



# The Rock Boy

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## Teaching Guide

By Liz Morris

### WHY READ *THE ROCK BOY*?

*The Rock Boy* is ideal for use in the senior classes of primary schools and in the junior cycle of second-level schools as it has, sadly, a particular relevance at present.

The migration of people from their native countries to those where there may be opportunities for a 'better' life is a constant in human history, and one with which the Irish are very familiar. The unprecedented movement of people from the war-torn countries of the Middle East, and the poor or struggling countries of Africa, is currently generating fierce debate and arguments about migration, race and religion; and about the accountability and responsibility of countries in the Global North.

Reading this book may help children understand how a person becomes an asylum seeker or a refugee, and the reasons why they would seek sanctuary in another country.

Artan, the rock boy, has escaped the grinding poverty of life in Vlorë, Albania, in the late-1990s. The unstable economic situation that came after the collapse of the communist regime led to thousands of Albanians fleeing in search of a better life in Italy, Greece, Germany and other countries. Uncle Tumas tells Jo about the extreme poverty in Artan's homeland:

*'There have been terrible riots in Albania. Parts of the country are ruled by gangs. Lots of shootings and killings, especially in the south, and people have been trying to leave. Some are starving.'* (pp123–124)

By engaging our minds and our emotions, a book like *The Rock Boy* can help to broaden our horizons, allowing us to imagine life in someone else's shoes, and it can increase our empathy – an essential interpersonal skill in the 21st Century and one we need to develop to maintain relationships and stand up to prejudice and intolerance.

*The Rock Boy* was first published in 2001, before many of today's readers were born, but it is just as relevant today. Taking a fresh, unsentimental and at times humorous approach, it focuses on many SPHE- and Language-based themes, for example:

- Family (and extended family) relationships
- Cultural diversity / appreciation of other cultural traditions
- Experience of death and loss
- Friendship and loyalty
- Helping and supporting others, even those who are not yet friends
- Courage, bravery, resourcefulness

### SUMMARY

The book opens in Malta, with twelve-year-old Josephine (Jo) Agius trapped in an ancient underground temple. Her uncle hadn't realised that she was exploring and had accidentally locked her in. She is alone in the darkness, trying not to think of the bones of the 6,000 humans buried there many millennia before.

Jo tells herself not to panic and promises the god she believes in that she will do something good, something important, if she gets out alive. She is very relieved when her uncle returns and frees her.

However she may have to redeem that rash promise – one that many of us have made in desperate times – when she finds a boy, barely alive, in a shallow cove almost hidden by rocks. He clearly needs help.

Some instinct, a feeling she can't explain, convinces her to tell only her friend Andreas, a Dutch boy holidaying in Malta with his family, about finding the rock boy.

Jo is determined to organise the food and drink, shelter and safety the exhausted and terrified rock boy needs, but Andreas is not sure that this is the right course of action. He knows how difficult it will be to hide this

boy on an island where secrets are hard to keep, but Jo knows that the Hypogeum – the underground temple – has held secrets for thousands of years ...

### BEFORE YOU BEGIN READING

#### 1. What Is a 'Refugee'?

We read and hear the words every day – 'refugee', 'asylum seeker', 'migrant', 'illegal immigrant', 'economic migrant' – but what exactly do they mean?

Thought-shower the class to establish what they know about the word 'refugee'. Where have they heard it lately? What does it mean to be a refugee? Can they think of alternative words, or words that are similar but mean something slightly different?

Explore some of the reasons why people might seek refuge in another country. Why would they leave their home?

Can you think of other words for 'asylum'? What do all asylum seekers (whether they're fleeing religious or political persecution, war or environmental disaster) have in common?

Record the students' questions or gaps in their knowledge on a flipchart or IWB, then attempt to address them.

#### 2. Improvised Role Play

Show an image of a refugee or a family of refugees to the class, then split the students into groups of four or five.

