

THE MOON KING

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SIOBHÁN PARKINSON

Teaching Guide

By Gillian Perdue

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This is a sensitive and thought-provoking story dealing with the fears and hopes of a foster-child settling in with a new family. It has other universal themes which would appeal to pupils in the senior classes in primary schools and junior classes in second-level schools, such as:

- The world of the imagination
- Friendship and love
- Jealousy and destructive tendencies
- Fear and loneliness
- Development of trust
- Gaining acceptance
- Childhood
- Families

SUMMARY

We meet Ricky on the threshold of a new life away from his ineffectual mother and her abusive boyfriend, Ed. He has been brought to Mammy Kelly's house to be fostered. The new house is tall and full of stairs, set in a sloping garden. It is also full of children; laughing, bickering and riotous. Ricky is petrified and unable to speak, though his mind races with jumbled thoughts and words. He discovers a special, secret place where he and his only friend, Freddy, can be alone. Here, in the Moon Chair, he escapes his fears and becomes the Moon King, holding court in an attic kingdom. But Freddy is only a soft toy and now there is a real friend waiting for him – Rosheen. She is concerned for Ricky and takes time to show him the pigeons, talk to him and save him from the cruelties of the jealous Helen. Unfortunately, she can't protect Ricky from his worst fears which Helen has stoked up – that Lipstick Woman, the social worker, is coming to take him away

and send him home to Ed. Ricky flees and the whole neighbourhood joins the search for him. Anything could happen to a confused, frightened boy on the run in a strange town. After a tension-filled search, Ricky actually makes his own way back to the tall house full of children. Back to the Moon Chair in the attic court. Back to old friends – Rosheen, Mammy Kelly and Tomo and the promise of a new friend, Helen, learning to change.

APPROACH For the purposes of this exploration, the novel has been divided into five main sections, covering five or six chapters at a time. However, the pace at which the novel is read is entirely up to the teacher. It may suit to read one chapter per day, or in larger blocks. Possible discussion points and activities are listed at the end of each section.

UNIT 1 SPIDERBOY

SUMMARY

Our first introduction to Ricky is the voice in his head speaking in jumbled words and half sentences. He is with his social worker, Lipstick Woman, on the stone steps leading to the tall, tall house where he will be staying. The house on a slope is to Ricky in danger of slipping off the hill and crashing down. Eventually he is coaxed in to meet Mammy Kelly and the gang of noisy foster children he will be living with. He is befriended by Rosheen who is to become his protector. In a moment of panic, he

knocks a pile of things off the stairs and expects to be punished but instead Tomo, the dad of the house, politely asks for his help in clearing up the mess. Rosheen shows him to his new bedroom at the top of the house.

Read pp.9–44.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Do you think the opening paragraph describes Ricky's fears and emotions? Would it have been as effective if the author had told us how he was feeling?
- What characteristics and habits does a spider have which lead Ricky to think of himself as 'spiderboy'?
- Why would a child be moved to a place of safety? Does Ricky want to go home (p.15)?
- Rosheen feels that being awake when someone else is asleep makes you feel stronger than they are (p.18). Do you agree? Why might this be so?
- Ricky has many, many fears – both for himself and even for the house and the other children. What are his main fears?
- Read the scene where Ricky lays the table (p.37). Do you think that even this could be a nerve-wracking experience for him? What makes him wonder if there is a belt or a cane?

ACTIVITIES

1. DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

The author uses interesting words, such as 'scufflings', to tell us more about the noises in the Kelly household. Re-read Chapter 1 and list all words that describe sound.

2. DANGER GAMES

On her way downstairs in the dark, Rosheen imagines that if she steps on the carpet, the banshee will get her. Many children play this game in the street, where stepping on the cracks in the pavement is 'the danger'. Did you play these games? Write a brief account of them. Why do you think children play this particular game?

3. SCARY STORY

On discovering that the howling was not a banshee, Rosheen immediately made up a banshee story to tell the others about in the morning. Write a scary banshee story to terrorise your friends.

4. ANIMAL CHARACTERS

Write a paragraph explaining Ricky's choice of character – Spiderboy. If you could choose an animal, insect or bird to identify with, which would it be? Draw a cartoon-style picture of yourself as this creature and write underneath your reasons for choosing it to represent you.

