



# Pawns

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Brian Gallagher

## Teaching Guide

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### RATIONALE & THEMES

The purposes of these Teaching Guides include stimulating thought and appreciation of writers' techniques, developing empathy skills and encouraging children's ability to appreciate literature, through a range of reading, writing, speaking and listening activities that pupils will complete either individually or in groups, developing their ability to learn independently and in groups.

Key themes within the novel include:

- Friendship
- Trust
- Social class
- Society

### SUMMARY

Set against the backdrop of the War of Independence, *Pawns* is a tale of how true friendship can overcome anything. Johnny Dunne is a pro-independence orphan working at Balbriggan's Mill Hotel, where Stella Radcliffe (daughter of an RAF Commanding Officer) and Alice Goodman (daughter of the hotel's owner) live. Despite their political and social differences, the three are firm friends. Bound by their love of music, all three play in the local band. On the surface life is good, but shadows threaten their happiness.

As the situation in Ireland worsens, Johnny becomes more and more involved in the IRA, much to Alice's dismay when she finds out his secret. The situation worsens as the Black and Tans move onto the streets of Balbriggan. Even though the three friends try to live a normal life, enjoying chess competitions and band practice, it becomes more difficult as the war rages, building to a climax one terrifying night that forces everything to change.

### APPROACH

This is a very enjoyable and entertaining read. Although the plot makes reference to a number of complex and challenging historical events, it is an engaging read with many opportunities for discussion.

This guide divides the story into three sections, and the activities offer suggestions on developing the themes.

## Section 1 Prologue & Assembly Pages 9-99

### SUMMARY

In the Prologue, we find Johnny in a perilous situation in Balbriggan. It is 20 September 1920, the War of Independence is in full swing and the Black and Tans are burning the town. Part One takes us back to January 1919, to meet Stella in Canada as she visits her psychiatrist. In the next chapter, we whizz forward to December 1919, as Alice shares a joke with her mother at the Mill Hotel, Balbriggan. Alice is friendly with Johnny and Stella through the town band and the local chess club. Johnny works in the hotel and, although Alice treats him as a peer, others (such as Robert Foley) make sure that Johnny knows his inferior position in the social hierarchy of the town. However, he asserts himself, gaining access to the local library after Alice intervenes on his behalf, further cementing their friendship.

To her delight, Stella is allowed to stay in Ireland as her mother returns to Canada to tend to her ailing grandfather. Meanwhile, Johnny becomes more involved in the surveillance activities required by Mr O'Shea, his IRA contact staying in the hotel, breaking into Stella's father's room and even RAF Gormanston in search of information that might prove valuable. Alice's political confusion grows as she clashes with a

local soldier, but she also becomes more suspicious of Mr O'Shea and his real purpose in the hotel. The three friends work together to help the local community recover after a storm wreaks havoc on the town.

### DISCUSSION POINT

- Read p9.** In the Prologue, we are told that: 'Johnny didn't see himself as a hero, but he hated the idea of being a coward.' Consider what Johnny means by a 'hero' here. What do *you* think a hero is? How would you define it in less than 20 words? Can you think of any modern-day examples of heroes?
- Read pp30-35.** The exchange between Johnny and Robert on pages 30-35 reveals the sort of person Robert is. Why is he treating Johnny in this way? What would you do in Johnny's position?
- Read pp52-58.** Johnny spies on Stella's father. Did he do the right thing? What did he find out? How does he feel about spying on his friend's father?
- Read p66.** 'Stella thought that a good heart was what mattered most.' Do you agree? How would she react if she knew what Johnny was really up to? Who do you know with a good heart?
- Read pp79-81.** Johnny makes his feelings clear to Mrs Goodman. Is he right to feel that he deserves the right to learn? Across the globe, millions of children go to work every day. Research child labour using the following websites: [unicef.org](http://unicef.org); [worldvision.org.uk](http://worldvision.org.uk)

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. Describing fire

In the second paragraph of the Prologue, the writer uses some devices to vividly describe the fire. Write a supplementary paragraph that describes the fire, including references to the five senses, personification and complex vocabulary.

## 2. Alice's school report

(Read pp24-30)

What are our first impressions of Alice? Imagine you are her school teacher. Write 5 to 6 adjectives that describe her personality, and find 5 to 6 quotes from the chapter where she demonstrates these traits.

## 3. Joke book (Read pp24-25)

Work with a partner to create a short joke book, containing 15 to 20 jokes. You should try to include some old-fashioned jokes that your parents or grandparents might have told you.

## 4. 'What if?' script

(Read pp52-58)

How do we get a sense of Johnny's fear of being discovered in pages 52-58? What do you think would've happened if Stella had arrived a few minutes earlier? Work in pairs to create a short script of their conversation if this had happened. If performing, remember to consider how their body language would reflect the tension in this scene.