Allocate the role of refugee/migrant/asylum seeker to one person in the group; the others will be the inhabitants of the fictional host country, Kishadoo. Explain that the refugee has landed in a country whose language he/she doesn't speak, with only the clothes on his/her back.

Ask the groups to spend a few minutes working on scenarios that they can freeze-frame: showing the arrival in Kishadoo of the traveller; the reactions of the locals; how the

situation progresses over time, etc.

Each group shows their freeze-frames to the rest of the class, and the teacher prompts a discussion with relevant questions. What is happening in the scene? Is everybody welcoming the newcomer? What might be done to improve the situation for both traveller and host community? Without a shared language, how could they communicate?

Ask those performing the freeze-frames to thought-track their characters too.

### 3. Media Education

Note: as teacher, you may decide that this exercise is inappropriate for the class. It would be particularly upsetting to a child who has experienced a death in the family, or one who has fled the country of his or her birth. And even children who have never experienced death may be very upset to see a photograph of a dead toddler.

If you feel that they won't be too distressed by it, ask the children to discuss their own reaction – and the world's reaction – to the photo of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea and was washed up on the beach in Bodrum, Turkey. (The photograph was in almost all newspapers on 2 September 2015, and the media reaction to it continued from 3 September onwards.)

Why did so many papers choose to use this photograph on the front pages, and why did others choose to place it less prominently?

Can the class offer suggestions as to why there was such a huge outcry over this photo, when newspapers had been printing other horrifying photographs and reports for months previously?

### 4. Empathy-building 1

At any stage of reading *The Rock Boy* – or reading any book – when the characters are experiencing emotions, the teacher can ask the children what the character (person) might be feeling. The students may not have experienced the situation described in the novel, but they have probably experienced the feeling.

In exploring this book, we as readers relate the story of Jo and her extended family to our own experience; we make connections with her and her life, and with the boy washed up on the rocks. We may then empathise with people seeking asylum in real life. We come to understand that everyone has a valuable contribution to make, irrespective of age, gender or nationality, and we get to know, respect

and understand Jo's cultural and ethnic traditions, which may differ from ours.

There is an increasing acceptance that those with responsibility for educating our children must do more to develop empathy. It is felt that these days, young people spend less time communicating with one another in 'real life'.

Empathy (recognising and responding to the feelings of other people, feeling *with* people) is not the same as sympathy, yet it can be difficult to explain the difference. This video clip may be helpful for teachers and older pupils, if school policy allows them to watch YouTube videos:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Fvwgu369Jw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Fvwgu369Jw)

By developing empathy, we help children to see points of view other than their own, to understand the situations of others, to value others, and to feel valued and understood themselves.

When children (or adults) empathise in this way with a person or group of people who are suffering, often they want to take action to ease that person's/people's plight. That might be something as simple and powerful as listening; donating food or money; writing letters to decision-makers like politicians, councillors or newspapers; or organising a debate with another local school or college.

## EXERCISES IN EMPATHY-BUILDING

### a. A Helping Hand

Ask the children to think of a time when they noticed that someone needed practical and/or emotional support and they were able to help. This might have been at home, in the class or playground, or outside school.

Ask them what moved or motivated them to offer that support/help. Then ask them to write a c. 200-word piece describing the experience: what help or support they gave, how supporting the other person made them feel, and what impact it had on the other person.

Ask them to draw a picture to illustrate the emotions they felt when they were able to help, and to add a caption that might encapsulate those feelings.

### b. Anatomy of a Feeling

Using a selection of newspapers, ask the children to find a full-length photo of a person to cut out and fix in the centre of an A3 sheet of paper. They should include the photo's background. (Make sure to check the newspapers beforehand for images that

might be deemed unsuitable or offensive to ethnic minorities.)

The teacher may add to the mix a few interesting and unusual photos of people in different scenarios.

The children should study their chosen photo for a few minutes – considering its subject's clothes, expression, background details, etc. – and then draw one or two thought bubbles with words that express what the person in the photo might be thinking.

