

YOUR BLOOD WILL RUN COLD...



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## BELOW ZERO BY DAN SMITH

***Below Zero is a fast-paced, sometimes scary, Antarctic thriller, featuring a resourceful family and a main character, Zak Reeves, who is determined to prove to everyone that he is strong despite his illness.***

The Reeves family is enjoying the holiday of a lifetime - organised specifically for Zak who will soon undergo treatment for a brain tumour. But when Zak's parents receive an urgent call requesting repairs on some sophisticated Drones they have designed for The Exodus Project Mars mission, Zak persuades them to head to Outpost Zero - a small base in one of the most isolated places on earth: Antarctica.

Outpost Zero is home to 32 people who are training for a life on Mars, but when the Reeves family arrives at Outpost Zero, they find that it is deserted. The inhabitants have disappeared, the power is off, and communications are down. And to make matters worse, the Drones begin to behave as if they are alive.

As they investigate the base, trying to discover what has happened, Zak begins to see unusual visions and suspects that something is trying to communicate with him - something that lies deep within the ice.

Soon, Zak realises that something is out there. Something ancient and powerful. Something life-changing. Something that only he can understand . . .



## **WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS . . .**

Frozen wastes, a shadow growing beneath the ice, a family marooned in the white wilderness . . . and tiny, creepy mechanical spiders. Yes, Dan Smith is back! This is a thriller with some exhilarating high stakes in the hands of one of the very best writers for young people - nobody else is this good at scary action. Dig in: you'll need that ice pick too.

**BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

## **AUTHOR BACKGROUND**

Growing up, I led three lives. In one I survived the day-to-day humdrum of boarding school, while in another I travelled the world, finding adventure in the paddy fields of South East Asia and the jungles of Brazil. But the third life I lived in a world of my own, making up stories . . . which is where some people say I still live most of the time!

## **AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

During a meeting with my publisher, we started talking about Mars One - the plan to establish a human outpost on Mars. The plan is to send volunteers on a one way mission to colonise the red planet. I thought it would be a great idea for a story, so I researched the idea and began to write. But as the story unfolded, my characters remained right here on earth, in one of the most isolated places on our planet. I realised there is still so much mystery under our noses that we don't need to travel beyond this planet to have an adventure that's out of this world.

## **DESCRIBE BELOW ZERO IN THREE WORDS . . .**

Chilling. Fast-paced. Adventure.



# THEMES

- Bravery and Courage
- Friendship and Family
- Survival
- Perseverance
- The Environment
- Antarctica
- Fear
- Mystery

# WRITING STYLE

Below Zero is an exciting and sometimes scary thriller set in a vivid Antarctic location. The writing is cinematic, descriptive, and fast-paced, with short chapters and cliff-hangers to keep the reader on the edge of their seat, wanting to know what happens next. The mystery at the heart of the story is slowly revealed. There is a strong message about family and friendship, and about perseverance in the face of impossible odds. There is also an environmental message about appreciating our planet, and accepting that there is still a lot we don't understand about it. Below Zero mixes a variety of genres including action, mystery, sci-fi, and thriller.



I am a firm believer in reading for pleasure, and I am not suggesting that after reading every chapter of a book, students should carry out a task and analyse the text. Sometimes it is better to simply discuss how readers feel about the story, or to maintain the momentum of the story and keep on reading. However, in the following pages, you will find some suggested activities based on selected chapters of Below Zero. I have mostly concentrated on the chapters in the first half of the book. At the end of this document I have included some more general ideas for tasks, and some proposed research to enrich aspects of the story.

Please feel free to use these tasks in any way that suits your students, and your enjoyment of Below Zero.





## RESEARCH PROJECT ON ANTARCTICA

Before I started writing *Below Zero*, I knew that the action would take place in Antarctica, so I had to do a lot of research to find out as much as I could. I wanted the reader to feel the cold and the isolation, but I also had to make sure that all my facts were right.

Ask students to make a poster advertising an adventure holiday to Antarctica. Here are a few things to help them start their research.