## 5. Johnny's dilemma

(Read pp67-68)

What is Johnny's dilemma? Is he right to feel guilty for deceiving his friends? Divide a page in two. On one side, write a list of reasons he should continue spying. On the other, write a list of reasons he should stop spying for the IRA. Which side has more reasons? What advice would you give him after writing these lists of reasons?

## 6. News report: Chaos in Balbriggan (Read pp70-73)

Write a news article for the local newspaper on the effects of the storm in Balbriggan and the dramatic rescue effort. Try to include quotes from eye witnesses and local people involved in the event.

## 7. Persuading Mrs Goodman

(Read pp79-82)

Johnny's argument with Mrs Goodman almost gets him into serious trouble. Imagine you are Johnny, and write a short speech that you *should* have delivered to her to convince her to allow you access to the local library. In your speech you should include some persuasive techniques and make sure you make at least three clear and sensible reasons to support your point of view.

## 8. Analysing Johnny's fear

(Read pp94-99)

Breaking into RAF Gormanston is very dangerous, and Brian Gallagher creates a very clear sense of Johnny's fear. Choose four or five quotes from the text that you feel best illustrate just how afraid Johnny is. Be prepared to explain and justify your choice.

# Section 2 Complications Pages 103-190

### SUMMARY

It is St Patrick's Day 1920. The three friends enjoy the local festivities, but tensions are still running high in the country. Johnny has another rendezvous with O'Shea, who offers him the chance to stop spying, as the situation has become very dangerous, but Johnny is determined to continue helping the IRA. Back at the Mill, Stella and Alice celebrate Easter Sunday with their parents and the Foleys, but Johnny Dunne's social status determines that no invitation is offered to him. The conflict in the countryside has been getting worse, and Alice decides to investigate the mysterious Mr O'Shea, breaking into his room in search of evidence to confirm her suspicions.

Although she and Stella are firm friends with Johnny, Robert Foley still treats him like a servant. After an altercation at the beach, Robert throws Johnny's precious clarinet into the sea, which has repercussions for Robert's friendship with Stella. The friendship between the three youngsters deepens as they open up to one another – Johnny tells Alice about his unhappy childhood at the orphanage, and Stella confides her secret about her brother's death to Johnny.

The war itself comes to Balbriggan, as the local RIC station is burned down and a local sergeant is killed by the IRA, prompting Alice to continue her investigation into O'Shea, which leads to a dangerous confrontation with O'Shea in which he threatens her and her mother. The band visit Bray for an outing, which is marred by trouble with the Black and Tans. As summer approaches, Stella is making arrangements to return to Canada for a visit, with Alice as her guest. As they leave for their trip, Alice shocks Johnny by confessing that she knows all about his relationship with O'Shea and the work he has been doing for the IRA, but she leaves for Canada before he can find out just how much she knows and what she plans to do with the information.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read pp104-106.** What Irish folk songs are they playing? Did you know the real background behind the song 'The Mountains of Mourne'? What Irish folk songs do you know? Why do you think there are so many songs written about missing the Irish people and countryside? Research a song from home that your grandparents or parents know. Share your findings with your classmates. How would you categorise them? Think of similar themes, such as loss/homesickness, etc.
- **Read pp106-110.** Mr O'Shea offers Johnny the chance to stop spying. Should he have taken this opportunity? What advice would you give Johnny?
- **Read p126.** After Robert and his friends attack Johnny, Stella slaps Robert on the face. Was Stella right to hit him? Is violence ever the answer?
- **Read pp156-159.** How good is Johnny's advice to Stella? Is he right? What advice would you give her?
- **Read pp169-171.** Stella considers allowing Johnny to beat her in the chess game. She decides not to and goes on to win the tournament. Should she have let Johnny win? How do you think Johnny would have reacted if he found out she had let him win?
- **Read pp172-175.** The three friends try to forget about all the turmoil around them by relaxing with a picnic. What would you bring on a picnic? Where would you have it? Describe it to a friend.
- **Read p185.** The trip to Bray with the band involves a nasty encounter with some Black and Tans. Why do you think Robert stood up for Johnny? What would you have done if you had been there?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. Coded message

Johnny is putting himself at risk when relaying information to Mr O'Shea (pages 106-110). Write a coded message from Johnny to Mr O'Shea, with instructions on how to break the code.

#### 2. Robert's letter

Robert doesn't immediately throw Johnny's clarinet into the sea – he needs encouragement from the others. Do you think he actually wants to do this? Imagine you are Robert. You feel guilty for what you have done. Write an apology from Robert to Johnny for the loss of the clarinet.

