Airport
by Arthur Hailey

SUMMARY
Airport (published in 1968) tells the inside story of one very difficult night in the busy working life of fictional
Lincoln International Airport in the USA. There is a bad snowstorm so air traffic is held up and impatient
crowds of passengers are waiting for their flights. Adding to the delays, a large plane has become stuck on one of the
main runways, which means that space for landing and taking off has become dangerously limited. In the middle of all this, residents of a nearby housing estate have decided to take their protest about noise to the airport terminal itself.

And these are not all the headaches facing the General Manager at the airport, Mel Bakersfield. He has a failing marriage and serious doubts about his own professional success. But everyone’s nerves are stretched to the limit when a suicidal man carries out his plan to blow up Flight 2 to Rome. Will the Boeing 707 return safely to Lincoln International or will it break into pieces killing all the passengers and crew on board?

ABOUT ARTHUR HAILEY
Arthur Hailey is a highly popular novelist, known best for his top-selling stories about disasters. He was born in 1920 into a working class family in central England. His formal education finished at the age of fourteen, but he was trained as a pilot during the Second World War, an experience which came in useful later in his writing career. After the war, he left England for Canada, where he settled in 1947. He had various jobs in industry, sales and on magazines before becoming a full time freelance writer in 1956.

Key words often used in descriptions of Arthur Hailey’s books are ‘realistic’, ‘informative’, ‘intriguing’, ‘thrilling’, ‘can’t put it down’, ‘top-selling’ and ‘block-busting’. Indeed, an advertising slogan for one of his books says: ‘THINK BIG. THINK BLOCKBUSTER. THINK ARTHUR HAILEY’. The key to his success as a novelist is that he is able to combine highly realistic details of the world he writes about with excellent characterisation, weaving the personal lives and day-to-day problems of his many characters into the main plot. For example, he researched Airport for three years before writing, making sure he became familiar with all aspects of airport life and work.

He has published about eleven works of fiction, several of which have been made into films and TV series. Airport is among the best known of these and probably the most highly regarded. The book was made into a film in 1970, starring Burt Lancaster, Dean Martin, and Jean Seberg, and has had three sequels. He has also written about life in the car industry, medicine, and hotels. His latest book is Detective, published in 1997.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES
This simplified version of Airport retains all the qualities for which Hailey is known, which makes it an excellent choice for a class Reader! There are many issues to explore, as well as strong characters, a gripping story and a fascinating look ‘behind-the-scenes’ at the world of commercial air travel.

On one level, the book is a plea for changes in the management of air transport and it is quite critical in this respect. Readers will not fail to be amazed and horrified by some of the practices in the book, such as the working conditions of air traffic controllers, the ‘stealing’ by cabin crews of leftover drink and food from the airline, and the way that the pressure of work can cause inefficiency which leads to disaster.

These things are still relevant today, even though many changes have taken place in air transport since the time when the book was written. Since then, the wide-bodied ‘jumbo jets’, which can carry up to five hundred passengers, have come into operation. Also, as a result of the frequent hijackings and international terrorism involving aircraft (which happened largely after 1968), great care is taken nowadays to ensure that dangerous items such as weapons and explosives cannot be taken onto planes.

Central to the story are the members of an ‘aviation’ family: Mel Bakersfield, the airport General Manager, Keith Bakersfield, his brother and an air traffic controller and Vernon Demerest, their brother-in-law and a pilot. The personal and professional lives of these men are explored as each plays his part in the events that take place. Hailey uses these characters to raise some interesting issues.

In Mel Bakersfield, we see a man who is so dedicated to his work that his family do not see enough of him, and his wife, fed up with her own lack of fulfilment, demands a divorce. Mel’s professional worries include his failure to persuade his bosses to invest sufficiently in the airport, even though he has foreseen the massive growth in air travel. But because he puts the needs of the airport above everything, he cannot see that his own policy towards selling life insurance is putting lives at risk.

Keith Bakersfield is a man who is talented and good at his work but who suffers from intolerable work-related stress.
The year before, a small mistake on his part indirectly cost the lives of several people and because he cannot bear the guilt that this causes him, he is driven towards suicide. The book shows how difficult it is to be an air traffic controller and how only a small number of people can do it.

One has the feeling that Vernon Demerest may be typical of pilots: highly intelligent and skilled but arrogant and not easy to work with. Through this character Hailey explores the close, sometimes difficult relationships between pilots and the other crew members. The emotional topic of abortion plays an important part in the development of Demerest’s character. It is also interesting that Hailey chose Demerest, an unlikeable character, to be the person with the correct view of the insurance issue.

There are many other colourful and entertaining people in the book, including the eighty-year old stowaway grandmother, the highly competent professional women, Tanya and Gwen, and Joe Patroni, the expert aircraft mechanic. Each has an important part to play in this exciting and dramatic tale, which ends happily for everyone involved – well, almost everyone.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK
Students discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.
1. Which airports have you visited? Describe one.
2. Have you ever been in an aeroplane? Tell other people about a flight you have made.
3. Do you like flying? Why? If you have never been in a plane, would you like to? Why?

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION
Chapters 1–8
Ask students to work in pairs or small groups and discuss these questions.
1. What will Captain Vernon’s report from the Airlines Snow Committee say? How will Mel defend himself?
2. Why has Mel and Cindy’s marriage broken down? Who is to blame?

Chapters 9–16
Ask students in pairs to make a list of things which happen behind the scenes at airports. Which of the things are surprising? Which things should not happen? Have a class discussion.

