

Checkers

A COLD JOURNEY

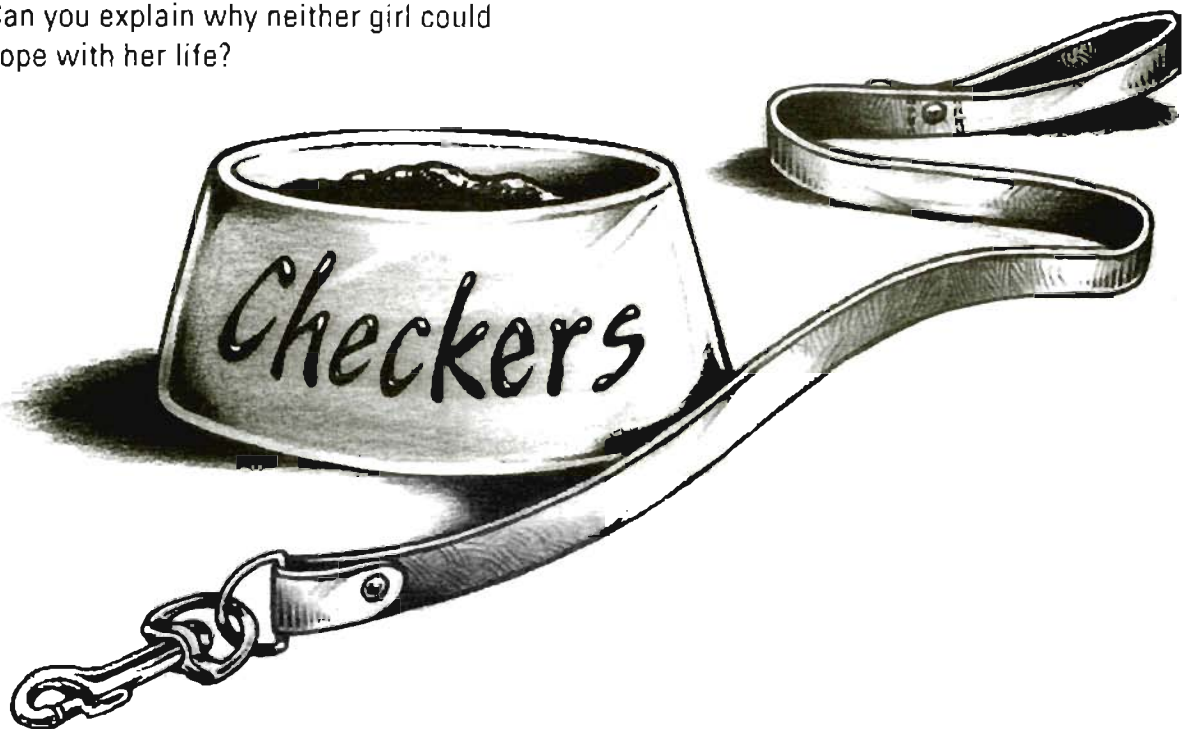
Exploring the Text

Check with your teacher about which questions to try.

