



A Cage of Roots

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Teaching Guide

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RATIONALE & THEMES

Ireland is a land of mysterious magic and ancient places, most of which are hidden in plain sight.

This story is a fast-paced, fantastic tale, which draws four friends through time and hidden, ancient places in a quest that will force them to seek strength where they thought there was none as they face fearsome creatures and overcome personal demons.

The themes explored are:

- Courage
- Friendship
- Loyalty
- Identity
- Integrity
- Trust
- Self awareness

SUMMARY

When Ayla awakes, terrified, in a dark underground cell. She has no recollection of how she was brought there.

Her three adopted uncles, driven by a sense of foreboding, frantically search for her. They realize that she has been taken by otherworldly forces and they fear for both her and them if she is not rescued. In order to battle the evil forces they need the help of Ayla's three friends, Benvy, Sean and Finny.

Forced to reveal the power of their own magic and the council of the Old Ones to persuade the friends to help, the uncles prepare to travel through secret time gates to rescue Ayla.

Splitting up to find the gates, each of the friends accompanies one of the uncles, Taig, Fergus and Lann, who are really warriors from ancient Ireland appointed as Ayla's guardians.

In an ancient Ireland called Fal the friends face challenges that they must overcome to prove themselves in order to obtain the

enchanted weapons they will need for the rescue.

Meanwhile, Ayla escapes from her cell into a labyrinth of underground passages, pursued by a snarling swarm of goblins, until she comes face to face with the fearsome Red Root goblin king in his hall.

She is recaptured and strapped to a giant loom, its sorcery drawing the very life thread from her in order to restore existence to the king's queen, who is slumped lifeless by his side.

Racing against time and now armed with the magic weapons, Sean, Finny and Benvy, enter the goblin king's hall, slay the king and overcome the goblin hordes to rescue Ayla.

They return to the surface badly wounded and with Ayla's life force drained. It is up to the guardian uncles to save her now, before they too wither and are carried away in the breeze.

Realizing the true nature of the goblins, and her own true nature and powers, Ayla understands that their rescue mission has not been completed and leads her friends back to the goblin realm.

Section 1 Ayla lost Pages 10 - 83

APPROACH

Essentially this is a fun adventure. It is very fast paced, credible and will capture the imagination of any child who reads it.

The plot is colourful and very visual, lending itself very easily to graphic interpretation.

The guide is divided into three sections to reflect and complement the development of the story

SUMMARY

Ayla awakens into a nightmare. She is buried alive underground with no idea of how she got there. Bruised from raging against the walls of her cell, she tries without success to recall her day and rationalize her situation.

As the glow at the end of her cell grows, what appears dashes her hopes of rescue as it pushes something into the cell before the opening snaps shut again.

Her uncle Lann has a strange foreboding of catastrophe as he tries to control the mischief of his brothers Taig and Fergus on his building site.

Finny, Ayla's friend, is in trouble again at school, his antics attracting the disapproval of the principal, Fr Shanlon. Finny has a history of disruption, exacerbated when his parents separated.

Finny phones Lann to enquire about Ayla whereabouts and the three uncles rush home to find her missing, their fears realized.

Ayla overcomes her revulsion at the food she has been given and tries to eat, enduring a cacophony of screeching insults from the grotesque black goblins that hold her captive, as she tries to understand where she is and why she was taken.

Fearful for Ayla's safety, the uncles know what has happened and decide to seek the help of Cathbad the druid.

Cathbad, disguised as Fr Shanlon, summons the Old Ones through the power of ogham stones.

Ayla's other friends, Benvy and Sean, meet up with Finny. They are all concerned by Ayla's disappearance and plan an immediate search of their usual haunts.

Deep under the school, the Olds Ones, summoned, agree to release the time gates to allow the uncles to search through the ages for Ayla.

Searching in the darkening woods, each of the friends is taken by one of the uncles and they are brought together in an isolated clearing for a strange explanation.