Chapters 17–24
Ask students to work in pairs to discuss these questions.
1. Whose fault was it that a stowaway and a man with a bomb both managed to get onto Flight Two?
1. Look at the picture on the front cover of the book. What does the picture tell you about the story? What kind of story will it be?

2. Look at the back cover and read the information about the story. In what country do you think it takes place?

3. Read the introduction and match the names and descriptions:
   (a) Mel Bakersfield,
   (b) Cindy Bakersfield
   (c) Tanya Livingston
   (d) Keith Bakersfield
   (e) Vernon Demerest
   (f) Elliott Freemantle
   (i) pilot
   (ii) lawyer
   (iii) Mel’s wife
   (iv) Air Traffic Controller
   (v) Passenger Relations Agent
   (vi) Airport General Manager

4. Look at the back of the book and the introduction. Find four events that affect Lincoln International Airport.

CHAPITERS 1–4
What do these people say? Imagine the conversations. Work with a partner or write your answers. Try not to look at the book!

(a) An air traffic controller explains to a person who lives in Meadowood why there is more noise today.
(b) A passenger explains to a friend who is going to meet her/him why he/she will be late.
(c) Patsy tells her mother why she has come home early.
(d) Roberta tells her mother about the phone conversation with her father.
(e) Joe Patroni phones the airport to explain why he has been delayed. Someone in Mel’s office answers.

CHAPITERS 5–8
1. Complete this summary of the argument between Mel and Vernon. Find words from the text. Use one word for each space.

   Vernon thinks that airports should not sell ...........
   ........... for several reasons. First, selling insurance feels like ........... to pilots and modern planes
   because flying is ........... . You don’t buy insurance at ........... or ........... . Airports just want to ...........
   ........... . Second, selling insurance policies encourages ...........
   and ........... to try to make money by killing people in planes. ........... do not feel ........... because of this.

   Mel thinks that because people are ........... they
   like to have insurance. So if they can’t buy it at ........... 
   ........... , they will buy it ........... . Selling insurance is an ........... way for the airport to ...........

2. Discuss these questions with a partner.

(a) Who do you agree with about the insurance policies, Vernon or Mel? Why?
(b) Has your opinion of Vernon changed since chapter 8? How?

CHAPTERS 17–20
1 Answer these questions.
(a) Which part of the preparations for a plane’s journey is often done badly?
(b) Why does Vernon think the flight delay is not so bad after all?
(c) Why does Inez go to the airport?
(d) What is the main reason why Elliott Freemantle is helping the Meadowood people?
(e) How does Joe plan to move the plane from the runway?

2 Complete these sentences with suitable ideas.
(a) Anson Harris is feeling uncomfortable because ...
(b) Demerest told Anson to wear an airline shirt so Anson ...
(c) Demerest is flying with him so Anson ...
(d) Anson cannot show his anger because ...
(e) Demerest is checking Anson’s flying so Anson ...

CHAPTERS 21–24
1 Imagine that Guerrero’s plan succeeds. What do these people tell police? Act out the conversations with a partner, or write your answer.
(a) Bunny Vorobioff
(b) Harry Standish
(c) Tanya

2 Work with a partner. One of you is Tanya and the other is Bert Weatherby. Tanya must explain to Bert Weatherby how Ada Quonsett managed to get on Flight Two.

CHAPTERS 25–28
Are these true, false or not mentioned in the story? Write T (true), F (false) or NM (not mentioned).
(a) Cindy has not got what she wanted from her marriage to Mel. ___
(b) Vernon thinks that Mrs Quonsett is a dangerous person. ___
(c) Vernon admires Harris’ strong beliefs. ___
(d) Harris’ ideas make Vernon feel guilty. ___
(e) Guerrero is very tired. ___
(f) Elliott Freemantle wants Mel to lose his temper in front of the reporters. ___
(g) Mel does not want a divorce. ___
(h) Tanya spoke to a ticket agent about Guerrero. ___

CHAPTERS 29–32
Who might say the following, when and to whom?
(a) ‘Oh no. We’re going to have to start the digging all over again!’
(b) ‘Excuse me. Can you tell me if a Mr Guerrero was on Flight Two to Rome?’
(c) ‘We’ve got Mrs Guerrero, sir. We’ll bring her right up.’
(d) ‘Pretend to get upset when Gwen is angry with you and ask Guerrero to help you. Try to make him take his hands away from his case.’
(e) ‘Excuse me, young woman, but this case does not belong to you.’

CHAPTERS 33–36
Discuss these questions with a partner or write your answers.
(a) Will Gwen die?
(b) Will runway three zero be cleared in time?
(c) Will the Golden Argosy crash?
(d) Will Mel stop selling insurance at the airport?
(e) Will Keith kill himself?

CHAPTERS 37–41
Match these sentence halves.
(a) Wayne Tevis is not sure whether
(b) Joe Patroni is shocked that
(c) Rolling doubts whether
(d) Doctor Compagno says that
(e) The pilots are worried that
(f) Mrs Quonsett is afraid that
(g) Mel decides that
(h) Vernon wishes that
(i) she will die before she can take her free flight to New York.
(ii) Gwen might recover in hospital.
(iii) he will move out of his home tomorrow.
(iv) Keith will be able to control the landing of Flight Two.
(v) anyone could think of destroying a plane.
(vi) he is landing the plane.
(vii) the runway might be too short.
(viii) Patroni can move the plane.

Activities after reading the book
How might the story end differently? Discuss your ideas with a partner.