giver by Lois Lowry

Uglies: Pretties; Specials; Extras by Scott Westerfeld

The Knife of Never Letting Go by Patrick Ness

Gone by Michael Grant

How I Live Now by Meg Rosoff

Darklands Trilogy by Anthony Eaton

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