- How cold does it get in Antarctica?
- What kind of clothing would you need?
- What would be the best way to get there?
- What animals would you find?
- What is there to see?
- Where might you stay?
- How long does it stay dark?
- How many people live in Antarctica?



# 1. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, 3 DAYS AGO (PAGES 1-6)

## Character Chart

In the first chapter I show the action through Sofia's eyes. Ask students to think about their first impressions of Sofia. What kind of a person do they think she is? Using 'inference' and 'deduction' what can they find in the chapter that supports their view of Sofia?

('Inference' is an interpretation that goes beyond the literal information given. 'Deduction' is an understanding based on evidence given in the text.)

Quotation	What does it tell us about Sofia?
There was something happening at Outpost Zero, something that wasn't supposed to be happening, and Sofia Diaz wanted to get to the bottom of it.	Sofia wants to know what's going on - she's curious and determined.



# 2. APPROACHING OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, NOW (PAGES 7-17)

## Character Chart

In the second chapter I show the action through Zak's eyes. Ask students what are their first impressions of Zak. What kind of a person do they think he is? Using **'inference'** and **'deduction'** what can they find in the chapter that supports their view of Zak?

(**'Inference'** is an interpretation that goes beyond the literal information given. **'Deduction'** is an understanding based on evidence given in the text.)

Quotation	What does it tell us about Zak?
Jackson Jones was never afraid - something Zak Reeves wished he could say about himself.	Zak doesn't think of himself as a brave.



### 3. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, 21 HOURS AGO (PAGES 18-20)

#### Writing Emotion

In this chapter, Sofia is terrified of something, but the reader doesn't know what it is. Ask students to think of a time when they were afraid of something. Discuss this with them, then ask them to write about it. Encourage them to use strong verbs and adjectives to describe what happened to them and how they felt.

### 4. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, NOW (PAGES 21-31)

#### Newspaper Report

In this chapter, we find out that Zak is excited about the possibility of seeing The Chasm.

*'... a huge rift that had opened up in the Antarctic ice. It was two hundred kilometres long, and at least fifteen kilometres deep. Zak thought it would be just about the most amazing thing he could ever see. A bottomless rip in the earth. Imagine that. He was far more interested in what might be down there than what might be on Mars, and he was hoping he might have the chance to see it. That way, he could have a real, proper adventure at the end of the world.'*

When I was writing Below Zero, I spent a lot of time thinking about what might be at the bottom of The Chasm. Ask students to imagine for themselves what might be there. A monster? An alien? A spaceship? A virus? A dinosaur?

Ask students to write a newspaper report about the discovery of a giant rip in the Antarctic Ice. Scientists have discovered something down there. What have they discovered? What will they do with it? How might it affect planet earth?





# 5. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, NOW (PAGES 32-37)

## Using Imagery

We've all heard 'as black as coal' or 'as bright as a button', but writers try to use original imagery to make their writing more interesting. In this chapter, I write 'The wind moaned around the base like a mournful ghost.' I used this imagery not only because I wanted the reader to imagine the sound of the moaning, but also because I wanted to create a scary atmosphere for my story. I wanted the reader to imagine ghosts whipping around the base. Discuss SIMILE, METAPHOR, and PERSONIFICATION with students, then ask them to use those concepts to invent original imagery for the nouns in the table below. The last two will be tricky, so students might need to re-read the descriptions in the chapter and discuss as a group.

Snow	
Storm	
Wind	
Darkness	
Cold	
Ice	
Outpost Zero	
The Martian Rover Vehicle	



## 6. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, NOW (PAGES 38-47)

### It's a Strange World

At the beginning of this chapter, I mention a book that Zak owns - It's Strange World. When I was growing up, I was fascinated by the paranormal, UFOs, mythical beasts, and strange phenomena. I loved watching 'Arthur C Clarke's World of the Strange' on television, and I used to read magazines and books about unexplained mysteries. Perhaps that's why I was so drawn to the idea of there being something below the ice in Antarctica!