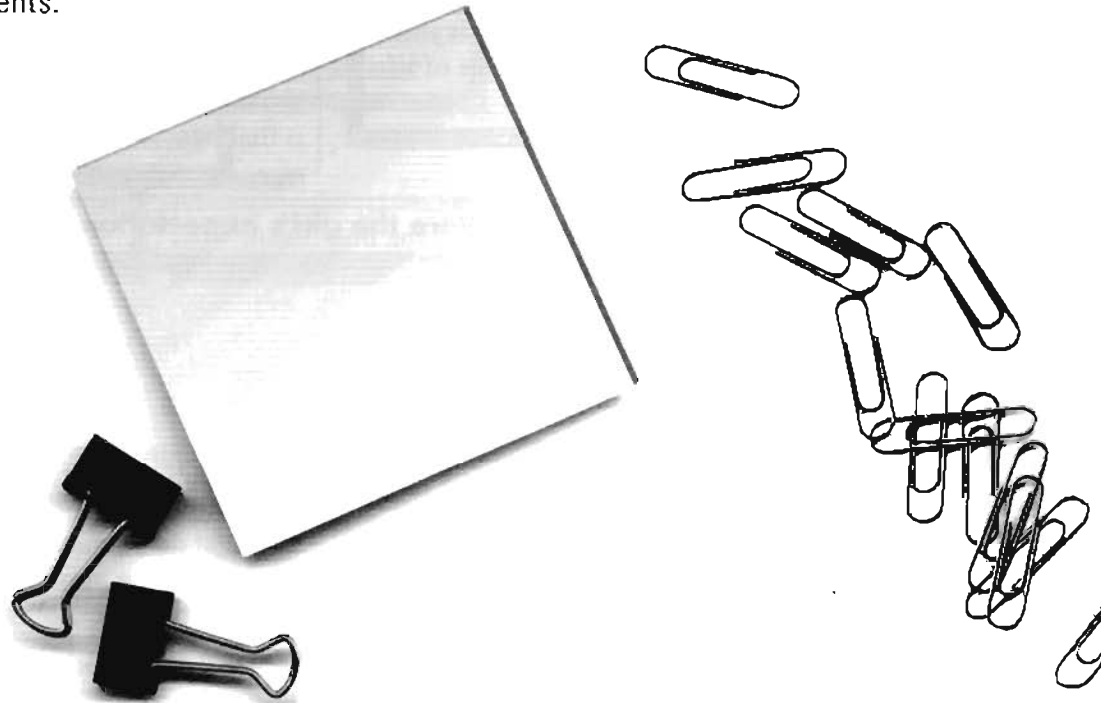
- ① On the first two pages of *Checkers* John Marsden demonstrates his mastery of image. On page 1 it is a soft, secure, musical image. On page 2, by contrast, it is a harsh, cruel image. Find the images and write them down. What is he saying through the two images?
- ② The girl is talking about the dog in the painting, lying in front of the fire. **'Checkers never did, because although we had a fireplace we never had a fire'** (p. 5). What does the image of the empty fireplace suggest?
- ③ Cindy is given very little sympathy (p. 10). You are the narrator; give your reasons.
- ④ After the celebration of **'the contract'** the family was coming home in a taxi (pp. 16–19). Dad spoke in a **'sad old voice'**. He was also very concerned that his daughter had friends she could trust. Explain why he sounded old and sad, and why he was concerned about his daughter's friends.
- ⑤ Cindy was **'dreaming other people's dreams'** (p. 21). Is that what you do when you watch TV? Explain. Is it good or harmful to dream other people's dreams?
- ⑥ What concerns you the most: things that have happened, things you wish would happen or things that might happen? (p. 21). Explain your ideas.
- ⑦ Why do you think John Marsden used the following image: **'I'll end up like Esther, a spaced-out koala ... up the top of my gum tree and off my face on eucalyptus'**? (p. 23).

Page references are to the Pan 1996 hardback edition of *Checkers*.

- 8 The girl was lamenting her dull existence at the hospital (pp. 41–2). Why was her life so dull there?
- 9 The girl can sleep only if 'I get right down under the sheets, pulling them over my head' (pp. 47–8). She does not want to emerge from her cocoon, does not want the freedom of the butterfly. You are the girl. Explain your reasons.
- 10 How could you explain the 'animal in Esther's head'? (pp. 51–2).
- 11 In the hospital the 'masks are off, people don't pretend so much' (p. 59).
 (a) Describe the two masks the girl used.
 (b) Do you have a mask? When are you most likely to use it? With whom would you never use a mask? With whom would you always use it?
- 12 Esther's family were into natural living and home schooling (pp. 50–1). The girl's family wanted everything to be predictable and appropriate (pp. 12–13). Neither situation worked for these girls. Can you explain why neither girl could cope with her life?
- 13 'My father always seemed to have too much respect for strong people, people like Jack' (p. 72). Why was that a concern?
- 14 'The photographer didn't do a thing to help his mate, just kept taking photos' (p. 82). What do you think this suggests about the photographer?
- 15 Why do you think writing is so important in the therapy offered at the hospital? (p. 86).
- 16 What, in your opinion, was the cause of the girl's frenetic behaviour on the first morning of the skiing week? (p. 94).
- 17 If you went out with a stunning girl or guy, do you think you would not be noticed any more? (p. 96). What is it about someone you meet for the first time that most attracts you?



