

Spies

Brian Gallagher

Teaching Guide

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RATIONALE & THEMES

The activities in this guide are designed to complement a class reading of the text in a way that inspires young readers to delve deep into the characters and themes of this fascinating story. It aims to develop empathy skills, stimulate discussion and encourage readers to dissect literary techniques in fresh and engaging ways. There are also activities included that are designed to hone communication, presentation and literacy skills. This novel deals with very important events in history and its key themes include:

- Friendship
- Loyalty and Trust
- Social and Class
- Courage
- Honour and Duty
- Family

SUMMARY

Spies is the sequel to the highly entertaining *Pawns*, picking up the story of Johnny, Alice and Stella three days after the dramatic burning of Balbriggan by the Black and Tans. Set against the backdrop of the War of Independence, we find Stella Radcliffe (daughter of an RAF Commanding Officer) and Alice Goodman (daughter of the Hotel's owner) still living at the Mill Hotel in Balbriggan. However, Johnny Dunne's situation has changed drastically and we first meet him trying to stay out of trouble in Thurles. But the authorities are on his tail and he finds himself in the thick of the action in Dublin.

Even though they no longer live under the same roof, the three friends stay in contact, despite the dangers. As the political situation intensifies and the country becomes even more divided,

they manage to support one another as events in their family lives bring grief and confusion. For Stella and Alice, life continues as normal, with band practice and chess competitions, but it feels hollow without Johnny there to share it with them – and *he* misses *them* in Dublin. As events become more fraught with danger, friendship comes first and, if they are asked to choose a side, they will always put each other first, no matter the cost.

APPROACH

This guide has followed the structure of the novel and is divided into three units, with suggested discussion points and a range of activities at the end of each section. Like the prequel, *Pawns*, the setting for this story is the Irish War of Independence and the story makes reference to a number of challenging historical events, offering excellent opportunities for elevated debate and discussion. It's an engaging read with well-developed central characters that readers will instantly relate to.

Section 1 Prologue & Secrets Pages 9-94

SUMMARY

The Prologue opens with Stella reliving the night of 23 September 1920 in a nightmare. She wakes from the image of saving Johnny from the burning hall and lies awake, worrying that Johnny is still involved with the rebels in Tipperary.

After the prologue, the action moves to Johnny in Thurles where the Black and Tans are raiding the bar he's been living

and working in. Thanks to some quick thinking, he avoids detection. Back in Balbriggan, life is getting back to normal for Stella and Alice, but they are deeply concerned about Johnny, especially when they each receive a Dublin-postmarked card from him telling them he's living in Tipperary.

After the Black and Tan raid, Johnny moves to safety in Dublin, lodging with the formidable Mrs Hanlon, another rebel. Within a short space of time, he's got a new job working as a telegraph boy, but he becomes increasingly more involved in the movement, even being entrusted to meet Michael Collins and take part in a mission that frees O'Shea, his old contact in Balbriggan. Meanwhile, the girls are still going to band practice and playing chess, but when they hear that Johnny has been sighted in Dublin working as a telegraph boy, their fears about his postcard being faked are confirmed and Stella sets off to Dublin to track him down and find out the truth.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read pp.9-10.** What are our first impressions of Stella? What adjectives would we use to describe her? Does she seem like a good friend? What gives this impression?
- Read pp.15-17.** What sort of person is Johnny? What do you think *you* might have done in his situation? Have you ever been in a scary situation? How did you react? Do you think some people are better at staying calm in such situations than others? Why?
- Read pp.24-25.** What do you think Alice's mum expected Johnny to do

when he left the Mill Hotel? Do you think Alice's argument is convincing? Why?

- **Read pp.28-29.** Stella's father gives the excuse of the 'dogs of war' when discussing the atrocities carried out by both sides of the conflict. Do you think he is right – does war always bring out the bad side of humanity? Is this ever justification? Why do you think there is an International Criminal Court at the Hague that puts war criminals on trial?
- **Read pp.44-48.** What are your impressions of Michael Collins? Do you think he lived up to Johnny's expectations? Do you think he'll help Johnny find his parents? Why? What do you think Stella and Alice would think of him?
- **Read p.69.** Why do you think there is so much debate over which dog should represent Ireland? Why do you think dogs are seen as an important symbol? Can you think of any other dogs used as symbols by other countries? What qualities do they have? If you had to choose a dog to symbolize yourself, which one would it be and why?
- **Read p.79.** Johnny reveals that he thinks that a 'new Ireland' will stop children living in poverty. Do you think this is likely? Why? Discuss any other revolutions you've learned about (like in Russia). Who benefits? Why do you think this is?

