

# FIELDS OF HOME

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MARITA CONLON-McKENNA

## Teaching Guide

By Irene Barber

### RATIONALE AND THEMES

This is the third book in the highly acclaimed *Children of the Famine* trilogy. Through the eyes of Mary-Brigid, Eily's child, we continue to follow the life stories of the survivors of the Great Famine. It is suitable for use in the senior classes of primary schools and the junior cycle of second-level schools. In addition to being a satisfying read in its own right, it lends itself to discussion and exploration of the following themes:

- Journeys
- Childhood
- Independence and leaving childhood behind
- Land ownership in Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century
- Inequity and exploitation
- Care of horses
- Conflict and its resolution
- Love and loyalty

### SUMMARY

*Fields of Home* is set in the second half of the nineteenth century and traces the lives of the O'Driscoll children into adulthood. Eily is married to John Power and has two children. In common with many others, the possession of their farm is not secure, depending as it does on the whim of successive landlords and often corrupt agents. Finally, after much hardship and uncertainty, Eily's brother, Michael, purchases their farm for them, giving them the security that land ownership confers. Michael's promising career as stable boy comes to an abrupt end when Castletaggart House is burnt to the ground. With the resilience already

displayed by his family, he confronts this setback with dignity and courage and we sense that he will survive and prosper. Peggy has emigrated to Boston and works as a maid to a wealthy family. On his second proposal, she agrees to marry James, the brother of her friend Sarah. Together they head west on yet another journey. But this is a journey she really wants to make.

So, with their future relatively secure, we leave the three young people whose eventful lives we have followed since their early childhood. Readers should find this a satisfactory and appropriate conclusion.

### APPROACH

For the purpose of this class exploration the book is divided into five units, each of which contains suggested discussion points and language-based activities. Useful website and other addresses are listed where relevant.

## UNIT 1 CASTLETAGGART

### SUMMARY

We again meet the members of the O'Driscoll family who stayed behind in Ireland when Peggy went to America. Eily is married to John and they live in peace and relative plenty with their two children and great-aunt Nano. Michael is a stable boy at Castletaggart House. Here, under the tutelage of old-timer Toss, Michael is becoming skilled at handling horses. The tenant farmers are

growing increasingly angry about high rents and the insecurity of their tenure.

Read pp.7–39.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- In retrospect, was Eily wise to have stayed in Ireland? She had had an opportunity to go to America after the famine. Should she have gone? Why was Mrs Hennessy so distressed?
- Certain issues dominated Irish politics during the second half of the nineteenth century. One was the fight for national independence. Given the Hennessy's experience, can you suggest another issue of immediate concern to tenant farmers?
- 'That was the grandest thing I ever saw,' whispered Brendan. To what was he referring? Why did he find it so moving?
- Michael witnessed birth and death all in the one night. How might you have coped with this? Share your experiences so far (if any) of the moments of birth and death. Try to communicate how you felt and try to listen sympathetically to your classmates as they tell their stories.

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. LETTER TO AMERICA

Write the letter that Eily might have written to Peggy in America, describing her life now and her hopes and fears for the future.

#### 2. PERSONALITY PROFILE

Write a detailed description of Michael's character as you know it to date. Comment on his personality and his ability with horses.

### 3. CHILDHOOD SCENES

Sketch three scenes from Mary-Brigid's childhood which together create the impression of a happy, secure upbringing. Write a caption and short commentary for each one.

### 4. WE PROTEST

Design a placard for a tenant farmers' protest meeting. Research their grievances before you design the placard.

### 5. THE LAND LEAGUE

The National Land League was an organisation set up to help tenant farmers. Michael Davitt was one of its founders. Using [www.encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com) or similar search engine, search for the Irish Land Question and find out the three main aims of the Land League.

