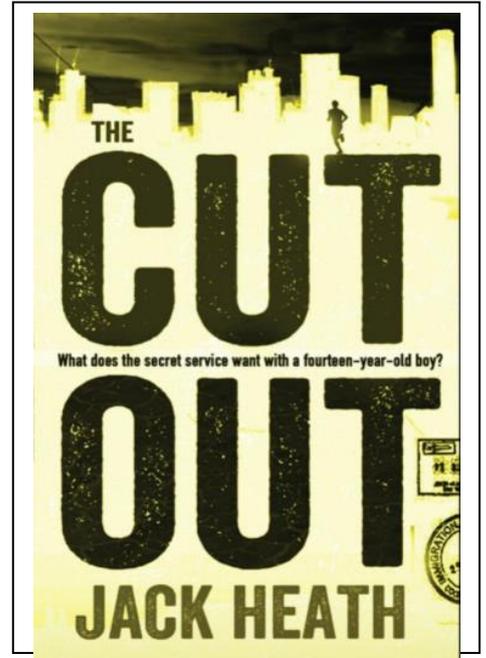


The Cut Out

By Jack Heath

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for readers aged 10-14+



Plot Summary

Fero Dremovich is a 14-year old Kamauan boy, dragged to a political protest by his only friend. When someone throws a brick and the riot police turn up, Fero gets arrested – it turns out that he bears an eerie resemblance to Troy Maschenov, a teenage spy from Besmar.

Meanwhile, five Besmari terrorists hole up in an abandoned hospital which was sealed many years ago to contain a deadly coronavirus outbreak. They have enough explosives to scatter parts of the building across Kamau, unleashing the virus and killing millions.

Dessa Cormanenko is a Kamauan intelligence agent who knows a secret way into the hospital. But she's undercover in Besmar and no-one can contact her. The authorities need someone who can cross the border undetected, find her and bring her home.

Hastily trained and loaded up with gadgets, Fero has no choice but to embark on a dangerous mission. He has to sneak into Besmar, disguised as Troy Maschenov, and find Cormanenko before it's too late.

Fero has been raised to believe that Besmar is a nation of savages, led by lunatics. But when he arrives, he discovers that it's almost exactly like Kamau. Could it be that everything he thought he knew about his country – and about himself – is a lie?

Author Information

Jack Heath is the award-winning author of fourteen action-packed thrillers for young people, published in several languages around the world. In the course of his research he has trained with firearms, performed street magic, visited morgues and prisons, travelled through Russia and read only books by women for a year. When he's not touring schools, libraries and festivals around the world, he lives in Canberra with his wife and their son.

'I wrote *The Cut Out* as part of National Novel Writing Month,' he says. 'Fifty thousand words in thirty days, which really suits this kind of story. Almost every character has a secret identity or a hidden agenda, and it would have been easy to lose track of who was who if I had been writing slowly.'

More information about Jack and his books is available on his website: <http://jackheath.com.au>.

Themes

'The book is a thriller, but I wanted to explore ideas about inherited responsibility – the ways in which we're punished or rewarded for the actions of our ancestors and our governments—actions which we had little or nothing to do with. None of the characters in *The Cut Out* were alive when the conflict started, but all are now caught up in it. The two governments in the story discourage the citizens of each country from seeing the population of the other as human beings – and the citizens encourage their governments to do the same, reinforcing the cycle.

'I went to Russia and Finland to research the book, but these themes are particularly relevant to Australia, where ancestry greatly affects how a person is perceived and treated, and where some see immigration as a threat to our national identity. I believe that restaging these concepts on the other side of the world and building an entertaining story around them will help young people bypass the tribal reasoning and rhetoric which often short-circuits these discussions.'

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In the classroom...

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Discussion questions

- Kamau and Besmar have been on the brink of war for several generations. Which real-life countries are in similar situations? What could Nina Grigieva, the Kamauan president, do to create peace?
- At first Fero seems to be an ordinary kid in the wrong place at the wrong time. But given what the reader eventually discovers about him, should he be held responsible for Troy Maschenov's actions? Why?
- Some of Fero's classmates blame the citizens of Besmar for terrorist attacks which were allegedly ordered by the Besmari government. Are you to blame for the actions of *your* government? What if you can't vote, or voted for a different party?
- When he first meets Vartaniev, Fero notices that he seems sad. What might be upsetting Vartaniev?
- Why do you think Noelein chooses to lie to Fero about the real threat inside the hospital?
- One of the terrorists implies that killing a million Kamauans now will save even more lives later. Is he right? Would that make it okay? How does this compare to the nuclear bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which killed more than 129,000 people but arguable ended World War II?
- To what extent do we inherit the sins committed by our country before we are born? Should young German or Japanese students feel 'guilty' about what their countries may have done two generations ago in WWII? In your opinion, how should contemporary 'Anglo' Australians feel about the treatment of Aborigines by early settlers? How is this concept of 'inherited responsibility' explored in *The Cut Out*?

Project ideas

- The two spy agencies in *The Cut Out* both have code names. "The Bank" has "Tellers", while "The Library" has "cataloguers" and agents "on loan". Make up your own spy agency and choose code names for all the roles.
- Research some of the technologies used by Fero and Cormanenko in *The Cut Out*. Choose three and write a paragraph for each where you i) describe the fictional technology and 2) compare it with its real-life equivalent.
- Write an epilogue to *The Cut Out*. What would happen after Cormanenko left Fero's apartment?
- Draw one of the characters or scenes based on the descriptions in the novel.
- Read Chapter 1 of *The Cut Out* and answer the following questions:
 - What tense is used?
 - Is the story told in first, second or third person?
 - What words or phrases help set the scene in this chapter?
 - Why do you think the author chose to start the story with the line, 'We shouldn't be here,' Fero said.

Related texts

- *Child 44* by Tom Rob Smith is a Man Booker Prize-longlisted novel about xenophobia and spy-hunting in Russia under Stalin. It has also been adapted into a film.
- *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak also explores the idea of children dragged into conflicts they have nothing to do with, and has been adapted into a film.

Teaching notes prepared by Jack Heath.