Finny, Benvy and Sean are astonished as they watch as the uncles create a 'Truelight' from the swirls of a fallen stump, revealing the uncles as warriors of ancient Ireland. They explain that they know Ayla's whereabouts and they ask for help in her dangerous rescue.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **(Read p27):** Finny is completing a punishment chore for misbehaviour. The task is tedious and irrelevant, its aim simply to punish. Do you think the task should have been relevant? Which should have been the priority, punishment or correction? What is the difference between them? How would you design a task?
- **(Read pp32-33):** After his parent's divorce, Finny's behaviour becomes disruptive. However, when he becomes friends with Sean and Benvy, things change for him. Why do you think he changed? How can our friends influence our behaviour? If there is an effect, how should we choose our friendship groups? Do we choose them or are we drawn to them?
- **(Read p43-45):** Ayla is shocked to discover the goblins. She finds it hard to believe they are real. Do you think that the existence of otherworldly creatures is possible? How would we know if they existed or do they only live in our imaginations? How can you tell the difference between imagination and reality?
- **(Read p65):** Finny and Ayla have a secret place where they go to relax, escape and if necessary, heal. Is it important to have a getaway place? Why do you think that only Finny and Ayla have connected to this place? What binds them especially that does not include Sean or Benvy? Should Sean or Benvy feel betrayed if they discover the place?
- **(Read p80):** Sean, Finny and Benvy witness an incredible display of magic and are told that the uncles are ancient warriors who have been time shifted to the present as Ayla's guardians. Time travel is a puzzle that many scientists have tried to solve. Do you think that it is even possible to travel through time? Would it work in both directions? If we were to go back in time, how might it affect the present?

ACTIVITIES

1. The Uncle (Read p19)

The author decided to illustrate this section of the story with a close-up picture of Fergus's head showing all his features in detail and reflecting all the mischievous delight in his character.

Could you create a large, full-colour, detailed picture of what you think he might look like?

2. The Day Book (Read pp30-31)

After his latest misconduct, the principal, Fr Shanlon, punishes Finny. He also takes Finny's 'day book' and writes a long note to his mother, adding a comment of advice to Finny as well.

What do you think he said? What advice did he offer Finny? Were his words harsh or gentle?

Recreate the page from Finny's 'day book'.

3. Linked (Read pp32-33)

Sean, Finny and Benvy are close friends. It is an unlikely group as each of them is quite different, yet each holds a strong attraction for the others and when Ayla joins them they are indestructible.

What do you think are the feelings, bonds and attractions, which mark their fellowship?

Draw a large triangle and write Sean, Finny and Benvy's name at each of the points. On each of the sides add the bond that you think links them. **(These bonds will be two-way)**

Now add Ayla's name in the centre and add relationship lines to the others showing how they are bound to her.

4. Finny to Finny (Read p33-34)

As he gazes from the window, Finny experiences a strange sensation. The phone in his hand vibrates and the text appears to come from him.

The message reads, "Why are you here AGAIN? Explain it to me Huh!"

Gingerly he taps a reply and the screen pops to life with an immediate reply.

It is a strange, difficult but truthful exchange.

Could you recreate the text dialogue that you think took place?

5. The Old Ones (Read pp61-63)

O'Brien Press have asked you to create a 20 second clip for their website of Cathbad summoning the Old Ones.

You will need to storyboard and create about 4 separate drawings showing the action and

then choose/create suitable music/audio to accompany them. You will need to decide on what camera shots and angles to use.

You can scan your pictures and use software (**Windows Moviemaker or iMovie**) to create the clip.

Use the sites below for useful tips.

portals.studentnet.edu.au/literacy/minisites/scegsdarlinghurstrevised/vliteracy/shots.htm

mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/pdfs/lesson-plan/Lesson_Camera_Shots.pdf

6. The Famine Wall (Read p66)

The Famine was a terrible time in Ireland's history and Famine Walls are found in many places, reminding us of the hardships that were endured. Each stone laid on the wall carried the story of pain and misery felt by the hand that laid it there.