5. THE BANSHEE

The banshee is a well-known figure in Celtic mythology whose wailing, or keening, outside a house was supposed to be an omen of death within. Consult Irish legends to find stories containing a banshee.

6. PSYCHOLOGICAL TERMS

On p.14, the social worker and Mammy Kelly discuss Ricky, using psychological terms for his condition. He suffers from aphasia, a speech disorder caused by brain damage from, in his case, blows to the head. Look up aphasia and the other terms they use. Write a definition for each.

UNIT 2 THE MOON CHAIR

SUMMARY

Rosheen shows Ricky the pigeons in their snug house. He loves their soft noises and feels safe in with them. Helen gives vent to her jealousy and begins seeking Ricky out to torment him. She tries forcing him to speak and accuses him of having no manners. This triggers a reaction from Ricky, because it's exactly what Ed had used as an excuse to beat him. He lashes out and hits Helen.

Mammy Kelly reprimands him gently, but is understanding. Ricky seeks solace in his quiet bedroom, but Helen has locked him out while she prepares a nasty surprise for him. So, Ricky goes to the attic, where he discovers the beautiful Moon Chair. He wraps himself in a blanket and imagines himself to be flying, moon-flying with Froggo and Fudge, the pigeon. Rosheen finds him there and christens him the Moon King. He speaks Rosheen's name.

Read pp.45–77.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Chapter 7 is called 'Helen Sticks the Knife In'. What two meanings can be taken from this title?
- Why do you think Ricky searches for clues as to how to behave (see p.45)?
- Do you think Helen's not getting her tea constitutes child abuse? Why do you think Helen hasn't 'the first clue about child abuse' (p.59)?
- Ricky experiences flashbacks to the abuse he received from Ed. What excuse did Ed use for beating Ricky? Do you think he was really teaching Ricky manners?
- What do you think were the emotions experienced by Ricky when he was moon-flying?

ACTIVITIES

1. AGONY LETTER

Helen is obviously feeling threatened by Ricky's arrival. Imagine you are Helen. Write a letter to an Agony Aunt saying how you feel and telling of your fears and emotions.

2. FIGURES OF SPEECH

Mammy Kelly says, 'It'll be better before you're twice married.' Figures of speech are exaggerated expressions used in everyday language. Explain the following well-known figures of speech:

The town was black with people
He led her up the garden path
She bought herself a pig in a poke
He screamed blue murder
She's the spit of her mum

3. VERBS

Chapter 12 is full of different verbs that describe flying and motion. See how many

you can find. List them.

4. VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

Look up these words which appear in this unit:

vehemence, ungraciously, mollified, impetuous, querying, whickering.

Arrange in alphabetical order and write a definition for each.

5. MEMORY GAME

The teacher re-reads p.75, the paragraph listing the contents of the attic. Ask pupils to write a list of contents from memory. The winner is the one who remembers most.

6. ILLUSTRATION

Read the description of the Moon Chair on p.66. Illustrate, using a medium of your choice.

UNIT 3 WHERE'S RICKY?

SUMMARY

Ricky settles in a little better and helps Tomo in the garden. Helen destroys a beautiful painting of Rosheen that Ricky had been working on and he is devastated. He finds solace being the Moon King once more. The social worker makes a routine visit, but devious Helen has convinced Ricky that Lipstick Woman is coming to take him away because he's a juvenile delinquent. He goes into hiding. Rosheen finds him in with the pigeons but is unable to coax him indoors. While she sneaks inside to get him some food, Ricky escapes. He doesn't return for tea and everyone is worried. Tomo goes out in the van to look for him.

Read pp.78–127.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Even though Ricky does not speak, we know that he is thoughtful. Where can you find evidence of his thoughtfulness in this unit?
- Ricky is devastated when his painting of Rosheen is ruined. Has anything precious of yours ever been destroyed? Can you describe your feelings at the time?

- Do you think Ricky's home was a place where he could paint, draw or relax? Read Chapter 15 and see if you can find evidence for your opinion.
- Not only has Ricky been physically and mentally damaged by abuse, his relationship with his mother has also suffered. Read the last paragraph on pp.93–94. Discuss the damage done by her failure to protect him.