Ask the children to list core feelings, for example sadness, fear, happiness, anger, shame, disgust and boredom, which the teacher should write on a flipchart or IWB. (Psychologists differ about the exact number of core feelings, but it's usually put at between four and eight.)

The children should suggest where these feelings are usually experienced in the body, e.g. disgust is usually felt in the belly; fear/anxiety can be felt in the belly (butterflies) or the chest (heavy feeling) or the throat (tightness when you're afraid to say something).

Next, the children should think about the colours they associate with these different feelings. Ask them to shade the colour appropriate to the feeling they believe the person in their photo is experiencing, in what they consider to be the most appropriate spot on their body.

Finally, ask them to draw themselves into the A3 sheet. In speech bubbles, write some questions they might ask the person in the photo in order to elicit more information about their feelings. For example, if the person in the photo is smiling broadly, they might write: 'You look very happy. Did you get some good news?'

## WHILE READING THE ROCK BOY

### 1. KWL

At the front of the book there are maps showing the position of some countries and islands near the Maltese archipelago. Many of these, including Greece, are relevant to current discussion about refugees and asylum seekers.

Ask the children to use Google Maps (if school policy allows) or a globe/atlas to locate these places. See what the children know – and what they want to know – about each country, and record their first responses on a flipchart or on the IWB.

Later they might fill in the K and W columns on their individual grids and file in their folders for future reference. They will

record their Learning as appropriate to your classroom routine.

## 2. Tourists

On p13, we read that the tourists were 'loud-voiced and laden with cameras', and that they were 'clicking shutters and posing for photographs'.

Ask the children to close their eyes and visualise this scene, then help them to analyse the situation with prompt questions. How did these tourists experience the temple they had chosen to visit? Do you think that tourists sometimes fail to experience things fully because their attention is on videoing or taking photographs? What happens when we see the world through our camera/phones/selfies? What do you think of the behaviour of the tourist who lay on the slab in the Holy of Holies (p14)?

Remember, people have always wanted to record visually their impressions of situations – think of the cave paintings of Altamira and Lascaux.

## 3. Roles of Women

Jo's headstrong and independent ways sometimes bring her into conflict with the women of her family (her mother and aunt) and the women of the village, and it is clear that her uncle and older brother Gabriel in particular have a soft spot for her.

The novel was first published in 2001. Ask the class if they think the roles of women and men might be different if the novel was written today?

Examine the gender roles in this novel, making note of sentences like 'Jo behaved more like a boy than a girl, anyway' (p17).

## 4. The Other World

Jo believes in ghosts and seems to be able to sense danger in her dreams. The ability to sense spirits and otherworldly elements is sometimes called ESP.

In Jo's village, dreams and visions are not quickly dismissed; after all, an oracle speaks in the Hypogeum, and clearly Jo's great-aunt Gracie has also had visions.

Ask the children to find out what ESP means and to write a definition. Some children may volunteer an experience of pre-cognition, telepathy or clairvoyance; others will offer references to ESP, ghostly presences and visions of danger in children's books and night-time stories.

## 5. At First Sight

When the children have reached the point in the novel where Jo finds the boy washed up on the rocks (pp71–73), ask them what

they think and feel about Jo's reaction to the boy. You might highlight these quotes on a flipchart or IWB:

*Suddenly she stopped humming. Something was wrong. Her heart began beating hard... But the odd feeling didn't leave her ... Yet the sea no longer seemed so friendly ... She trod water for a moment to beat down her panic. (p71)*

*'Madonna!' she gasped. The eyes below were open. Eyes as dark and brown as her own. (p73)*

Ask the children to read these three pages again carefully, giving them prompt questions. For example:

- What do they think of Jo's reaction?
- Does she display any emotion?
- Is her reaction more physical than emotional at first? (She is no longer humming, her heart is beating hard, she has an odd feeling, etc.)
- Are there 'describing' words to tell that she is nervous of the unknown, or scared or fearful?
- Beyond Jo's physical reaction, can we imagine how she's *feeling*? What words indicate this?
- Can the reader feel Jo's concern for the boy grow as her knowledge that something is wrong increases?