Even today, the walls resonate with the torment of the people who built them.

As he walked the wall, Sean imagines that he hears one those stories.

Can you retell the story he heard?

www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/irishfamine.htm

7. Time Shift (Read p81)

As the 'Truelight' flashes around the brothers, time itself recoils and the friends see them as warriors from Ireland's ancient past.

If you could travel to any point in Ireland's history, where would you go and whom would you hope to meet there?

Could you describe the meeting?

8. I've eaten it (Read pp41-42)

Ayla finds the food almost impossible to eat. It is the most repulsive experience that she has ever endured. Everything about it is nauseating.

Write a brief comic description of the foulest food 'trial' that you have ever endured.

What were the circumstances and who was involved?

Section 2 Time Shifting Pages 86 - 157

SUMMARY

Tormented by the goblins and repulsed by their food, an idea begins to come to Ayla.

As the sky lightens, Finny, Sean and Benvy return home to make preparations for their rescue mission.

Sean runs the gauntlet of his mother's distress, discovering that the Garda have been alerted to his disappearance.

The pungent diesel whiff Ayla caught from the food gives her an idea. Grabbing a torch from one of her captors, she manages to ignite the foul brew and escapes in the confusion it causes.

A phone call, seemingly from school, calms both Sean's mum's and the Garda's concerns allowing Sean to gather what he needs for his trip. He meets Benvy outside with her older brother in his car and realizes the brother had phoned posing as their school.

Arriving at Ayla's house, they find Finny already there and Lann issues instructions about where to find the time gates before they set off in pairs.

Lann and Finny have the shortest journey, to a nearby construction site that the brothers are managing. Discovering the architect on site, Finny creates a distraction which allows them to locate and activate the gate.

Sean accompanies Fergus into the wild Burren landscape towards the Ailwee caves, learning the story of Queen Maeve, the druid's magic and their search for Ayla from the giant man as they travel.

Joining a cave tour, Fergus takes the opportunity, during a black-out, to seize Sean and silently enter the water. Tracing swirls on the entrance stone, the time gate opens and they enter.

Taig entertains Benvy as they travel to Newgrange and she discovers Fal, the mythical ancient land of Ireland, is their destination. There the friends will have to retrieve an assortment of closely guarded enchanted weapons to complete the rescue.

Taig is recognized and chased by a dishevelled creature as he and Benvy locate the gate and escape through it.

Out of her cell, Ayla flees through the maze of passages, seeking escape.

Exiting the gate, Lann breathes the smells of home and begins his own explanation. Finny learns who the brothers are, their responsibility for Ayla and is shocked to discover that his principal, Fr Shanlon, is really Cathbad, a powerful druid.

Taig's powerful grip prevents Benvy crashing off a precipice as they exit into Fal sweeping her onto his back as they find somewhere to rest before she faces her test and recovers the magic javelin.

Fergus realizes that they have exited into the wrong time and seeks the help of an Old One to adjust the time gate.

Pursued, Ayla plunges into a dark pool and is wrenched off her feet and dragged under before she can react.

Captured, Fergus realizes that they have exited into Norman times, discovering the Old One he seeks as all three of them are pilloried in the castle courtyard and pelted with rotten fruit.

