Escaping the Killer Bees

Big Picture
Each week the Guardian newspaper runs a feature called ‘Experience’. The idea of it is simple: for people to describe the strange experiences that have happened to them. Sometimes these are life-threatening. In this example, Havana Marking describes being attacked by killer bees.

Skills
● Understand the meaning of a text.
● Use quotations and references to demonstrate your understanding of a text.
● Infer meanings from beneath the surface of a text.
● Comment on a writer’s language.

Before reading
1 The English word ‘phobia’ comes from Latin and Greek words meaning ‘fear’ or ‘dread’. Many people have phobias, sometimes of creatures (e.g. spiders or rats) and sometimes of things (e.g. heights or water). What phobias do you or people in your family have? What happens to you when you see this creature or thing? Talk about these phobias with a partner or write a paragraph explaining your experience of a phobia.

2 Many people are scared of wasps, bees and other insects. Write down a paragraph outlining the worst experience you have had with them.

3 Have you ever been in contact with any exotic or dangerous creatures? Write a fact-sheet detailing information about the deadliest creature you know. You should include:
   • a description of the creature
   • information about where it lives and what it eats
   • information about why it is dangerous
   • advice on how to stay safe if you encounter the creature.
   Add pictures to your fact-sheet, if you wish.

Build your word power
ravine – a narrow valley with steep sides
precipice – a steep rock face or cliff
opaque – not see-through
sarong – a long piece of cloth worn around the waist by women and men
Assamese – a state in the northeast of India
immune – protected from

Experience: I was attacked by killer bees

I heard the bees way before I saw them. I also heard my friend John screaming before I knew what was happening. He was a little way ahead of me, on a rock face close to the water.

I was 18 and backpacking around India with friends. One very hot afternoon, four of us decided to cool off in a patch of river the locals had told us about. We weren’t climbers – we were wearing flip-flops – but to reach the water we had to scramble down a small ravine. That’s when John started to wave his arms around and I knew something was up. He jumped forward a few steps, then leapt 10ft off the precipice into the dark green pool beneath us.

I heard a low hum, which was growing louder, but I still didn’t know what it was. From a distance, the swarm looked almost like smoke, an opaque mass vibrating somewhere above me. As it got closer, I realised that this strange cloud was actually thousands of bees, each one an inch long and heading for me.

John had been close enough to the rock edge to leap to safety, but I was unable to jump from where I was balanced on rocks higher up the ravine. So I covered my face with my hands; a childlike reaction to protect myself. I genuinely thought that if I made myself invisible, they may not find me. It wasn’t logical, but it made sense at the time. I curled up into a tiny ball, praying they would think I was just another rock.

After a few seconds, and the sixth or seventh sting, I knew my plan hadn’t worked. It was me the bees were after. I could hear my friends below, shouting. The two others had reached the water before the attack began, and they were telling me to get down to the pool fast.

By now I was in extraordinary pain. Each sting was like a wave of agony – much worse than that of European wasps or bees. I later found out that these were giant honey bees and that, when provoked, a swarm of them was easily capable of stinging a human being to death. We had obviously disturbed their colony, although we never actually saw the nest.

The only way I could get away from them was to use my hands to climb down the rocks, yet this meant exposing my face. The noise the bees made was so loud and terrifying, my instinct was to scrunch up my eyes and keep them closed.

Ultimately, however, I had no choice. I did scramble down the rock face and jump into the pool, but I have no recollection of doing so. Everything was blanked out by the sheer relief of being free from the pain. I was safe, and the sensation of treading water seemed wonderful.