On the Beach

Nevil Shute

About the author
Nevil Shute Norway was born on 17 January 1899 in Ealing, a suburb of London, which was then at the edge of the country. Shute had a lifelong passion for aeroplanes and said they were ‘the best part of my life.’ Playing truant from his hated Hammersmith prep school, Shute would visit the Science Museum in Kensington, where he immersed himself amongst the model aeroplanes. Shute’s elder brother, Fred, died at the age of nineteen in the First World War. Shute believed it was his fate to die in the same way, and tried, without success, to enlist with the RAF. For the final three months of that war, he guarded the mouth of the Thames Estuary as a private soldier.

After obtaining an engineering degree at Balliol College Oxford, Shute began his career as an aeronautical engineer. He began writing in the 1920s under his two Christian names (Nevil Shute) because he was worried that a reputation as a novelist may undermine his engineering career. Shute formed his own aeroplane construction company, Airspeed Ltd., which he built up to a thousand employees by the time he left in 1939.

At the start of the Second World War, Shute joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve as an ‘elderly yachtsman’. After two days, he was pulled out to work on the design of unconventional weapons, and by the middle of the war had been made a lieutenant commander.

After the war Shute became a full-time author. He wrote twenty-five books over a period spanning thirty years. In 1949 he moved to Australia with his wife and two daughters, where he gained a reputation as an ‘Australian’ writer. He died in 1960.

Summary
On the Beach was first published in 1957. It was made into a film in 1959 starring Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner and Fred Astaire. The story is set in a fictional future, and assumes that a nuclear war has taken place. The nuclear bombs and the fallout have destroyed the northern hemisphere of the world. The radioactive dust is slowly moving south, killing everything in its path. Peter Holmes, Lieutenant Commander in the Australian navy, is appointed liaison officer on board Scorpion, a nuclear submarine. He is to work under American Commander, Dwight Towers. The submarine is sent on a short journey to investigate the eastern and northern coasts of Australia, and a longer cruise to the north to determine if there is any sign of life. The story focuses on five main characters – Peter, his wife, Mary, and baby daughter, Jennifer, their friend, Moira, and Dwight Towers. It shows how they face impending disaster, and how they personally confront the fate that awaits them.

Background and themes
Threat of nuclear war: In 1957, when On the Beach was published, nuclear war was at the forefront of people’s minds. The Cold War between the Eastern block and the West made the danger of war frighteningly real, as both sides gathered arms and threatened each other. The world seemed more vulnerable than ever before, and On the Beach dealt with issues few people were prepared to confront.

Shute was convinced that On the Beach was going to be a failure, and was pleasantly surprised when it proved to be a huge success, drawing new readers to his works. Since then it has been referred to by pacifists, philosophers, theologians, and political scientists, as a vivid picture of the horrific consequences of nuclear war.

Apocalypse: Shute set his novel in the year 1962 – a few years into the future. The title of the novel is fundamental to its key theme. The beach is a place where earth and water meet. It is often associated with beginnings and endings, and in this case is symbolic of the end of life on Earth. Shute used an extract from T.S. Eliot’s poem, The Waste Land, at the front of the full version of his novel. These lines can be directly related to the story:

‘In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river …’
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.’

Melbourne can be seen as the last of meeting places where people struggle to live their lives, not mentioning the impending doom, whilst the tumid river of radioactive dust moves slowly towards them. The last four lines are particularly significant. The world dies not with the bang of a nuclear bomb, but through the slowly fading whimper of suicide and radiation sickness.

The novel ends on the beach. Dwight Towers takes his submarine out to sink it in the bay, leaving Moira watching on the beach, where she then takes her suicide pills.

Hope: On the Beach is a story of desperate hope and final resignation. All the way through there is the thought that maybe Australia will be spared, that the radioactive dust will be washed away by the rain before it reaches Melbourne. One scientist insists that the radiation in the north is lessening and that soon life will be able to exist there again. This is the motivation behind the submarine’s journey to the shores of Canada. The strange unintelligible radio signals emerging sporadically from Seattle for two years give out a message of hope that someone just might be alive there. This hope too is dashed when the cause – a broken window frame rocking in the wind – is discovered by the exploration party. This theme of hope runs parallel to the resilience of humans to disaster.

Shute was first and foremost an engineer, and his books always contain an extraordinary amount of technical information, written in an easily understood style. His characters are practical people who get on with their lives stoically and efficiently. The characters and the technical information in On the Beach are typical of Shute, but the storyline is not. He generally likes his heroes and heroines to solve their problems through logical and practical thinking.

Shute had a wide readership by the time he wrote On the Beach, so that the novel made an instant impact. The day before he died, Shute remarked on the power of the popular novelist, who is able to ‘play the part of the “enfant terrible” in raising for the first time subjects which ought to be discussed in public and which no statesman cares to approach. In this way, an entertainer may serve a useful purpose.’