## 6. Dilemma

When she discovers the boy, Jo is faced with a moral dilemma. Her father disapproves of refugees and says they should be sent back to their own countries. But when Jo sees Artan alone and injured, she knows she must protect him. Artan's future lies in Jo's hands. Now that his brother is dead, he is alone, friendless and helpless.

Divide the class into small groups. Each should think of four reasons why Jo should help the boy, and four reasons why she should not.

## 7. Fáilte is Fiche Romhaibh

Some schools and communities have a Welcome Committee, whose job it is to show newcomers around, help them settle, answer their questions, and improve relationships between newcomers and locals.

Ask the children to draw up a policy document for a Welcome Committee in their school. It should contain practical suggestions (eg. how many people should be on the committee and the roles of each) as well as clear tasks for committee members (eg. learning some words in the newcomer's language, bringing them along

to an extracurricular activity, sport or club).

Remind the children that newcomers might be from very different cultures to their own, and that their families may not have much money.

When the children are satisfied, the Welcome Committee policy might be circulated first to the students' union or council, then to the BOM and, with its approval, to the whole school.

## 8. Social Inequality and Its Consequences

Ask the children to find and consider graphs showing the GNI (gross national income) per capita of countries like Malta, Ireland, the Netherlands, Albania, Syria, Eritrea, Yemen, the United States, etc. What would these figures mean for the average person living in one of these countries?

Ask the children, in groups, to select a country that is currently suffering the effects of war, for example Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, Yemen or Burundi. They should find out more about the history, geography, industries, main religion, climate and typical food of their chosen country, and try to find out whether the resources exist there to feed, clothe and house the general population.

Ask them also to find out what their country produces for export to the rest of the world, including Ireland, making comparisons to pre-conflict norms.

## 9. Drama

Ask the children to project themselves into the life of a twelve-year-old boy/girl living in a country currently affected by war. They should think about his/her life before the conflict, and his/her life now.

## 10. Strange New World

Discuss how Artan must have felt when he arrived in this new country. Ask the children to put themselves in his shoes and to think about how alien and different it all would feel – to think about the villas he may have noticed on his walk to Jo's house; the comfort and food available in Aunt Anna's.

Remind them that Artan has grown up in a village much poorer than Jo's. Do the children think it would all seem positive to Artan, or might any of it seem wasteful or extravagant?

## 11. Character Portrait

Ask the children to develop a list of words to describe Jo as they read the book. These adjectives may come from the text itself, or from the children's own impressions based on her actions in the novel. They may choose to illustrate their portraits.

**1. Science and Board Games!**

You will need a set of dominoes, blindfolds/ eye masks and torches for this.

Before you begin, remind the children of just how dark it was for Jo down in the Hypogeum:

*[Jo] waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness ... But here there was no window to let in even a chink of light. Her eyes did not adjust. It was as if she was blind. (pp9–10)*

Pass domino pieces around the class, letting each child feel both sides of the tile. If necessary, explain how to play dominoes and allow time for the class to practise.

Ask volunteer children, in pairs, to play a game of dominoes, with both players wearing a blindfold. The rest of the class should watch closely, thinking about how difficult it is to identify the markings on the dominoes in the dark and remember where to place each domino. Then ask the blindfolded children to try to do what Jo did: to take batteries from their pocket, unscrew the bottom of a torch and insert them correctly. Did anyone get it first time?

**2. Visualisation**

Before her torch fell, Jo was able to work out where she was. Can the children imagine what it would have been like if she had not brought a torch that day? Some children might suggest that having had the light, and then losing it, may have made things more scary for Jo.

*Click. Figures leapt out from the walls. Jo gasped and the torch jerked upwards in her hand. She forced herself to look again. (p11)*

Ask the children to consider the fact that refugee/migrant children and adults sometimes travel in sealed vehicles, or in cramped boats with no lights, in an attempt to reach safety and gain asylum in a new land.

