The World of

After Tomorrow

Ideas for exploring Gillian Cross’s novel with pupils in Years 7, 8 and 9 (P7, S1 and S2)
Introduction

*After Tomorrow* is set in the very near future in Britain and France, and examines:

- what it might feel like to be a refugee
- how poverty caused by economic problems leads societies to look for scapegoats
- what happens to an ordinary family when they are put under pressure
- the effects of resentment between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’
- how in any group of people in need, some members of the group will quickly move in to exploit the others
- how desperation will drive almost anyone to commit crimes despite their best intentions.

This novel would be ideal as a class reader for lower secondary pupils, as a text for a reading group, or to spark debate related to current social issues such as the 2011 riots, public mistrust of the banking system, and the treatment of refugees in various parts of the world.

Many novels for teenagers reflect a society that has collapsed due to environmental disaster. *After Tomorrow* is unusual because the core problem that has created poverty and social unrest is economic—the failure of the banking system—and is relatively close to reality. It is an unsettling novel that will lead readers to examine how they would act in various circumstances.
Synopsis

After the banks crash on Armageddon Monday, currency is worthless and food becomes the only valuable commodity in Britain. Matt’s family struggles to survive after his father, a lorry driver, is killed for his load of potatoes. The drivers’ boss, Bob, helps the family barter their surplus homegrown food but they are denounced as “skadgers” (food hoarders) and repeatedly attacked by armed raiders.

Matt’s resourceful mother arranges for them to join one of Bob’s convoys seeking asylum in France, but she has to stay behind, leaving Matt and his little brother Taco to travel with her new husband, Justin. Taco brings with him a shoebox, in which he keeps his most secret and treasured possessions.

The French army stops the convoy while it is still in the Channel Tunnel but the trio succeeds in being sent to a refugee camp at Les Mondeaux in rural France, along with Bob, who introduces his teenage daughter, Paige. Conditions at Les Mondeaux are tough. Food is scarce, the local people despise them, and Justin becomes depressed—but Paige, who speaks French, helps Matt look after himself and Taco.

After an encounter with Salman, a TV journalist, Matt is determined to improve his situation by repairing his beloved bike, which he had brought with him from home. He does this by stealing spare spokes from Steff, a local Frenchwoman. Steff catches him, but agrees to let him off when he offers to mend her stock of damaged bikes. Word gets around at the camp that Matt has a talent for fixing bikes, and Bob, who has quickly become established as a ‘fixer’, manages Matt’s bike repair service and takes a percentage.

Page and Matt introduce Justin to Steff, who gives him vegetables in return for gardening help. Taco makes friends with her son Pierre and gradually begins to speak—and become—more French, which annoys Matt. There is growing tension between Justin, who’s trying to make the best of where they are, and Matt, who’s frantically saving all the money he can earn, because he’s focused on getting out of the camp and returning back to England where they belong. This is exacerbated when Taco gets bitten by a rat that has invaded their food stores.

This tension comes to a head when there’s a communal meal and singing session round a large bonfire. The French soldiers who guard the perimeter of the camp try to disperse the crowd and in the resulting stampede, Taco’s shoebox is trampled and the contents (including rolls of worthless English banknotes) catch fire and start raining down on the tents. This starts a fire which spreads through the entire camp.

In the resulting chaos, no one notices straight away that Taco is becoming seriously ill. At first they think he’s inhaled too much smoke from the fire, but then they remember the rat bite, and it becomes clear that Taco is
suffering from rat bite fever, a disease which can be fatal if left untreated. He needs antibiotics, but the camp is running out of medicine and he can’t wait for the new supplies. Bob claims that he can get some, but that it will take all Matt’s money—and his precious bike. Matt and Paige cycle madly across country to fetch the pills—which turn out to be out of date aspirin.

So Matt has lost his home and his bike. He’s lost contact with his mother and it looks as though he’s going to lose Taco too. Just when everything seems hopeless, Salman and his crew of reporters arrive to cover the story of the fire. Salman ensures that Taco is treated in hospital where he happily makes a full recovery.

