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Ken Catran

Neo's War

Australia, New Zealand (1995)

TAGS: Achilles Agamemnon Diomedes (Son of Tydeus) Neoptolemus Odysseus / Ulysses Polyxena Priam Trojan War





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Neo's War
Country of the First Edition	Australia, New Zealand
Country/countries of popularity	Australia, New Zealand
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1995
First Edition Details	Ken Catran, *Neo's War*. Rydalmere: Starlight, 1995, 175 pp.
ISBN	0733602576
Genre	Historical fiction, Time-Slip Fantasy*
Target Audience	Crossover (Older children aged 10–15 and young adults; especially boys, possibly reluctant readers)
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Creators



Ken Catran , b. 1944
(Author)

Ken Catran (born 1944 in Auckland) is a New Zealand children's novelist and screenwriter. He lives in Waimate in South Canterbury with his wife who is also a writer. Catran started his career as a screenwriter and only in the 1990s started focussing on writing novels. Catran is well- known for his contribution to the TV drama *Shortland Street* and his scripts for the television miniseries *Under the Mountain* (1982), an eight episode dramatization of Maurice Gee's 1979 children's novel, for the 1993 movie of Tessa Duder's 1987 novel *Alex* and for the dramatisation of his own 1987 novel *Steelriders* (1987).

Catran has written over 30 novels for young adults, mostly sci-fi, fantasy or historical novels. He is particularly noted for the large number of stories he has written about New Zealanders at War, such as his novels about the Moran family. For this reason, he has been called "one of the key figures in this century's revival of interest in the historical novel." (Agnew, 2014). Catran's action-packed plots and lively, colloquial writing style seem to be intended to especially appeal to teenage boys, possibly also reluctant readers.

Catran has won over 30 awards, both for his novels and his television screen writing. In 2007, he received New Zealand's most prestigious award for children's writing, the Storylines Margaret Mahy Medal, for his distinguished contribution to New Zealand children's literature and was writer in residence at Waikato University. In 1996, he was writer in residence at the University of Otago. In 2004, Catran was awarded the Ester Glen Award for his contribution to literature at the LIANZA Children's Book Awards with *Jacko Moran: Sniper.* His books have been shortlisted numerous times in the New Zealand Post Book Awards and in 2001, *Voyage with Jason* became book of the year.

Five of Ken Catran's young adult novels are set in ancient Greece, four of them during or immediately following the Trojan War. All of these novels, except one (*Odysseus*), tell the story of the war from the view point of a child or young adult.

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Sources:

Agnew, Trevor, "New Zealanders at War in novels and picture books", *Magpies* 29.2 (2014): 3.

Profile in Storylines, 2013 (accessed: March 23, 2020).

New Zealand Book Council (2013) *Catran, Ken* in: Read NZ Te Pou Muramura (accessed: March 23, 2020).

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Additional information

Summary

In this "boys' own"-style time-slip novel, contemporary New Zealand teenager Neo (Neil) Torrens experiences the final days of the Trojan War as the hero Neoptolemus from ancient myth. It is a coming of age novel, in which 14 year old Neo's experiences as a soldier in Bronze Age Troy help his modern persona mature. The parts of Catran's novel set in antiquity take place in the time between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, after Achilles' death and just before and during the Sack of Troy. Modern-day Neo is of half Greek descent and the son of a UN soldier who is about to depart to fight in a conflict between Greece and Turkey. Neo is worried that his father might die during the fighting and (rightly) suspects that his mother is pregnant, but is keeping it secret, in order to not worry her husband at the time of his departure. Neo also in annoyed by the bossy behaviour of his older sister Iris.

Neo decides to strike a bargain with the goddess Athena: if she stops his father from going to war, he will sacrifice to her his most treasured possession, his expensive mountain bike. From then onwards, Neo's reality keeps suddenly shifting between 1990s suburban New Zealand and ancient Troy, where he finds himself fighting as the commander of an ancient Greek people from Thessaly, the Myrmidons, against the Trojans. He needs to prove that he can fill his father Achilles' shoes, but also sees the war and loss of men critically, from a modern standpoint. In this novel, Neo is the one who gives Odysseus the idea to trick the Trojans with a Wooden Horse. He joins the soldiers who hide inside the Wooden Horse and fights at the Fall of Troy. Most importantly, Neo needs to figure out who he is and what is ethically right: should he follow the pressure of the other Greek heroes and his soldiers in order to win their respect or should he listen to his own conscience?