**3. People and Other Lands**

As the children read through the book, they will be learning about the lives of the people of Malta. Encourage them to research the country further, either individually or in groups, and to record their observations using some of the topics found in the Geography curriculum, for example:

- Art and culture: Many of Malta’s churches are incredibly beautiful. One of Caravaggio’s best-loved works, ‘The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist’, is on display in the Oratory of St John’s Co-Cathedral in Valletta. The children could

visit the National Gallery of Ireland and/ or its website to study his painting ‘The Taking of Christ’, and make comparisons between the two.

- Religion: Catholicism is still at the centre of much activity in Malta – processions for saints’ feast days are common, and every village has churches and chapels – although the island is becoming more secular. The children might list five items with religious significance and say with which religion each is associated (eg. cross, Qu’ran, prayer mat, yarmulke). Can they suggest any non-religious, traditional symbols (eg. rabbit’s foot for good luck)?
- Language: Jo and Andreas try to communicate with the rock boy in their own languages; Jo asks him questions in Maltese, and Andreas tries Dutch. Ask the class to research the most widely spoken languages in the world. Imagining themselves trying to communicate with a stranger for the first time, they should write down ten words/phrases they think it is important to know in English (eg. ‘yes’, ‘no’, ‘my name is’) and then translate them into three chosen languages.
- Society: In Jo’s village, there seems to be quite a lot of social interaction between the generations, and it appears that the neighbours all keep a close eye out for one another. The children might discuss the advantages and disadvantages of living in such a community. How does it compare to life in Ireland? Is it different in our big cities to our small villages?

**4. Balloon game (from Student Action for Refugees)**

A fun way to impress on the children an awareness of some of the issues faced by refugees and asylum seekers. You need five balloons in different colours; these represent some of the issues refugees and asylum seekers face each day. On each, the teacher writes the words Language, Accommodation, Education, Food and Freedom.

A volunteer student stands, with plenty of space, and tries to keep all five balloons in the air at the same time. The volunteer only gets thirty seconds, and they can’t pick up a balloon again after it has dropped.

If the student drops the Language balloon, the teacher should suggest some problems not having language might create: for example, you would catch the wrong bus and end up on the wrong side of town. The dropped Freedom balloon might mean: you have committed no crime and yet you have been detained indefinitely. And so on.

**5. Empathy-building 2**

Before the class finishes *The Rock Boy*, spend some time studying photos of refugees/ asylum seekers outside Calais in France; in any of the camps or railway stations in central Europe; on the Greek islands of Lesbos and Kos, etc.

Ask the children to imagine what it would be like to have to leave their home country because remaining there would be too dangerous (due to war, natural disaster, environmental problems).

Then, ask them to imagine how it would feel if no one wanted to help or accept them. They should think about how some people in the new country/situation may pose even more danger, and how this would make them feel even worse.

Ask the children to put themselves in the shoes of people with no shoes; those on the sides of roads in central Europe, worn out by days of walking. Ask them how they would feel, and thought-shower their responses, writing them on an IWB or flipchart.

If they are really imagining what it must be like for refugee children, the class may suggest feelings of fear, anger, shame, sadness, a sense of dread, helplessness, hopelessness or perhaps despair at the huge losses involved (loss of possessions, home, country, relatives, etc.).

Ask the children to imagine the refugees’ fear of the unknown, to think about how they must wonder where their next meal and shelter are going to come from; to imagine their boredom at the long hours and days spent waiting for anything to happen; to ‘feel’ their exhaustion after the long walks and terrifying journeys in overcrowded and unseaworthy boats.

Finally, focus on the difficulties the migrants/ refugees might encounter after they manage to arrive in a northern European destination. Will their dreams be realised, or might they spend time in detention centres or halting areas? Encourage the children to think about the ‘better quality of life’ that the refugees hope for. Are they sure to find this in northern Europe?

**Find out more about *The Rock Boy* and its author, Jan Michael, and order copies for your classroom at [www.obrien.ie](http://www.obrien.ie)**