Zak remembers, Bigfoot, The Mothman, and the Tennessee Wildman. He compares what he finds at Outpost Zero to a story he read about The Mary Celeste. Investigate and research what happened to the Mary Celeste. Was it an unexplainable mystery or not? Spend some time with the students investigating and discussing unexplained mysteries from around the world. How do students feel about these kind of mysterious stories? Do they like the idea that sometimes things remained unexplained? Perhaps they already know about some urban legends?

## 7. JANUARY ISLAND, SOUTH CHINA SEA, 17 HOURS AGO (PAGES 48-54)

### Comprehension

After reading this short chapter, students could either answer these questions themselves, or they could be discussed as a class.

1. In this chapter, what is your' impression of The Broker? What kind of a man do you think he is? Give examples to explain your decision.
2. Can you find anything in this chapter that shows it is difficult to tell where The Broker comes from?
3. What do you think 'monitoring the satellite' means?
4. '*Phoenix watched a mirror image of what her employer was seeing*'. What do you think this means?
5. Can you find anything in this chapter that tells you what The Broker thinks BioMesa might be looking for beneath the ice.
6. The Broker tells Phoenix that he is '*in a rather dour mood*!' What do you think this means?
7. How does The Broker react when he sees the last few photographs?
8. What does The Broker see in the last three images, that he thinks is more important than anything else?
9. Why does The Broker pay Phoenix so well?
10. Phoenix mentions that there are '*two prototype Ospreys*' at November Island. From the rest of the paragraph, are you able to work out what an 'Osprey' might be?



## 8. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, NOW (PAGES 55-59)

### Cool Gadgets

In this chapter, Zak's mum uses something called a Dermal Adhesion Unit to treat Dima's wound. As a class, you could discuss what students think this is, what it does, and how it would be useful for medical personnel. Students could research whether or not anything like this actually exists. Discuss other types of cool gadgets that they think might be useful. Ask students to design, draw, and label their own Dermal Adhesion Unit - or another gadget of their choice!

## 9. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, NOW (PAGES 60-68)

### Write your own story

In this chapter, Zak tells May a story he read online, about a researcher who went to investigate a meteor. I wrote this into *Below Zero* because while I was researching the book, I found out about the number of abandoned buildings and bases that are scattered around Antarctica. I thought it would make a great creepy story for Zak to tell, and that it would help to build the spooky atmosphere I wanted to create. Ask students to read the story again, then to tell it in their own words. They can write their story in the first person, imagining they are the researcher who finds the abandoned shack. It would be useful to research this online, and to look at images they might find.

Here are some of the images I used to inspire this part of the story.



## **10. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, NOW (PAGES 69-78)**

### Insects

I spent a long time researching insects, trying to decide what the bugs would look like when Zak discovers them in the lab. Ask students to find the passages where I have described the bugs, and to write down the important points. Perhaps they could try to draw what they think the bugs look like. Students could then design their own bugs, using real insects for inspiration. Would their bugs have wings? Would they have stingers? Pincers? Antennae? How many legs? etc. They could try giving their bugs interesting names.

## **11. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, NOW (PAGES 79-85)**

### Communication- Write an Email

In this chapter, Zak's mum tells the others that she has emailed Head Office to call for help. Ask students to imagine that *they* are stranded in an isolated research base and the only way for them to communicate is via email. Ask them to write an email to their best friend explaining what has happened to them.

## **12. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, NOW (PAGES 86-95)**

### The Spider Drones

So . . . we meet the Spider Drones for the first time. Ask students what they think about the names given to the three Spider Drones - Hal, Roy, and Ed. Is there anything in the text that tells us where the names came from? Ask students to think about what the Spider Drones look like. How big are they? What kind of language do I use to describe them? Are they frightening? Do they feel as if they are alive? Using bullet points, write down some of the phrases that I have used to describe the Spiders, then ask students to draw the Spider Drones using the bullet points they have made.

## **13. NOVEMBER ISLAND, INDIAN OCEAN, 10 HOURS AGO (PAGES 96-99)**

### Lazarovich

In this short chapter, we are introduced to Larisa Lazarovich. Discuss with students what sort of a character they think Lazarovich is. What do we know about her? Would they like to know more or is it better that we don't know too much about her? What do students think Lazarovich is going to do? What part is she going to play in the rest of the story? Ask students to write a short passage, from Lazarovich's point of view while she is sitting in the aircraft. What is she thinking about?