Meanwhile, modern-day Neo, in his anxiety and frustration, makes a number of bad choices: under the influence of a very nationalist Greek friend, he vandalises the takeaway belonging to the family of his Turkish classmate Pakize. Next, he voluntarily participates in a television interview, speaking about how he feels about his father going to war, which is cut by the producer in such a way as to embarrass not only Neo, but also his father in his military position.

At ancient Troy, Neo sees a young woman whose appearance reminds him strongly of Pakize (his class-mate, whose family's dairy he has

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spray-painted). He learns that she is the sorceress daughter of king Priam and queen Hecuba, Polyxena. There are rumours that Polyxena's magic is responsible for his father's death. At the end of the novel, in the last episode set at Troy, Neo is under enormous pressure from the other Greek soldiers and kings, to kill the Trojan princess on his father's grave. As he hesitates to follow through on this, the perspective switches back to modern-day New Zealand, leaving Neo and the novel's readers wondering whether Neo killed her or not. Contemporary Neo hopes that he has not killed Polyxena, but the mysterious librarian Ms. Shaker, a personification of the goddess Athena, tells him that he did kill her. Neo feels like a moral failure, but then Pakize comes to see him, gives him the chance to apologise and relates a dinner invitation from her father to Neo. Pakize's father has seen Neo's television interview and now understands Neo's side. Neo's understands now that Athena has sent him to Troy in order for him to learn to make his own decisions in his contemporary life, rather than letting himself be manipulated. He honours his promise to Athena and throws his bicycle into the sea as the promised sacrifice.

Analysis

Neo's War is part of the very popular genre of children's historical fiction, the most popular setting of which is the Trojan War. Like many novels of the genre, it is a time-slip narrative which focusses on a biographical narrative and mixes history, ancient mythology and fiction. It is a coming of age-story in which the young protagonist matures through his experiences in antiquity. In the parts of the novel set in antiquity, Neo's persona is Neoptolemus, Achilles' son. Both are teenagers who are affected by wars and their fathers' absences and (possible) deaths. Catran's Neoptolemus is shown struggling to find his own feet among the older, more experienced Greek warrior kings at Troy, and having to cope with the pressure of filling his famous father's shoes. In particular, he need to learn to recognise and resist being manipulated by the pressures, both of the kings (especially Agamemnon and Odysseus) but also of his own men. The novel's central themes are the character development of the protagonist and a critical view at traditional concepts of heroism, similar to Sophocles' *Philoctetes*.

Neo analyses his situation in the Trojan war frequently through a modern lens. There is much ambiguity about the gods and prophecies, but one thing is clear and of particular significance: the realisation

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that the Trojan War was a trade war, the abduction of Helen by Paris being only an excuse to start it. This insight helps Neo understand why his Greek friend was so keen to vandalise Pakise's family's takeaway restaurant, which was in competition to her own family's business.

Catran mentions the *Iliad* as his source, but, surprisingly, neither Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, in which Neoptolemos's character development is a central theme, nor Virgil's *Aeneid*, which describes the Sack of Troy and Neoptolemus' (Latin: Pyrrhus) involvement.

Catran uses a modern, often colloquial style, but gives his story an ancient epic touch, by applying epithets to his characters and using many metaphors and similes. He employs a few quotes from the *Iliad* and the goriness of his battle scenes also reminds one of Homer's epic.

In this novel, readers find out many details about Bronze Age Greek warfare, life at a war camp, armour, clothes, food and drink, feasting, treatment of slaves, prisoners of war and concubines. Catran's lively narrative paints a colourful picture of a young warrior king's life at Troy. For young readers, Neo/Neoptolemus is an easy character to emphasise and identify with.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Achilles Agamemnon Diomedes (Son of Tydeus) Neoptolemus Odysseus / Ulysses Polyxena Priam Trojan War
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Authority Boys Character traits Coming of age Communication Death Emotions Family Heroism History Identity Maturity Murder Relationships Sacrifice Superstition Values Violence War

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