Ayla revives to discover that she is being devoured by a giant toad. The goblins arrive and hack him to pieces, rescuing Ayla only to present her to the goblin king, where she is strapped to a fearsome loom to begin the process of extracting her life thread.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **(Read p96-98):** In most relationships one person is usually the dominant one and makes the decisions. In the Sheridan home, who do you think is in charge? Is it his dad or his mum? What clues can you find from what they say or do to indicate who is really in charge? Why do you think this is the case?
- **(Read p106):** Both Mr Fitzgerald and his son speak with a particular Dublin accent. Finny immediately assumes a number of characteristics about them simply on hearing them speak. Why do we use accents to label people? What does this tell us about ourselves? Why do you think that this particular accent was annoying for Finny? Is this type of stereotyping laziness or discrimination? How can it be avoided?
- **(Read p113):** Maeve and the druid magic are presented in a play of lights, mists and strange incantations. This occult interpretation of evil is designed to fire the imagination and frighten. Do you think there is any substance to it? Does this type of evil exist or is it just imagination? What do you understand by evil?
- **(Read p114):** Maeve and the Red Root King have been defeated, banished underground, alive, but with their 'humanness' ripped from them. What do you think the quality of humanness adds to us? How can it be identified and what does it bring to our existence? What would be the consequence of us losing this quality?
- **(Read p130):** Immortality is the quest of modern times, to stop and reverse the aging process. What do you think it would be like to live beyond our normal timespan, to live forever? Do you think it would be a benefit or a curse? Should we even try to prolong our lives? Is dying as normal as living? Why do you think people are afraid of dying?

ACTIVITIES

1. The Truth (Read pp92-93)

Sean is upset at having to lie to his parents and decides to scribble a brief note to them to explain what is happening before he leaves.

What might he say to reassure them and make the adventure seem less incredible?

Can you help him write the note? Remember he is good at English and will try to make his note sound calm, factual and sober.

2. Magic Ireland (Read pp99-100)

The Irish Tourist Board like the idea of magic places in Ireland holding time gates that allow travellers to visit the ancient past.

Help them produce a map showing where these gates might be and give a little historical background for each site.

Each of the maps will show 7 enchanted sites.

maps.scoilnet.ie/

www.irishcentral.com/roots/top-ten-magical-prehistoric-sites-in-ireland-photos-217795351-237786391.html

www.authenticireland.com/ancient-places-in-ireland/

3. Fergus's Tales (Read p109)

Fergus enjoys telling tales of his past experiences. They are full of adventure, humour and drama.

Unknown to him, Sean has managed to record him telling one of the stories.

Make a recording of one of the stories.

Decide if it will be a comic story or an adventure, who it will involve and where it will be set.

Tell the story with all the drama that you imagine Fergus had in his voice.

4. Truelight (Read p111)

Sean remembers his experience in Coleman's Wood when the 'Truelight' shone through the brothers' disguises and he was able to see them for who they really were.

He wonders what would be seen if the 'Truelight' were shone on Finny, Benvy and himself. Who are they really?

Create an illustration and brief description showing what you believe would be revealed for each of them by the 'Truelight'.

5. The Stones (Read pp117 & 122)

Each of the time gates has a swirl marked entrance stone and the brothers hum a bass note key to activate it.

The only memory the friends have of passing through the gate is the throb of the vibrating note and the kaleidoscope swirl as the colours wheel and glow.

Can you create an image of the flashing colours of the spiral as the gate opens?

6. Home (Read pp127 & 132)

The brothers yearn for their home and they savour every sight, sound and fragrance when they return.

If you had to leave your home for a long time, what things would you long for?

List the three things you would miss the most and explain why.

7. The Goblin King (Read pp143 & 154-156)

Ayla is prodded through the Red Root King's hall, to stand before him and a crowd of goblins. The sight of their faces and their dark and twisted forms is a memory she will never forget.

Using black paper and white chalk, draw a picture of what she saw.

You can use different strengths of shading to create an effect.

8. The Normans (Read pp147-151)

Trapped in Norman times and in deadly danger, Sean leafs through his history notes for some sort of information to help them survive. He finds nothing.

Create a brief survival guide for someone captured by the Normans.

Your guide will need to be very short and to the point; details listed in order of usefulness and including no more than 5 pieces of information.

Section 3 Tested Pages 160 - 237

SUMMARY

Lann explains to Finny the enchantment of the weapons they seek and the trials they must overcome to recover them, including the consequences of failure.

Each of the brothers have exited the time gates at different places and now Taig accompanies Benvy as far as the yawn of a cave mouth, leaving her with words of encouragement and advice.