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Research and discuss: Divide the class into small groups. Ask them to find information from books or the Internet about the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan during the Second World War. Have each group talk about these questions: Why were the nuclear bombs dropped on the two cities of Japan? Which country dropped them? How many people died? What made so many people die? How did the nuclear bomb destroy the two cities? What were the results of the bombing?

2 Write: Ask students to write what they know about Australia. They can describe the following: Where is the country situated? What is the climate like? Where is the capital? What is the country famous for? Which cities or places are best known to you? What can you see in the country? (e.g. koalas, kangaroos)

3 Artwork and discuss: A mushroom cloud will arise from a nuclear explosion. Ask students to draw the mushroom cloud and discuss why there is such a cloud.

Chapter 1

While reading

4 Read carefully: In Chapter 1, some energy resources available to the contemporary world are mentioned. What are they? Where do they come from? What are their characteristics? What are the effects on the environment? Invite a few students to give their answers.

5 Guess: Commander Towers and his crew were unable to communicate with any radio station in the United States or Europe. Ask students to guess what had happened to them.

After reading

6 Write and guess: Divide the class into small groups. Give each group a card with the name of one of the main characters with the letters in the wrong order. The group decodes the name and writes a few sentences to describe that character. Using the first person, the group reads out a sentence to the rest of the class, who must guess the name of the character.
On the Beach

Chapters 2–3

After reading
7 Write and discuss: Divide the class into small groups. Ask each group to write an account of these chapters through the eyes of one of the characters. They must write in the first person. Groups read their work to the class. Class votes on the most realistic account.

8 Role play: In Chapter 3, it mentions that Washington and London were bombed. Ask students to play one of the following roles and give a speech.
   Student A: You are a general in the American army. Say why Washington and London were bombed and what the fall of these two cities mean.
   Student B: You are the last politician in Washington/London after the bombing. What would you do to save your country and the people?

Chapters 4–5

While reading
9 Pair work: Ask students to work in pairs and imagine that a nuclear war has created a huge cloud of radioactive dust which has killed the rest of the world and is coming towards their country. What would you do? What effect would the rest of the world have on your country? Would you prepare for death as Peter’s family does?
   Have a class discussion after students have talked in pairs.

10 Guess: The Scorpion is ready to set off for the Pacific. Ask students to guess how disastrous the Pacific could be after the explosion. They guess if the people on Scorpion will detect any sign of life. Why/why not?

After reading
11 Discuss: Divide the class into small groups. Write the sentence the chemist says on the board: ‘It’s probably going to be a difficult decision for religious people.’ Ask students what he is talking about. Is he right? Why/why not? How difficult would religious people find the decision? What would their decision be?

Chapter 6

After reading
12 Check: Ask students to check whether their predictions in Activity 11 were correct.

13 Discuss and write: In small groups, students discuss whether they think Nevil Shute gives a realistic picture of the world after a nuclear war. Make lists of the things they agree and disagree with and anything they think should have been included. They then write down all the feelings they have as they read about the dead world. The groups report back to the rest of the class.

14 Role play: Refer to the paragraph on page 87, which says, ‘Everybody’s dead there, Captain. I went home, but the family were dead. I went to see my girl, but she was dead too. There are no dogs or cats or birds. Nothing alive … I’m ready to die here like this. It’s better than in Australia.’
   Swain does not want to survive. Ask students to play one of the following roles and act out the conversation.
   Student A: You are Swain. You want to die in your home town in America. You tell Captain Dwight why you want to do this and you hope he will understand.
   Student B: You are Captain Dwight. You want to ask Swain not to give up hope and take him to Australia. You try to change his mind. Give your reasons.

Chapters 7–9

Before reading
15 Research and discuss: If possible, record a radio news broadcast. Play this to the class and have a discussion about the way the information is presented. Divide the class into small groups. Ask groups to produce a short radio broadcast about radiation sickness, the car race, or life in Melbourne, from the last people alive in the world. They may include interviews if they wish. Each group reads their broadcast to the rest of the class. Discuss which broadcast was most successful in conveying the information, and why.

After reading
16 Pair work: Ask students to work in pairs and imagine that the world has plunged into a nuclear war and is coming to an end as depicted in the book. What would you do during the last few days before you die?
   Would you spend the days with your family as Peter does?
   Would you spend time on your favourite sports as John Osborne does?
   Would you do something to save lives?
   Would you hunt for a solution?
   Have a class discussion after students have talked in pairs.

17 Write: The ending of the story is quite sad. It gives a sense of hopelessness. Ask the students to re-write the end of the story with a happy ending.

Extra activities
18 Pair work: Nuclear power can be used as a source of electricity. However, nuclear accidents could cause a lot of damage. Some energy resources are safer or even renewable. (e.g. wind power, hydroelectric power, solar energy, bio-fuels) Ask students to work in pairs and compare the advantages and disadvantages of new energy resources as far as they know.

Vocabulary activities
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.