### 3. O’Shea’s house map

Alice puts herself in danger by going to Mr O’Shea’s house, but her search is thorough. Sketch and label a map of Mr O’Shea’s house, as described in pages 141-143. What sort of a man lives here? What can we tell about him from the description of his home? Write a paragraph, using quotes from the text.

### 4. Alice’s diary

It has been an eventful few months for Alice, who is now holding on to some dangerous secrets. Based on the events in chapters 15 to 24, write a diary entry from Alice’s point of view, including her thoughts on Mr O’Shea and his threats, her worries about Johnny and the political situation, and her excitement about her upcoming trip to Canada with Stella.

### 5. Secret report on Stella

In the confrontation with the soldiers in Bray, Stella is very brave and stands up to them. What other characteristics does she have? Using MOD headed paper and marked secret, write a character analysis, outlining what sort of person she is. Can you find evidence in the text to support your ideas?

### 6. Johnny’s letter

Imagine you are Johnny. How do you feel after waving goodbye to Stella and Alice? Write a letter to Alice that explains some of your thoughts and fears.

## Section 3 Chaos Pages 193-end

### SUMMARY

While Stella and Alice have been having a great time in Canada, Johnny has been working at the Mill. In Balbriggan, the situation has worsened, as the Tans and Auxies have moved into the area. They have proved unpopular, with their aggressive and violent approach.

The Tans raid the Mill and, much to Johnny’s horror, Mr O’Shea is arrested. Even the prospect of the girls returning doesn’t ease his worry, as he also worries about what Alice knows. As soon as she returns, Johnny and Alice talk properly, and she tries to persuade him to stop. Johnny is then ordered by his new IRA contact to leave Balbriggan, but, as he prepares to make his escape, two RIC men are shot.

As Balbriggan prepares for reprisals from the Black and Tans, Alice and Stella find themselves in charge at the Mill Hotel, with a group of drunken angry Tans ransacking the town. Johnny won’t leave without his clarinet, and ventures out into the chaos. When he doesn’t return, Stella goes after him, leaving Alice alone as the Tans are due to arrive at the hotel.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read p193.** The sound of the lorry’s engine is described as a ‘deep growl’. What does this example of personification suggest about the lorry? Can you think of any other ways in which the sound of a vehicle could be personified?
- Johnny’s new IRA contact is less sympathetic than Mr O’Shea. When he tells him to leave Balbriggan on page 208, is it fair on Johnny? Do you think soldiers should just follow orders without question?
- **Read p233.** Even though he is due to leave in the morning, Johnny continues with his chores. Why is he doing this? Should he just leave his chores and spend time with his friends?
- Historians have said that the Tans and Auxies were suffering from shellshock as a result of WW1, which is why they were so vicious towards civilians. Research what the term ‘shellshocked’ means, and its effects on soldiers after the war. Discuss whether or not you think this excuses their behaviour. Should they have been in Ireland at all? Imagine you are a Tan. How would you have reported this event?
- **Read p251.** Alice slips Johnny some money to help, even though he is involved in everything that has been going on. Is Alice wrong to feel sad about Johnny leaving? Does Stella do the right thing in not reporting him? What would you have done in their situation?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. Guerilla warfare research

On page 193, the IRA are described as using ‘guerrilla warfare’. What does this mean? Research other examples of guerrilla warfare in the twentieth century.

#### 2. Personal postcard design

Johnny receives postcards from a range of sights in Canada. Design a postcard for a landmark in your home town or area.

### 3. Past empire research

The Ottoman Empire lasted over 600 years. Research key events and create a timeline. Why did it end? Do all empires have to end?

[bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/middle\\_east\\_01.shtml](http://bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/middle_east_01.shtml)

### 4. A lot can happen in a year ...

On page 208, Stella considers all the important world events that have taken place that month. What happened in the year of your birth? Choose the 10 most important events and create a poster. Be prepared to explain your choices of events, and why you think they are more important than others.

### 5. News report: Balbriggan Burns!

In a reprisal attack after the deaths of two RIC officers, lorries filled with angry Tans and Auxies descend on Balbriggan on page 226. Write either a news article or script a news report detailing events as they unfold. Remember to use eye-witness accounts, and to keep your tone factual and neutral.

### 6. Hotseating Alice (Read pp240-249)

Alice has been left alone at the Mill. What questions would you ask Alice about her thoughts and fears in this situation? Someone in the class should imagine they are Alice, and answer these questions in her character.

### 7. Johnny’s leaving letter

On page 251, Johnny waits on the platform. Imagine you’re Johnny. Write a letter to Alice and Stella explaining why you’re leaving.

## Class Activities

### Epilogue

Johnny, Alice and Stella meet again almost 20 years after the events of the book. How do you think they have changed? Has their friendship remained the same? What questions do you think they have for one another? Write a short script.

### Letter to the author

Did you enjoy the book? What have you learned? Write a letter to the author with any questions you have about the book.