## UNIT 2 BOSTON AND BACK

### SUMMARY

We renew acquaintance with Peggy, who emigrated to Boston after the Famine. She is still working as a maid in Rushton House. The vain and aggravating Roxanne is getting married and there is a mad flurry of activity. Peggy makes her peace with Roxanne, but is devastated to learn that her friend Kitty will be leaving Rushton House to be Roxanne's housekeeper in her new home. Meanwhile, back in Ireland, a neighbour of Eily's, a destitute widow, is evicted for not paying rent. Mary-Brigid feels a powerful sense of outrage that an old woman can be thrown out of her home like this. Michael competes in a horse race and comes second on Nero. He is appalled at the cruelty which another winning jockey, Peadar Mahoney, displays during the race. Later, when Peadar is sacked, Michael senses that trouble will follow.

Read pp.40–77.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- When Mrs O'Connor said 'the fish took the bait' (p.42), what did she mean? Who was the fish? Who was the bait? Was it a good start to the marriage? Why?
- Why do you think Peggy was able to

put past provocation behind her and sincerely wish Roxanne every goodness for the future?

- Why did Mrs O'Brien's neighbours stand idly by as they watched her being evicted? Why did Nano encourage her to pack and leave?
- 'It's not fair! They shouldn't have done it!' shouted Mary-Brigid, showing a sense of outrage not evident in the older spectators. Do younger people sometimes have a stronger sense of fair play than adults do?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. PERSONALITY PROFILE

Kitty and Peggy stitched two samplers with the mottos: BE GOOD SWEET MAID and FRIENDSHIP IS A GIFT. Which one do you think Peggy stitched? Write a short personality profile of each girl.

#### 2. SOCIETY WEDDING

Write an account of Roxanne's wedding for *Hello/VIP/OK* magazine. Remember to mention any famous guests.

#### 3. JUST DOING HIS JOB

Write the conversation which might have occurred between the older constable and his wife when he went home the evening of the eviction. Try to bring out his personal conflict between doing his job and his sympathy for the Widow O'Brien.

#### 4. THE RACE

Read the account of Michael's race (pp.69–70). Write a sense poem which communicates the excitement of the race. In the first draft begin each line as follows:

- I see
- I hear
- I touch
- I taste
- I smell
- I feel/sense

Improve on this draft and rewrite, omitting I see, I hear, etc. at the beginning of each line. Read aloud to the class/group.

#### 5. ISPCA/RSPCA

Nowadays, people who ill-treat animals can be reported to the animal welfare organisations. Find out all you can about such groups. If you go to Links under

[www.ispca.ie](http://www.ispca.ie) you will find Irish and international web addresses.

Read Chapter Twelve of the Legal Handbook at the above site. This deals with the control and protection of horses and details the provisions prohibiting cruelty to horses. Write a paragraph on the action Michael might have taken had such information been available to him.

## UNIT 3 LONESOME TIMES

### SUMMARY

This year the harvest is abundant and a harvest supper is organised when all is saved. Michael's relationship with Mercy Farrell, a maid in Castletaggart House, develops. Meanwhile in Boston, Peggy is lonely now that Kitty has gone. Her friend Sarah tells of her family's decision to go west and stake a claim. She invites Peggy to go with them. Peggy is very sad to think of losing a friend but reluctant to leave secure employment. She is thrown into confusion when Sarah's brother James proposes marriage and she refuses. Back home, fire destroys Castletaggart House. The landlord, Lord Henry Buckland, and his family return to England. Michael is given two horses in return for wages owed and in recognition of his heroic rescue of two maids from the fire. Mercy leaves for home and Michael decides to go to Eily's.

Read pp.78–126

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Do you think Peggy should have gone west with Sarah's family? Why didn't she? What might you have done?
- 'Go back to England.' Why did Felicia react so strongly to this taunt?
- If the fire hadn't happened how do you think Michael's life would have worked out?
- Felicia said that her father was a good man and he had done his best for the tenants. Do you agree? She also said that her father predicted that the Irish would all fight among themselves and kill each other one by one. To what extent did his prediction come true?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. DECISIONS

Draw a line down the centre of a page. On one side list reasons why Peggy should go with Sarah. On the other side list reasons why she shouldn't.

### 2. WORKERS UNITE!

Pretend you are a journalist. Write an article for a Trade Union journal highlighting the awful working conditions in Goldman's shirt factory. List demands that the union might make and decide how it might achieve those demands. (The article's 'audience' is fellow workers whose support you need to enlist.) Be persuasive!