## **14. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, NOW (PAGES 100-108)**

### Engaging the reader

In the second half of this chapter, the Spider Drone builds something that Mum and Dad have never seen before - something that attacks them. I wanted this section to be tense, exciting, and scary. Ask students to think about how I have used my writing to engage the reader. Consider sentence length, paragraph length, sentence structure, character reactions, punctuation, sound, dialogue, repetition etc.

## **15. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, NOW (PAGES 109-122)**

### Found Footage

In this chapter we meet Sofia again, but only on camera. This technique is called 'found-footage' and is often used in films (especially horror films) to build tension. Ask students to re-read the found-footage section, bullet point the important information, and then, imagining they are Sofia, write this part of the story in the first-person. Students can use detail from the text, but add their own - they might want to consider what Sofia is thinking about, and how she feels about the things that are happening.



## **16. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, 22 HOURS AGO (PAGES 123-130)**

### Write a Letter

The first two pages of this chapter tell us more about Sofia. Ask students to write bullet points to make note of some key points about Sofia's character. When they have done that, students can pretend they are Sofia, and write an application letter to the Exodus Project explaining why they and their family would be good candidates to travel to Mars.

## **17. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, 22 HOURS AGO (PAGES 137-143)**

### Writing Emotion & Diary Entry

In the first few pages of this chapter, Sofia finds strange devices attached to the necks of the people from Outpost Zero. How does Sofia feel about it? Is she disgusted? Curious? Afraid? Ask students to find phrases that show how Sofia feels. Ask students to pretend they are Sofia and write a diary entry about what she finds. They could even draw a sketch of the devices that Sofia finds.

## **18. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, 22 HOURS AGO (PAGES 148-154)**

### Comprehension

After reading this short chapter, students could either answer these questions themselves, or they could be discussed as a class.

1. Sofia's motto is 'Be Prepared' but she has a second motto; 'Improvise, adapt and overcome.' What do you think this means?
2. On page 149, what does Sofia decide she is going to do? What do you think this says about her character?
3. Why do you think Sofia screams into the storm on page 149?
4. On page 151, why don't the Spiders attack Sofia?
5. On page 153, when Sofia is recording herself on video, what does she do that indicates her mood?



## **19. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, NOW (PAGES 155-161)**

### Continuing The Story . . .

This chapter ends on page 161 with the words 'the lock on the office door disengaged with a quiet click, and the door slid open.' Ask students to imagine they are the author. What happens next? Continue the story using strong, dramatic verbs to capture the action.

## **20. OUTPOST ZERO, ANTARCTICA, NOW (PAGES 223-226)**

### Understanding The Story

This chapter is only four pages long, but it was one of the most difficult chapters to write. The insects can't talk, so they can't use words to tell Zak what they want him to know. They can only show him images. But what they want to tell him is complicated and extremely important. Why do your students think the insects chose Zak? Can they find any phrases in the text to back up their thinking? What do your students think the insects are trying to tell Zak? Why is it important?

Ask your students to imagine they were writing this story. What else might Zak have discovered beneath the ice? Can they think of any other interesting ideas?



# GENERAL TASKS

- Write a book review of Below Zero.
- Design an alternative cover for Below Zero.
- Think of an alternative title for Below Zero.
- If there was a sequel to Below Zero, what would it be about? Try writing the beginning.
- If you have read Boy X, do you think that Zak Reeves and Ash McCarthy could be friends? Write a story about the first time they meet. Where are they? What do they do?

# FURTHER RESEARCH

- In Below Zero, I mention DNA. What is DNA?
- Is there anything in existence that is similar to the Spider Drones that Zak's parents have designed?
- Below Zero is partly inspired by the Mars One expedition. What can you find out about Mars One?
- Mars is known as 'The Red Planet' but is it really red?
- Halley VI was the inspiration for Outpost Zero. What can you find out about Halley VI?
- There really is an enormous split opening in the ice in Antarctica. What can you find out about it?