- 18 'Oliver's had so many changes of name that now he doesn't have a surname. He decided about six months ago that he would just be known as Oliver, nothing else.' (p. 99). Why?
- 19 'What I loved about him was his happiness, his friendliness, his loyalty. He bounced through life, looking for ... another person to love and lick ...' (p. 105). Why were these qualities in Checkers so important to the girl?
- 20 'Above all, though, I think the reason I spoke to him was that I was so lonely' (p. 111). In your opinion is this explanation reasonable? What, in the girl's experiences in the previous few weeks, would have left her very responsive to kindness?
- 21 Do you think the tactics used by the young journalist were planned, fair or honest? Justify your comments.
- 22 You be the judge. 'I heard Jack's voice ... "You've done for us now!"' (p. 116). Is the girl guilty or not guilty of causing the disastrous end to the story?
- 23 'I'm here because I killed my dog' (p. 103). Did the girl kill her dog?
- 24 What part of the guilt, if any, should be shouldered by others? Who and why? Explain your ideas fully.
- 25 Why do you think John Marsden elected not to give the girl a name?
- 26 The girl had a father, although, 'We hardly ever saw dad. He'd always worked hard; now he doubled it' (p. 35). Her father was never named. Oliver had 'four fathers' and insisted on no surname. Comment on what you think John Marsden is telling us. What is the role of fathers? What value do they have?



Think it through, talk it over

In groups or as a class, discuss one or more of these topics.

1 Coldness – warmth

'Although we had a fireplace we never had a fire' (p. 5).

What does the image of a fireplace suggest?

What about a fireplace where there is never a fire?

Is it warmth or effort that is missing, or something else?

When a fire is lit, what is the natural thing for a family to do?

What was natural for the Warner family?
What was unnatural?

2 Life and perfection

'The perfection was pretence ... On those two nights I thought that life itself was going to be perfect' (p. 6).

Is life ever perfect?

Are expectations of perfection in life unrealistic?

What can we realistically expect of life?

How possible is it that our expectations of life will be met?

If our expectations are not met, is that necessarily a bad thing?

Were the girl's expectations unreasonable?

3 Appearances

'No matter how hard I try, I am still fooled by appearances' (p. 49).

Can you judge successfully by appearances?

Are appearances important to you? Why? What do you understand by the phrase 'keeping up appearances'?

What would happen if you decided not to keep up appearances?

Do appearances lie? How?

4 Masks

'In here the masks are off, people don't pretend so much. We still fake it when we can ...' (p. 59).

When do you wear a mask? Why?

How does a mask help?

What happens when you have to remove the mask?

In what situation would you always wear a mask?

In what situation would you never wear a mask?

Are you 'faking it' when you wear a mask?

5 Thick skin, thin skin, no skin

'People talk about thick skin and thin skin, but we don't have any, or we wouldn't be in here' (p. 80).

Is thick skin a help? When?

If you are accused of having thick skin, does it mean you don't care?

Does anyone really have thick skin? If you don't have thick skin, what do you have?

If you have thin skin are you hurt more than those with thick skin?

What does the girl mean by 'no skin'?

Do you ever feel that you have 'no skin'?

How would you get your skin back?

6 Being conspicuous

'Normally I hate to stand out. I don't like being conspicuous' (p. 66).

What is bad about being conspicuous?

How do you avoid it?

Is there anything good about standing out?

Do you like to be conspicuous?



How can you do justice to this very moving story so that you capture the very essence of the hurt, the fear, the strength, the longing and the love for a lively, outrageous puppy? Try one or more of the following activities.



write a poem Read pages 59 to 61. Write a poem with a verse for every one of the girl's hospital friends. Try to capture the particular strengths, weaknesses and vulnerabilities of each person.



choose a song The girl – there is no description of her – she has no name. Think carefully about her and her story. Think of a song that you know which could have been written about her. Play the song to the class and give the reasons for your choice. Ask the members of the class whether they could suggest any other song that would suit, and ask them to justify their choices.

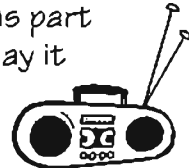
life-size portraits Form a group with some of your friends. Lie on the floor and trace life-sized templates for each of the characters. Paint them according to your image of each, from descriptions in the novel. Present them to the librarian to display and to entice others to read the book.



write a script Break up into groups. Write a script on one or more of the scenes from the novel. Each group could then present it for the rest of the class.



soundscape Get together with one or two of your friends. Find a passage to read in which there is a good description of the characters in the hospital. You might have to do some editing or put together a passage for yourselves from several extracts. Arrange a soundscape, using sounds or music appropriate to each character. One or all of you can read the passage onto tape, with the soundscape as part of the presentation. Play it for the class.



write an epilogue