Wedge painfully into the pillory, Sean hears the rising pitch of Goll's ancient incantation

as Fergus rips the stocks apart, freeing the three of them. In a confusion of hail and lightning strikes, conjured up by Goll, Fergus scatters the castle guard, but is prevented from killing the captain of the guards by Sean.

Finny is faced with his challenge and leaves Lann, at the top of a huge bowl in the earth, to meet it alone.

Disorientated to find his mother waiting for him at the bottom and then his father, concern morphs to rage as his confusion clears and he realizes the creature he faces has created a hallucination to trick him.

Wrestling the creature to reveal the sword, Finny is forced to confront a perfect mimicry of his own rage before he swings the sword, ending the challenge and returning to Lann.

Benvy's challenge forces her, too, to confront uncomfortable truths, almost succumbing to a siren melody before she asserts herself and claims the enchanted javelin.

Freed from their Norman capture, Goll activates the time gate to allow them passage to Fal and Sean faces his challenge.

Facing an ogre, the remains of an elk dangling from its claws, Sean seizes the initiative and approaches him boldly, shouting a challenge.

Seeing Sean's book the monster unexpectedly retreats and Sean takes the advantage, improvising a drama of book waving and spells which cows the monster into releasing the bewitched war hammer.

Ayla watches in horror as her own body is changing into a crooked black form, while her life thread, drawn by the loom is beginning to revive the lifeless shape hanging beside the goblin king.



United and each armed with a magic weapon, Sean, Benvy and Finny are led to Ayla's prison.

The land grows cold and barren as they reach the entrance to the underground realm.

The brothers are noticeably weakening, and when Taig reveals a misunderstanding, the others realize the source of the treachery that saw Ayla captured.

Tracing the spiral and splitting the ground open, Lann bids Sean, Benvy and Finny into the gaping hole to rescue Ayla while he remains above with Taig and Fergus.

Weaving cautiously down through the root-choked passages; they face the goblin king and his horde, rescuing Ayla with the help of their enchanted weapons before her life tread has been completely spun out.

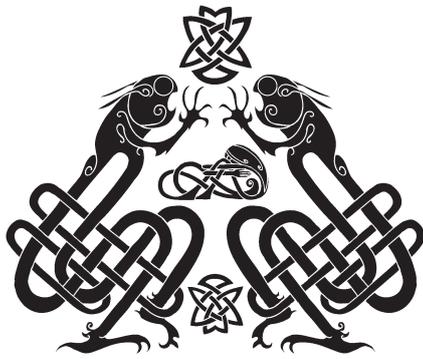
Back on the surface, injured, they watch as the brothers prepare their final spell to restore Ayla.

However, saving Ayla comes at a high price and brothers spin off in the wind, leaving the friends alone, with Ayla, distraught at the loss of her uncles.

Thoughts of home are postponed as Ayla persuades her friends to return underground to rescue the goblins, finally understanding their true identities and her own destiny.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **(Read p162):** Lann suggests to Finny that heroes are capable of more than bravery. They also need to be able to love. What types of strengths do you think he means? What would these strengths look like? Who might have them? How would you recognize such a hero?
- **(Read pp167-168):** Sean and Fergus have time-travelled back in time to the Norman age. It is interesting to consider whether time travel is possible. If it were possible, what might the consequences be? What could happen to our present if something was changed in the past? Does the future even exist to travel to?
- **(Read pp173-175):** Finny discovers that the creature he has challenged knows everything about him, including feelings that Finny had even hidden from himself. Everything is revealed. Do you think it is ever useful to see yourself so clearly? How would you deal with that knowledge?
- **(Read pp181-184):** The challenge for Benvy is to know and to be true to herself. Why do you think that people seek reassurance in comparing themselves to others? Are 'Role Models' a useful idea, or do they deceive us into thinking about



who we might be? How can you actually discover who you are? Why do you think there are so many pressures on us to be 'like' someone else?

