

AN
EXPLORATION
OF

BEARMOUTH

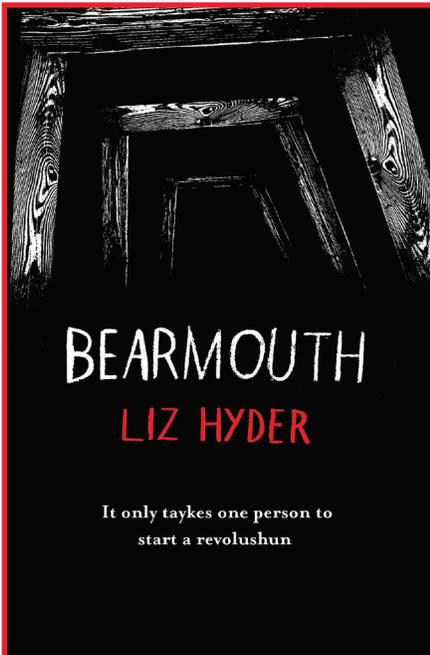
LIZ HYDER



PUSHKIN
CHILDREN'S
BOOKS

IT ONLY TAYKES ONE PERSON TO START A REVOLUSHUN

***Bearmouth* by Liz Hyder is a story about courage, friendship, exploitation and rebellion**



Set deep underground in the fictional Bearmouth mine, the story is told from the perspective of a young worker named Newt. Like the other workers in the mine, Newt both lives and works in Bearmouth, enduring a tough life with sparse food and long hours of labour in dark, dangerous conditions.

Reward will come in the next life with the benevolence of the Mayker and Newt accepts everything – that is, until the mysterious Devlin arrives. Newt starts to look at Bearmouth afresh, questioning all the things that until that point had seemed certain – but the friendship that offers a way out of the darkness also threatens to destroy Newt's entire world.

'One of the most ambitious and darkly brilliant YA books I've read. It's provocative, tender, claustrophobic and epic. It blew my mind'

Kiran Millwood Hargrave, author of *The Girl of Ink & Stars*

'One of the most vivid, tough, bold and gripping books I've read in a long time – and it's utterly original, the kind of story to carry you away'

Katherine Rundell, author of *The Good Thieves*

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TALKING POINTS

One of the most interesting things about *Bearmouth* is the way that Liz Hyder has written it. Why do you think she chose to write her book in such a strong dialect? What does the voice of the novel tell you about Newt, the character narrating the story? Do you think reading a book written in the first person makes the character come to life for the reader?



An important theme of *Bearmouth* is censorship and control. The characters in the book are told stories that reinforce the power of the mine owners. Do you think that the Mayker's prayer and the myths and stories around the Mayker help to keep the miners subservient and hard working? What do you think encourages Newt and Devlin to start asking questions? How easy do you think it is for people to question the power of authorities?

Friendship is an important and powerful force for good in the book, opening the world up for Newt. First, there is her friendship with Thomas, who shares his knowledge in reading and writing but also acts as a protector of both Newt and Tobe. Then there is Newt's friendship with the young Tobe, almost as an older sibling in which Newt feels the need to look after a younger, more vulnerable boy. Finally, there is her friendship with Devlin, which encourages Newt to see the world of the mine in a different light. What do you think the impact of Tobe's death is on Newt? When Devlin first arrives, Newt is suspicious of him but also drawn to him. Why do you think that is? What is it about Devlin that enables Newt to change?

Bearmouth is set below ground in a fictional working coal mine. Liz Hyder researched the working conditions for children in Victorian mines and visited historic mines to understand how it felt to be in this alien subterranean world. Children as young as four worked long hours down the mines and, in some parts of the world today, are still working in mines in difficult and dangerous conditions. Did reading *Bearmouth* give you an idea of what it might be like to work in a mine? How did the story bring this to life for you? Do you think it was fair that miners were not only working hard to dig out the coal but also had to buy their own candles, boots and food? Bearmouth mine is fictional but many of the details in the story are real. Do you think it works to combine a made-up world with a real historical setting?



Rebellion starts to emerge when Newt and Devlin no longer believe all the stories they are told about why they are working in the mine. As their friendship grows and they trust one another more they come to realise that their lives and work, along with those of all their co-workers in the mine, are what the mine relies upon to function. What do you think it is that allows them to see the world differently? What are the moments in the book when Newt and Devlin start to understand that they have to make a stand?

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RELATED CREATIVE WRITING IDEAS



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LETTER WRITING AND CENSORSHIP/EDITING

A visualisation exercise followed by a letter-writing session, a discussion about censorship and editing and a second creative writing/editing session

SUGGESTED SCRIPT for the visualisation exercise

Hold your hand just in front of your nose, as close as you can get it without actually touching it (blindfolds can also be used for this). Imagine a darkness that is so absolute that you cannot even see your own hand this close.

Close your eyes and imagine that you are a new miner in Bearmouth. It is the end of your first day down the mine. You have worked for over 12 hours in dark, dusty and dangerous conditions. Imagine how it might smell down there. Imagine how the air might taste. Imagine the flickering light of the candles. Think about how noisy it might be – what sounds might you hear as the miners chip away at the rock, as they blast out new shafts in the mine using sticks of dynamite?