ACTIVITIES

1. NIGHTMARE

On pages 9 and 10, Stella has a very vivid nightmare where she remembers the night the Black and Tans burned Balbriggan. Write a description of a nightmare (it can be real or imagined), remembering to use sensory detail. It must also develop fear in the audience – think about how you would use punctuation and sentence lengths to achieve this.

2. WITNESS FOR THE DEFENSE

Alice stands up to her mother and argues Johnny's case by presenting his good qualities in a persuasive way. Have you (or someone you know) ever been wrongly accused of something? Write a speech that would persuade

an audience that the accused is a good person and incapable of committing the crime or offense. Remember to make your speech appropriate for the audience and use as many persuasive devices that you think are appropriate to fully argue your point.

3. DESCRIBING A CITY AT WAR

In pages 30-31, Johnny arrives in Dublin and describes the city in the aftermath of the battles between the rebels and the armed forces. Use the internet to research a city at war and find images of the same setting before and after the conflict. What has changed? Write two detailed descriptions: one of the city before the conflict began and one where it bears the scars of warfare. Extension: Write a description of the city rebuilt. Make it as fantastical as you want.

4. JOHNNY'S POSTCARD

Johnny writes two postcards to Alice and Stella telling them all about his new life in Tipperary. Imagine you are Johnny. Write the postcard. Remember, what you are writing is not true, so you've got to make it as believable as possible so as not to arouse the girls' suspicions.

5. SPEAK TO A HERO

On pages 44-48, Johnny gets to meet his hero. Imagine you have the opportunity to meet your hero. What would you say? Either write a short 2 minutes-long speech or write a short playscript imagining the conversation between you both.

6. ACTING LIKE FRIENDS

On pages 66-68, Alice and Stella realise something is wrong. In a group of three, create a piece of drama where the two girls go to Dublin and express their concerns to Johnny. Would they ask him to give up working for the rebels? How would he respond?

7. JOHNNY IN THE HOT-SEAT

On page 68, Johnny is involved in a dangerous mission to free O'Shea, the original contact in Balbriggan who kept Johnny's secret. However, in the rescue mission, shots are fired. How do you think Johnny feels? In small groups, create a number of questions you would like to ask Johnny. Someone should take on the role of Johnny and answer the

questions as you think he would. What do we learn about his personality from this exercise?

Section 2 Revelations Pages 97-172

SUMMARY

In Balbriggan, Stella gets the sad news that her grandfather has died, news that Alice takes to Dublin to deliver to Johnny personally. In a show of friendship, Johnny returns to Balbriggan for the funeral, even though it is a huge risk and could also put his friends in danger because of his work with the rebels.

In Dublin, Johnny has become more involved with the rebels, taking risks for Collins and using his job as a telegraph boy to follow prominent British intelligence officers around the city. With the help of O'Shea, he confronts the brothers in the orphanage and has an emotional reunion with his mother. After a close shave, his mission begins to come to an end and he has a decision to make on whether he starts a new life in Scotland with his mother and leaves Ireland behind.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read pp.102-105.** Do you think O'Shea was right to do what he did? Is violence ever the answer? How do you think Johnny feels? Do you think he regrets asking for help?
- **Read p.107.** Johnny sees Brother Kenny as 'an overweight, middle-aged man with bad breath and dandruff on his collar' and 'no longer a figure of terror'. Why do you think the brother was so cruel to the children? Why do you think people often say that bullies are cowards? Do you agree? Why?
- **Read pp.115-116.** Alice advises Johnny to forgive his mother and get in contact. Do you think her advice is good advice? Why? What advice would you give Johnny?
- **Read p.119.** Is Johnny being reckless? Why is he putting himself in so much danger? What do you think Alice and Stella would say if they could see what he is doing?
- **Read p.119-124.** Michael Collins

manages to stay calm and controlled under unbearable pressure in this scene. Has this changed your view of him? What do you think the soldier would do if he knew he'd captured Collins?