Paige reveals that Bob is not her father: they travelled together because only family groups were being allowed into France. Matt and Paige confront Bob. Paige threatens to tell the authorities the truth about their relationship, risking them both being sent back to England. Bob agrees to pay for the bikes and disappear from Les Mondeaux, leaving Matt to run his bike repair business with Paige. Matt realizes that he needs to embrace his future in France and makes a promise to Paige that he will learn to speak French.
‘Il faut vivre’ (‘You’ve got to live’)  

1. After Armageddon

Read the first four chapters of After Tomorrow. What details does Gillian Cross give us to show:

- How hard the family’s lives are now?
- What might help them survive in the future?

Which scenes or details from the first four chapters most help you to imagine these events happening to your family?

Matt’s family are targeted as food hoarders (“scadgers”) but Paige points out near the end of the novel, “Matt and his family were just getting food for themselves. People have to survive.”

- What could Matt’s family have done to avoid the attention of the raiders?
- Why did the raiders feel justified in attacking the family?

After reading to the end of the novel, consider:

- What is the difference between Matt’s mother’s system for feeding the family and the activities of the “super-scadgers” that Paige despises?

2. The Journey

What do we learn on the journey from the Channel port to the Les Mondeaux camp about:

- Bob?
- Paige?
- Justin?
- How Matt feels about a new life in France?
- How the French people feel about the British arrivals?

What do you know about the conditions asylum seekers from overseas must meet to stay in the UK? How is the experience of Matt and his family similar?
3. At Les Mondeaux

“The people who come through best are the people who make things happen” (TV reporter, Salman).

“What you want in a place like this is something that makes you special. Something you can trade.” (Bob)

At Les Mondeaux, British money is worthless and there is no French money in circulation.

- What becomes valuable besides food and water?
- What do the asylum seekers use to trade between themselves?

Matt has the chance to learn various skills, ideas, and attitudes that help him in his new life. He can learn from what people tell him and by their example. What does he learn from:

- His grandfather?
- His mother?
- Bob?
- Paige?
- Muriel, his fellow asylum seeker?
- Salman?

Many people in the book make hard choices to survive.

Consider Matt, Paige and Bob in turn.

- Write down everything each of them does to get what they need from the moment they arrive in France. For each of them, what is the most difficult choice that they have to make?
- Write a short story for each of them, set one year after end of After Tomorrow. What other choices have the three characters made and what has happened to them?
People like us

Compare Matt and Paige’s attitudes to France and their new circumstances.

- What is it about Paige that makes the biggest difference to her situation and that of her friends?
- When Matt and Paige arrive in Les Mondeaux, which of them has the best chance of making a new life in France?
- What impression do the French people (the officials and the ordinary citizens) initially give of their attitude to the British asylum seekers?

Choose three scenes or incidents in the book that help to change Matt’s mind about living in France.

The British asylum seekers may all seem the same to the French, but they make distinctions between themselves.

How do Matt and Paige see themselves as different from:

- The chicken rustlers (Scally, Nobo, and Wardle)?
- Bob?
- Amy, the nurse?

Scally, Nobo, and Wardle first appear when Matt and Paige see them eating a chicken they have stolen from Steff.

- How does Matt feel about Scally the next time he sees him?
- How does he feel when Bob sets up a deal for him to fix Scally’s bike?

Steff, the young chicken farmer, is the only French person we get to know much about.

- How does she feel about the British asylum seekers at first?
- What helps to change her view?
- How does she feel about being French?
The public gaze

*After Tomorrow* contains many descriptions of TV news reports of riots and other violent acts in Britain and conditions for asylum seekers in France.

Use the internet and newspaper archives to find reports, film footage, and images related to similar events, including reports on asylum seekers' living conditions, over the past 10 years:

- In Britain and France
- Worldwide.

Which images or pieces of film are most like the scenes described in the book?

Discuss the role of the TV crew who visit Les Mondeaux, referring to these statements.

**Salman:** “We’re here to report, not to interfere.”

**Matt about the film crew:** “They should try *living* here. They can go home whenever they like.”
About the author

Gillian Cross has been writing children’s books for over twenty years. Before that she took English degrees at Oxford and Sussex Universities, and she had various jobs including working in a bakery and being an assistant to a Member of Parliament.

She is married with four children and lives in Dorset. Her hobbies include orienteering and playing the piano. She won the Carnegie Medal for Wolf and the Smarties Prize and Whitbread Children’s Novel Award for The Great Elephant Chase.