

## Teachers' Notes

These can be photocopied for use in the classroom.

### The Earthborn

Fourteen-year-old Welkin Quinn has never set foot on Earth. A Skyborn, he has spent his life on *Colony*, a generations-old self-sufficient space vessel. Now, after a failed attempt at settlement on a new planet, the elders of *Colony* have decided to return home. The elite of *Colony* believe that their post-apocalyptic Earth is populated by virtual savages worthy of nothing more than quick and humane extermination. These Earthborn are no better than *Colony*'s 'lower-deckers'—rebels and dissenters contained on the lower floors of their great vessel. Shortly before *Colony* lands on Earth, Welkin's friend, Harry, is revealed as a lower-deck sympathiser. Guilty by association, Welkin is stripped of his rank and status and assigned to a preliminary reconnaissance team.

What Welkin finds when he emerges from the womb of *Colony* is a desolate landscape populated by filthy and frightening individuals. Then he is discovered by Sarah, the tough but wise leader of an ambitious pack of Earthborn survivors struggling to reconnect with other families and rebuild their world. But Welkin, Sarah, and her clan face threats not only from the *Colony* Skyborn bent on exterminating them, but from ferals and jabbers—Earthborn who have succumbed to their basest needs and desires in the quest for mere survival.

Reunited with his sister Lucida, Harry, and a group of surprisingly non-inferior lower deck rebels, Welkin joins Sarah's family in the fight to create a new civilisation on Earth. Slowly, he comes to question *Colony*'s belief in the superiority of its citizens and their technology. He recognises the value of the primitive survival skills of the Earthborn. He rejects *Colony*'s empirical plan to eradicate all Earthborn life to prepare the planet for the Skyborns' supposed greater humanity. Welkin Quinn begins to consider that perhaps the greatest achievement is not the ability to control or simulate all experiences, but to live one rugged, textured, dangerous, dream-filled human life.

### About This Guide

The information, discussion questions and activity ideas which follow are intended to enhance your reading of *The Earthborn*. Please feel free to adapt these materials to suit your needs and interests.

### About the Author

Born in England and raised in New Zealand, Paul Collins has spent the last three decades in Australia where he is an award-winning writer and anthologist. From short stories to novels, from writing to editing, and from adult works to children's literature, Collins has been a driving force behind Australia's science fiction and fantasy scene. Holding black belts in both tae kwon do and ju jitsu, Collins uses his knowledge of martial arts to lend authenticity to his tales. The most published science fiction short story writer in Australia, *The Earthborn* was Collins's first novel to be published in the United States.

### Writing and Research Activities

#### 1. Post-apocalyptic Literature

A. Go to the library or online to research 'post-apocalyptic literature'. Write a short report that includes a definition of the term, a list of its notable authors and their books, and an explanation of how 'post-apocalyptic literature' fits into the larger category of science fiction.

B. Watch one or more of the following post-apocalyptic films: *Bladerunner*, *Logan's Run*, *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, *Planet of the Apes*, *The Running Man* and *The Time*

*Machine*. Compare the landscape, protagonist's situation, and outlook for Earth as depicted in the film(s) to the world of *The Earthborn*.

## II. Reaching to Space

A. Use online research to create an informational brochure on the history of space exploration, the International Space Station, or a related topic. If possible, design your brochure on a computer, and include charts, diagrams, or other graphic elements. Share your brochure with friends or classmates. Hold a debate, taking pro and con positions on the statement: Human beings will one day be able to live in space as they did on *Colony*. Support your position with facts from your brochure.

B. Learn about the Mars Rover. Visit <http://marsrovers.jpl.nasa.gov/>. Then, imagine you are a scientist working on the project. Write a journal entry recording your feelings when Opportunity or Spirit lands on Mars. Write a second journal entry celebrating the experience of receiving information from the rovers. Write a third fictional entry in which you imagine an amazing or unexpected event or discovery in the future life of the Rover program and your reaction.

## III. Leading the Pack

A. The relative success of Sarah's group is due in large part to her leadership skills. Define the term 'leader' in your own words. Compare your interpretation to a dictionary definition of the word. Then, make a list of the leadership qualities that put Sarah in control of her group. Do you recognise these qualities in people that you know, such as parents, friends, teachers, or coaches? Can you list five great leaders from history? Are all leaders good? Are all leaders famous? Are leaders necessary?

B. Imagine that you are a member of Sarah's family charged with announcing her departure and keeping the group together. Prepare a short (1-page) speech. Consider the facts you will state, the ideas you will put forth, and the way you will describe the challenges to be faced. Deliver your speech to family, friends or classmates. Were they persuaded by your words? Why or why not?

## IV. Understanding Others

A. The factions of the Earthborn and Skyborn dislike and distrust each other. Often their enmity is based on misconceptions. Create a chart with rows for Earthborn (Sarah's group, Gimps, Jabbers\_Bruick's group, Ferals and Skyborn (Elders, Upper Deck elite, Lower Deck rebels). Head three columns with the questions: 'How do they interact?' 'What type of information do they have about the others?' and 'What are their sources of information?' Answer these questions for each group. What can you learn by examining your completed chart?

B. Write a paragraph describing a time when you felt misunderstood. Who misunderstood you? What actions did they take? What consequences did their actions have for you? Might you have also misunderstood them? What did you learn from this experience?

## V. Politics and Environment

A. *The Earthborn* takes place in a post-apocalyptic wasteland Earth. Look through the book for details about the quality of the air, water, plant, and animal life, buildings and cities. Draw or paint a picture of some part of Earth's damaged landscape based on this information.