- **Read p.136.** What do you think Mrs Hanlon would say if she knew Johnny had gone to Balbriggan to the funeral? What defence could he give? Do you think he did the right thing? Why?
- **Read p.149.** Do you agree with the idea that politics *always* matters? How much does politics affect the lives of the three friends in the novel? Do you think it has the same influence on our lives today? Why?
- **Read p.154.** Do you think Johnny should tell his mother the truth? Is there a risk of their relationship starting on a lie? What do you think she would say? What would her reaction tell us about her feelings for her son?
- **Read pp.158 – 159.** Stella's mother asks if Johnny is the reason Stella wants to stay. Do you think there is any truth in this? Do you think boys and girls can be friends without having any romantic connections? Why?
- **Read pp.166-167.** Did Johnny do the right thing in stopping the tail? What do you think might have happened if he had continued? What would the consequences have been if he had been caught? Do you think he would have received the same treatment as an adult?

ACTIVITIES

1. TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE

On pages 100-101, Johnny goes back to the orphanage and all his memories come 'flooding back'. Have you ever returned to a place and been 'flooded with memories'? Write a description of a place you've returned to that includes sensory detail. Explore your emotions as you move through the place, describing what it's like now and what it was like in the past.

2. JOHNNY'S LETTER

On page 116, Alice offers to help Johnny write a letter to his mother. What do you think the letter should say? Should the tone be angry? What do you think

Johnny wants to happen as a result of the letter? Imagine you are Johnny. Write the letter.

3. FREEZE FRAME THE TENSION

Johnny and Michael Collins almost get caught at the cordon in a very tense scene on pages 119-124. In small groups, choose five key moments from the scene and freeze frame them, making sure you create a sense of the drama and tension.

4. STELLA'S DIARY

Stella has had a difficult time. Not only has her grandfather died, but she may also have to leave Ireland. Imagine you are Stella. Write a diary entry after the funeral on pages 126-127 where you explain your feelings about your grandfather, your fears about the future and your thoughts about Johnny.

5. DEBATE: STELLA VS PADRAIG

As the conflict rages on, more and more brutalities are being committed. Consider Sheila and Pádraig's argument – are either of them right? Why? Divide into two groups. Each half will take a side and debate: is either side wholly innocent in conflict? Take Sheila and Pádraig's arguments and develop them further – the debate isn't limited to the argument in the book – bring in examples from other eras or countries.

6. DRAMA: JOHNNY MEETS HIS MOTHER

This is a momentous occasion for Johnny. In small groups, create a short piece of drama that focuses on Johnny and his mother on the morning before they meet, beginning with them preparing for the meeting at home. How will you show their nervousness and excitement?

7. NORAH'S DIARY

Imagine you are Johnny's mother, returning home after the revelation Johnny made to you on pages 154-156. What are you thinking? Write a diary entry exploring your thoughts about what Johnny has told you and your hopes and fears for the future.

8 . DEBATE FREEDOM OF SPEECH

On p.162, Mr Tardelli says 'Do we just

allow freedom of speech when people say what we like? Or do we allow it when they say things we hate? And if they can't say things we hate, it's not really freedom of speech, is it?' Is he right? What *exactly* does freedom of speech mean? Do we have freedom of speech in our society? Divide into two groups, with one preparing the argument that freedom of speech means *everyone* can speak freely and the other preparing an argument that freedom of speech means only non-offensive speech. Debate as a class and vote on a definition.

9. GUIDE ON HOW TO FOLLOW SOMEONE

Johnny decides that it is too risky to continue following his target on pages 166-167. Did he make a mistake when tailing his quarry?? Create an 8-10 step guide on how to follow someone effectively. Make sure your writing is factual.

Section 3 Turmoil Pages 174-256end

SUMMARY

This final section opens with Johnny preparing for his last ever mission. He is already beginning to have doubts and is shocked to discover that his mission could hurt Stella's father. Faced with a dilemma on whether or not to try and save Stella's father at the risk of his own safety, Johnny follows his conscience and makes up a story about Stella to force her father back to Balbriggan, saving him from death at the hands of Collins' flying columns.