Think about how different elements of the mine feel, think about the wooden handle of the pick-axe, might it be smooth from years of being used? Think about the cool, gritty crumbliness of the coal under your nails, crushed into your hands. Think about the coal dust, thick in the air, thick in your lungs. Think about how tired you would be after a day's work. What parts of your body might ache? You will be staying down the mine overnight, living and working down there. Think about how you feel, are you scared or worried?

Ask the group to imagine that they have seen an accident in which someone was seriously injured in front of them. What sort of accident was it – an explosion, a cave-in? Set the group the task of writing a letter – from the heart – to their family at home. When they are finished, share favourite lines/paragraphs or whole pieces.

Discuss censorship and editing (links below in Notes). In **Bearmouth**, the Master reads all the letters that are sent, censoring those that depict the mine in a negative light. Talk about other examples of censorship, in the letters sent from the Front during WWI or in books being 'banned'.

Imagine the mine-owner is going to read the letters, docking their wages for any negative comments about the mine. Ask the group to look at their letters again. What negative things do they say? Discuss sarcasm, subtext, code and slang. How can they re-write what they've already written, keeping the content but being clever about how they recount their experiences?

Redraft the letter. When they are done, discuss how much more difficult this was. Share favourite lines/best paragraphs or entire pieces – compare with the original version too.



NOTES:

For less confident writers, the above visualisation exercise can still be used but the creative writing exercise could either be a diary entry from the point of view of a child miner or a poem/prose piece from the perspective of an inanimate object down the mine e.g. a candle, a stick of dynamite or even a pick-axe.

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LANGUAGE AND DIALECT

Discuss the use of language in the book – what phrases or words did you find memorable? Talk about dialects – what are they? Where do they come from? What sort of family sayings do they have? Who uses them and what do they mean? Create a word bank of family sayings, local slang and dialect with the group. Talk about phonetics. Each student chooses five words or phrases from the board that most appeal to them and writes them down phonetically.

Invent some brand new words or sayings for another word bank. Perhaps combining two words together – cracked mug into crackemug, smelly feet into smelleet. This can be a group activity or individual exercise. Share favourites.

Using the five words or phrases and any of the newly invented words, write a short piece of prose or poetry. This could be an everyday event, their walk to school that morning or something that happened to them at the weekend but written using dialect, family sayings, newly invented words and phonetic spelling. Share favourite lines/paragraphs. Discuss how playing with language changes the everyday into something different.

CREATING FICTIONAL DYSTOPIAN WORLDS AND CHARACTERS

As a group exercise, create a fictional dystopian world together. This is best with groups no bigger than 15. Collectively, discuss ideas and vote using a show of hands so everyone gets a chance to feed in. Prompt questions might include: Where is the world? Is it in the future or the past? How many people are there and where do they live? What problems are there in your world? What threats are there to the world? What do people do to survive? Keep drilling down and asking questions until a shape of the fictional world emerges. The group can either keep working on this until a more detailed shape of the world is created or they can work on this individually so their version of the world is more personal.

Each student must then invent a character to live in that same world. Think about age, name, location, where they fit into that society (at the bottom or the top), what their likes and dislikes are, their ambitions and fears, what their everyday life is like, who their friends and family are.

Finally, each student writes a piece of creative writing guided by the teacher. This could be character-based, describing their bedroom/place they sleep each night, what objects they might have around them, what they can see around them and how they feel about their world or it could be focused more on world-building, perhaps a view out of a nearby window or porthole, again describing what they can see around them, what's near to them, what's far away and upon seeing movement, describing what they can see, what happened. Let their imagination run riot! This can be extended over several sessions to really develop the characters and world in more detail.

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USEFUL LINKS

FREE - Children of the Revolution – information and background on the groundbreaking 1842 Mines and Collieries Act plus tasks and activities from The Big Pit and Museum of Wales team:
<https://museum.wales/childrenoftherevolution/>

FREE – images, fact-sheets, loan-boxes and more from the National Coal Mining Museum:
<https://www.ncm.org.uk/learning/learning-resources>

ITV short documentary and information on letters during WWI -
<https://www.itv.com/news/2018-11-05/the-letters-of-world-war-one-how-two-billion-treasured-messages-reveal-the-hopes-and-fears-from-the-frontline/>

The Telegraph - piece on censorship and first-hand accounts of censorship during WW1 -
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/world-war-one/inside-first-world-war/part-ten/10863689/why-first-world-war-letters-censored.html>



THE AUTHOR

Liz Hyder is a writer, experienced workshop leader and award-winning arts PR consultant. She has a BA in drama from the University of Bristol and, in early 2018, won the Bridge Award/ Moniack Mhor's Emerging Writer Award. She is currently working on her second book and a range of other creative projects. *Bearmouth* is her debut novel.

Liz Hyder always loves to see creative writing inspired by *Bearmouth* – feel free to share work with her on Twitter/Instagram at @LondonBessie

(Thank you to Polly Shepherd of Lacon Childe School in Cleobury Mortimer for her assistance with these notes)

Bearmouth by Liz Hyder | £12.99 | Hardback | ISBN: 9781782692423 | 320pp | OUT NOW