B. Look through the book for clues as to whether the destruction of Earth's environment was largely the result of environmental abuse or political and social problems. List and research

one or more current environmental or political issues that you feel threaten our world. Make a two-minute video in which you try to raise awareness about these issues.

## VI. Tumultuous Technology

A. On *Colony*, various forms of technology have been used in an attempt to improve human life. Make a list of the technologies at work on *Colony*. Circle those technologies which we employ at some level in our world today. Which technology do you feel is most beneficial and which is most dangerous? Which *Colony* technology do you wish we had today? Explain your answers.

B. The Earthborn live in a devastated and primitive environment. If you lived in Sarah's world, what remnants of current technology would you struggle to find? Pack an imaginary backpack with basic items and books you believe would be most helpful for survival in her world. What technology would you struggle to reclaim first?

## VII. The Future

Write the first chapter of a sequel to *The Earthborn*, taking place one week, one month or one year from the end of Paul Collins' story.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Early in the first chapter, Welkin experiences what is, for him, an unusual sensation. He is afraid of what the future holds. Why do you think Welkin has this fear?
2. Harry challenges Welkin to consider a gentler solution to the problem of the lower deck rebels. How does Welkin react to Harry's statements? Why does he react this way?
3. Is *Colony* a great new world, or has it used its technological and simulation capabilities to create a lazy, childlike civilisation that in fact does not understand much at all about its own world or the Earth to which it returns?
4. When Welkin is put in the position of being sacrificed for 'the good of *Colony*', how does his understanding of this phase begin to change?
5. What in Welkin's recent experience makes him opt to trust Sarah, at least in the short term? What is appealing to Welkin about Sarah? What does Sarah want, or need, from Welkin?
6. What is the Aging Disease? What have been its effects on the Skyborn and on the Earthborn? How have the short life-spans caused by the Aging Disease helped foster ignorance and savage behaviour?
7. The Earthborn suffer from many imperfections, such as stuttering, poor vision, deformities, and untreated wounds. How does Welkin react to these differences? What is their value? Although physical imperfections have been largely eradicated on *Colony*, was the price of this systematic culling of the gene pool too high? Explain your answers.
8. Sarah relies upon history and the teachings of her ancestors to survive in her own rugged landscape. Are you as reliant on the lessons of history as Sarah? Do you feel that people today take sufficient time and care to learn the lessons of their past?
9. How do subtle misuse of the clichés and other minor errors point to both the Earthborns' and Skyborns' larger misunderstanding of history and culture? Give examples from the text.

10. Who is Bruick? How do his group's survival tactics change as *Colony* settles onto Earth? What do the encounters with Bruick teach Welkin about life on Earth? What do they teach Welkin about Sarah?
11. How might Sarah define 'family'? Compare and contrast Sarah's relationship to Gillian with Welkin's relationship to Lucida. How do Con, Budge, and ultimately Harry fulfil roles in Sarah's family?
12. What is Sarah's goal for her family and for the Earthborn? Do you think her method of working toward this goal is a good one. Why or why not?
13. As *Colony* resettles on Earth, its occupants seem to be playing as primitive a game of diplomacy as the ferals and jabbers practice. Have they 'come down' to the Earthborns' level, or were they already there?
14. Define 'humanity'. How might your definition differ from the *Colony* elders who allege they are bringing 'humanity' back to Earth? Does it differ from Sarah's definition? Is humanity something absolute, or does its meaning change as human beings find themselves in difficult circumstances?
15. Ignorance and intolerance are rampant between the various factions of Earthborn and Skyborn struggling for a foothold in post-apocalyptic Australia. Why is there so much bigotry?
16. Ostensibly offering a decoy for Sarah's family to loot the back of *Colony*, Welkin instead returns to the vessel to find his sister Lucida. How is this a betrayal of Sarah? What does he discover? How are Welkin's actions, ultimately helpful to Sarah? Is this episode, in fact, Welkin's first truly free action?
17. When Welkin finally finds himself on the lower decks of *Colony*, what type of civilisation does he find there? What is his reaction to this discovery?
18. 'No matter how long Welkin lived on Earth, he would never get used to children having fun'. What is the meaning of this statement which opens Chapter 14? How might 'childhood' and 'adulthood' be defined in the course of the novel?
19. What is the significance of Sarah's departure? What does her family think has occurred? What has really happened? In what ways are the family and its future affected by Sarah's return?
20. The final battle of *The Earthborn* is a complicated sequence of skirmishes between Earthborn and Skyborn with varying allegiances to *Colony*. What is significant about this confusing scenario? Why is Sarah's family so horrified by the mutilations to which they bear witness? Compare these events to the Holocaust.
21. In the course of the novel, Welkin changes his allegiances from the Skyborn to the Earthborn. What choice is he really making? Explain your answer.
22. In *The Earthborn*, what do readers learn about the real definition of freedom? What conclusions might be drawn about the difference between true progress and technological advances that only appear to be progress? Does technology make us free or somehow more dependent?
23. What is *Colony*'s real, or most significant, power? What is the source of Bruick's strength? What is the greatest power wielded by Sarah's family?

24. What do you think will happen to Sarah, Welkin, and their family after the novel comes to an end? What will be the fate of *Colony*? What might happen to their Earth?

25. Paul Collins presents a frightening vision of Earth's future. Do you think our world is headed in this direction? Why or why not?

26. Can *The Earthborn* be seen as an example of what happens when wisdom, compassion and understanding fall behind the rapid progress of technological power? If yes, what actions might we take to help keep wisdom and power in pace with each other?