ACTIVITIES

1. SPEAKING WITHOUT WORDS

On p.83, there is a brief conversation between Tomo and Ricky, even though Ricky doesn't utter a word. What body language does he use to say 'you're welcome'? See if you can translate these physical messages:

Shrugging shoulders

Crying

Hanging your head

Biting your lip or fingernails

Hands flying up to your mouth

Being unable to look someone in the eye

Can you think of any more? List them with their meanings.

2. WRITING A REPORT

Write the social worker's report that Mrs O'Loughlin might write after visiting the Kelly household looking for Ricky.

3. CLICHÉS

A cliché is an overused or hackneyed phrase such as the one Mrs Kelly uses on p.109: 'No rest for the wicked.' Try and think of as many clichés as you can and list them, e.g., 'a rose-covered cottage'.

4. CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Both Mammy Kelly and Mrs O'Loughlin are adult women who care for children, but that is about all they have in common. Discuss in class the characters of these women then write an essay outlining their differences.

5. DEBATE

If Ed were asked why he beat Ricky, he would probably claim to be disciplining him. Has Ricky now been moved to a home where there is no discipline? Organise a class debate on the motion: 'Children need firm discipline.'

UNIT 4 SEARCHING

SUMMARY

Tomo and Terry head out in the van to find Ricky but they have no luck. Ricky has walked into the town unintentionally and still has no idea what he wants. He doesn't know the way home and, anyway, doesn't want to go back if Ed is there. He cannot go back to the Kellys, either, as he still believes Helen's threat that the social worker is coming to take him. Rosheen is distraught and realises how much he means to her. She berates Helen, who is now feeling guilty and confesses that it was partly jealousy and partly the fact that she just doesn't know how to be a friend which made her so cruel. Meanwhile, Ricky has been befriended by a bearded man who buys him a burger and chips. Rosheen and Helen make friends and Helen vows to try to be a friend to Ricky too. They sneak off to look for him

Read pp.128–156.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Tomo hopes that Ricky hasn't been hitching. What are the dangers for people hitching?
- Rosheen has countless fears for Ricky and is very upset over his disappearance. What is the worst part for her (see p.134 last paragraph)? Discuss.
- Ricky's Mam believes that 'a boy needs a father' and that he should try to make the best of it. Do you think this is fair? What does Ricky think (see p.141)?
- Read pp.134–135 where Rosheen realises how much the other children and Mr and Mrs Kelly like Ricky. What are the signs that they like him?
- Was it a good idea for Ricky to go for a meal with the bearded stranger?

ACTIVITIES

1. FEARS

Rosheen's imagination goes into overdrive imagining all the terrible things that could have happened to Ricky.

Re-read p.134 and list her fears. Have you ever been in this situation? Write an

account of your fears and how relieved you were when it was over.

2. COMPLEX CHARACTERS

Ricky recalls on p.141 that sometimes Ed bought him sweets and had once brought a video home for him. What does this signify? Does this mean that Ed is really a nice person and Ricky should like him? Organise a class discussion around the question: 'Is there any such thing as a totally bad person?'

3. FRIENDSHIP CHARTER

We see in Chapter 27 that Helen is actually jealous of Ricky, because he's nice, and particularly because Rosheen is so fond of him. What is your opinion of the advice Rosheen gives Helen on how to be a friend (pp.151–152)? Draw up a Friendship Charter, listing these 'guidelines for friendship' in the order you consider most important.

4. CHARACTER REFERENCE

A reference is a description of a person's character that is sent to a prospective employer or school. On pp.149–150, Rosheen describes all the good things about Ricky, explaining why she and others like him. In class, write character references for each other so that there is one for everyone. Make sure they are positive.

5. WOMBAT POEM

Look up 'superannuated' and 'wombat'. What does Rosheen really mean when she says that Helen wouldn't know the truth from a superannuated wombat? Write a funny poem either about this creature or any interesting animal of your choice.

UNIT 5 THE MOON KING

SUMMARY

Rosheen and Helen go into the town centre unnoticed and search for Ricky. They return home without him, bedraggled and exhausted. All the neighbours are milling about the Kelly household offering support and joining the search. Meanwhile, Ricky has been fast asleep in a warm hiding-place in a department store. Eventually, the store closes and Ricky realises he has to go.

He weighs up his options in a calm way that he couldn't have done a few weeks previously, and decides to go back to the Kellys. He creeps in the back and goes up to the Moon Chair. The Kelly family all head off to bed, but Helen and Rosheen have one last look in the attic and see him. Helen apologises, Rosheen reassures. 'I am the Moon King,' says Ricky.