His cover blown, Johnny needs to escape Dublin as the government forces take a brutal revenge, opening fire on the crowd at Croke Park. With the help of Stella, Alice and the rebels, Johnny makes it back to Balbriggan where he is reunited with his mother. However, the Black and Tans are waiting for him, having already arrested Mrs Hanlon in Dublin. In an unexpected twist, it is Stella's parents who prevent Johnny from being exposed, allowing him to escape with his mother to Glasgow, where they start a new life.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read pp.175-179.** Johnny is already beginning to have doubts about the consequences of his mission. Do you think he should continue? Why?
- **Read p.181.** Alice proclaims that there are “good people on both sides.” Is she right? Is this always the case that there are good people on *both* sides in a conflict? Can you think of any characters from history that prove this?
- **Read p.191.** After hearing about the deaths of 14 spectators at Croke Park, Johnny is horrified by the consequences of his actions and asks if it was too high a price to pay. What do you think? Do the ends ever justify the means?
- **Read p.197.** Johnny has decided that he will be safe in Balbriggan. Do you think this is a good idea? What advice would you give him on how to stay undetected? Does he need a cover story?
- **Read pp.208-210.** Public opinion seems to be turning towards the rebels. Why do you think this is? Why might the people be beginning to sympathise with them? Do *you* have sympathy for them? Why?
- **Read p.245.** Why do you think Mrs Radcliffe helps Johnny and his mother? Do you think it was right for the Commander to play along? What should he have done if he was ‘doing his duty’? Why do you think he helped them? What does this tell us about Stella’s parents?

ACTIVITIES

1. SPORTS REPORT

Dublin is busy before the big game in Croke Park. Have you ever been to a big sporting occasion? Write a description of the venue, using sensory detail and interesting adjectives to create a sense of the building excitement.

2. PROTESTING JOHNNY’S INNOCENCE

On pages 188-189, Stella and Alice try to protest that Johnny wasn’t involved in the events in Dublin, but they are not very convincing. With a partner, write a persuasive speech proclaiming Johnny’s innocence as if you were defending him at a trial.

3. NEWS REPORT ON BLOODY SUNDAY

On page 191, Johnny finds out about what happened at Croke Park. The city of Dublin would have been shocked and people would have wanted as much information as possible on what happened – from the government, from eyewitnesses and maybe even the relatives of the victims. Write a detailed news article telling the full story of the days’ events.

4. DRAMA: JOHNNY ON THE BARGE

Johnny is very close to freedom when he is almost caught hiding on the barge on pages 199-203. In small groups, create four freeze frames that show the tension and danger in Johnny’s situation.

5. DRAMA: MRS HANLON’S ARREST

We learn on page 217 that Mrs Hanlon was arrested. In small groups, create a script for the scene of her arrest. What do you think her reaction was when the police turned up? Did they ask any questions? Did she go willingly or try to run?

6. COMMANDER RADCLIFFE’S DIARY

Helping his wife and daughter assist a known criminal escape meant Commander Radcliffe put his family before his duty. How do you think he felt about this? What did he learn about his wife and his daughter? Imagine you are Commander Radcliffe. Write a diary entry reflecting back on the episode on pages 241-249.

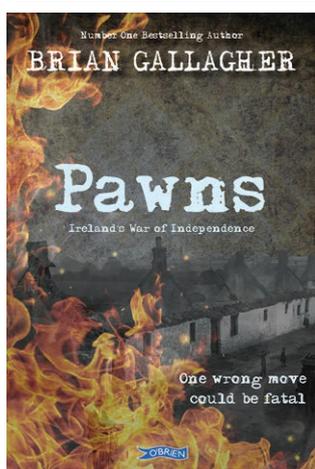
7. EPILOGUE

Thirty years after the events of the novel, the three friends meet again. Write a script and act out the meeting. What do they say to one another? Do you think they talk about the events of their lives in Balbriggan?

Choose one of the three characters. Imagine you are that character and write a letter to your younger self from the future. What advice would you give? What would you tell them about things will turn out?

HISTORICAL NOTE

Why do you think the Gardaí were unarmed? Do you think the police should be unarmed today? Do all countries have an unarmed police force? What are the consequences of this? As a class, debate whether or not the police should be armed.



Friends Johnny, Stella and Alice first met in *Pawns: Ireland's War of Independence*, by Brian Gallagher. Set a few months before the events of *Spies*, the three friends grapple with conflicting loyalties – then matters come dramatically to a head on the night the Black and Tans set Balbriggan ablaze during a murderous night of vengeance.