- (**Read pp 168 & 188**): Fergus has little sympathy for the Normans who perished in the fire and he would have killed their captain if Sean had not stopped him. How do you think a defeated enemy should be treated? Do they deserve to be shown any mercy, or is this simply a sign of weakness? Do you agree with the cliché 'The winner takes all', including life and the processions of the defeated?
- (**Read pp196-198**): Sean is astounded to discover that he is able to overcome the ogre without having to use any physical force whatsoever. What message do you think the author is trying to present? Do you think it is a sensible or realistic position?

ACTIVITIES

1. Answers (**Read p164**)

As she stands at the entrance of the cave peering into the darkness, a strange hum fills Benvy's head and she hears her own voice answer each of the questions she has.

The voice finally offers one very important piece of encouragement for her.

Work in small groups to create the dialogue she had. Dramatize it and record it if you wish.

2. Lightning Bolts (**Read pp168-169**)

The scene inside the Norman fort is dramatic as the captain kneels before Fergus in the driving rain, the lightning bolts exploding and crashing around them, ripping the fort apart.

Using graphic novel-style images, could you capture the scene with all its fury of movement, noise and light?

3. Pleased to be me (**Read p179**)

Benvy's challenge has undermined her confidence, causing her to doubt herself.

This is a common experience for everyone at some time and we need to remind ourselves often of the reasons why we are worthwhile.

On a sheet of A4 paper draw an outline of your hands and along each finger write one reason why you are happy to be you. In the middle of each hand include an illustration of yourself being happy.

You can add colour to decorate the page.

4. Fear (**Read pp194-195**)

As he makes his way across the valley floor, Sean has to concentrate intently, in order to overcome his fear and the urge to run.

The strategy he uses to distract himself is to compose a mental poem.

The title is FEAR and as Sean is talented at composing acrostic poems, this is the form he chooses.

Recreate the poem you think he might have composed.

www.poetry4kids.com/blog/lessons/how-to-write-an-acrostic-poem/

5. Don't (**Read p205**)

Lann pulls Fergus close and whispers something to him to prevent him tearing Taig apart.

What did he say to him? Was it a threat, a reminder or maybe a promise?

It was enough to stop Fergus and allow them to hum the enchantment together to open the passage.

Create the whispered conversation they had.

6. Which Way (**Read pp210-211**)

As Sean, Benvy and Finny descend into the labyrinth of tunnels they are faced with the choice of going right or left whenever a tunnel branches.

Benvy is excellent at maths and loves to solve puzzles.

To distract her, she tries to calculate the total number of routes they have available, each time a tunnel branches.

She knows that at the first branch there will be two routes and if each of these routes branches then they will have four different routes.

If every branch offers another two-branch choice, how many routes in total are created after they have made 4 branches?

If each route offered 3 branches, how many routes choices would they have?

Draw a diagram to help you to calculate the numbers.

7. Goodbye (**Read pp234-235**)

Lann, Taig and Fergus have gone but not completely; they have simply moved.

Looking back, Lann sees that Ayla is distraught at their going and decides to reach back to her to reassure her that they will meet again and that she is not alone.

The author has asked you to create a short paragraph here to describe the encounter.

Write a short 150-word paragraph to describe how Lann reaches back, what he says and how Ayla responds.

8. Transformed (**Read p237**)

Picking their steps carefully, Sean, Benvy and Finny follow Ayla into the darkness of the tunnel complex leading to the goblin king's hall. They cannot believe the scene that meets their gaze as they watch Ayla reach out and touch a goblin child.

Can you work in small groups to create a final page to end the story? What do you think happens?

Class Project

The story is an exciting fantasy which would work well as a graphic/comic novel. The descriptions in the story are very visual and the class might enjoy interpreting the story in the exciting visual way that a graphic / comic novel presents.

The following sites will give useful information and help to start a project to allow the class to retell either the complete story in a short graphic form or select a section of the story that particularly appeals to the class to present a comic version of it.

www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/activities-projects/comics-graphic-novels-30296.html

www.booktrust.org.uk/books/children/comics-and-graphic-novels/useful-links/