Read pp.157–173.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- What do you think Helen remembered on p.158 that caused her to look over her shoulder and wish Rosheen good luck? What could this action signify?
- The whole way through the story, Ricky has been unable to use the word 'I' when talking about himself. What did he say instead? What has changed that would enable him to say: 'I am the Moon King,' as he does in the last line?
- Why do you think Mammy Kelly says nothing to the girls, though she knows they went out without permission?
- Have you ever felt, like Rosheen on p.163, unable to speak out loud in case you burst into tears?

ACTIVITIES

1. REPORT FOR TV

Imagine you are the TV journalist assigned to cover the case of the missing boy. Prepare a list of questions that you might ask his foster family and friend, Rosheen, while the search went on. Then re-read p.165 carefully and write an account of Ricky's decision to return to the Kellys.

2. SHAKESPEARE

As the girls climb the stairs, Rosheen quotes: 'Lead on, Macduff.' This is a line from a famous play by William Shakespeare. Look up Shakespeare in a reference book, history book, or on the Internet. Can you find the play set in Scotland where Macduff appears? List some other famous plays by Shakespeare. Write a brief account of what is known of his life and work. You might also read *The Shakespeare Stealer* (ISBN 978-0-86278-634-2) by Gary Blackwood.

3. LETTER OF APOLOGY

What is your opinion of Helen's apology on p.171? Write the letter of apology Helen might have written to Ricky.

4. PREDICTIONS

Ricky now has people who love and care for him and the promise of a better future. What do you think would be the next chapter, if there was one? Discuss the possibilities and write the chapter.

5. VOCABULARY EXTENSION

The following words appear in this unit: *rakish, dejected, ushered, conviction, tense, indecipherable, unfurled, silhouette*. Arrange in alphabetical order and write two definitions for each – the first without consulting a dictionary to see if you can work out the meaning from the text; the second after you have checked the dictionary. How close were you?

6. RADIO VOICE

People in radio advertising or doing other announcements often sound strange and put on special voices. Re-read the store closing announcement on p.164 in the 'peg-nose voice' that is described in the book. Take turns acting out in class. Write an advertisement or other public announcement. As before, perform in class.

 Denotes activities that are suitable for both senior cycle primary school use and junior cycle secondary school use.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, SIOBHÁN PARKINSON



SIOBHÁN PARKINSON was appointed Writer-in-Residence to the Dublin Corporation/Irish Writers' Centre in 1999. Her primary interests are reading and writing. Siobhán's novel *Sisters...no way!* won the Bisto Book of the Year Award (1997) and has been translated into Danish. *The Moon King* won a Bisto Merit Award (1998) and was on the iBbY Honour List 2000, in Ireland's first year as a member of iBbY.

Reviews for *The Moon King*:

'*The Moon King*...is a superb book. It explores the world of foster care and damaged children...an adventurous book, and a brave choice of topic for both author and publisher.' *Children's Books in Ireland*

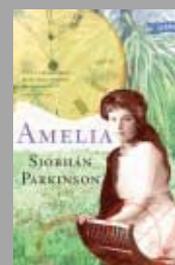
'The book is never preachy, but I think every child will come away from it having learned something about friendship and fitting in.' *Examiner*

'...Ms Parkinson has abandoned the usual rough-and-tumble world of angst and the average teenager in favour of a far more introspective viewpoint.... *The Moon King*...is a brilliant portrayal of the confused mind of an extremely troubled young boy.... An extraordinarily thoughtful story told with panache and an enormous charm.'

Books Ireland

Also from Siobhán: the popular *Amelia* series:

Amelia is the story of a wealthy 12-year-old, Amelia Pim, whose world falls apart when her father loses the family fortune, her mother is imprisoned, and her brother falls ill. By facing up to her own prejudices, Amelia deals with these problems, and achieves maturity. ISBN 978-0-86278-352-5.



No Peace for Amelia is the sequel to *Amelia*. It is set in the uneasy Dublin of 1916, and is an exploration of Amelia's confused feelings around the issues of war and divided loyalties, set against the turbulent backdrop of the Easter Rising and World War I. ISBN 978-0-86278-378-5.