### 3. DIARY-WRITING

Write Felicia's diary entry describing:

- (1) the fire
- (2) the reaction of the workers, as she left
- (3) her emotions on going to England.

### 4. FAVOURITE CHARACTERS

Compare the relationship between Michael and Mercy to the relationship between Peggy and James. Write a paragraph saying which of the four characters you find most likeable and why.

### 5. HEART-TO-HEART

Write the conversation which might have occurred between Mercy and her best friend when she returned to Athlone.

## UNIT 4 THE GIFT

### SUMMARY

John, Eily's husband, is beaten up in a brawl between the agent Hussey and some tenants after a tenants' meeting. News is out that the new landlord plans to compulsorily merge small holdings into bigger units and to increase rents. John is determined to hold on to the land which his family has farmed for generations. Meanwhile Toss passes on to Michael the gift of horse whispering. Later, Michael comes to visit Eily. His visit serves to lighten the atmosphere of dread in the house and his presence brings new energy and hope. Eventually

Hussey's representative does come and announces that their rent is to be doubled. Eily is distraught. The pig and hens are sold in an effort to raise the necessary money.

Read pp.127–154

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Discuss the issue of land ownership in Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century. What were the problems faced by John and Eily in relation to their farm?
- What is a horse whisperer? Have you ever heard of this before? Where? What effect does it have on a horse?
- Ever since the night her father had come home all bruised and cut, it was as if 'a dark shadow like a big black crow had spread its wings and settled itself over them all' (p.143). In what way, do you think, had the atmosphere of the house changed since that night? Try to identify what it was exactly that was worrying each member of the household. Should Mary-Brigid's family have explained to her what was going on?
- "'Twill be a lie," she said softly. "Twill be a fib," said her mother.' (p.136) Explain the difference. Was it fair of Eily to put Mary-Brigid in this position? If you were Eily what might you have done?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. IMAGERY

Mary-Brigid's anxiety is described as being like 'a big black crow' settling over them all. Try to think of another image which would describe her uncertainty and worry and upset. Begin like this: 'It was as if ...'

### 2. HORSE WHISPERER

Speaking in 1996, Robert Dunbar said that, 'there are few moments in recent children's fiction more magical than the one where [Michael] listens as Toss, the old and experienced man of horses, passes on to him the gift of whispering to the animals'. Read pp.140–141 and write your own opinion of this writing.

### 3. SPEECH BUBBLES

Michael's visit changes the atmosphere of the house. Write a word-sketch of the

meal-time scene (p.148) with Nano, John, Eily, Mary-Brigid, Jodie and Michael around the table. Draw 'thought bubbles' coming from all but Michael. In each person's thought bubble begin: 'I'm glad Michael's here because ...' Complete all the sentences, trying to make them suit the characters in content and style.

### 4. THEN AND NOW

Write down what you have to eat at lunch break today. Underneath write down what Mary Brigid had for lunch (pp.135–136). Write how you came to school today. How did Mary Brigid go to school? (P.136).

In relation to lunch and coming to school, compare your lifestyle with Mary Brigid's. Think about which is easier, healthier, more fun, more ecologically sound.

### 5. WHO SAID IT?

Identify the speaker – all quotations are from Chapter 13.

- 'You're like a hen on a hot griddle.'
- 'I've no intention of letting them take our land!'
- 'I think I'll away to bed.'
- 'I swear I didn't lay a finger on him.'
- 'Who did this to you, my love?'
- 'Can Scrap sleep at the bottom of the bed tonight?'
- 'Put the rent up! Again?'
- 'I think it was a constable that got my nose!'

## UNIT 5 A SOD OF EARTH

### SUMMARY

Even with the proceeds raised from the sale of fruit pies, jams, jellies and chutneys, John and Eily have insufficient money to pay the increased rent. Under threat of eviction and in a state of siege, the family wait. In the nick of time Michael arrives with the news that he has sold one of his horses and bought the land from the landlord, Dennis Ormonde, and the eviction order has been cancelled. Meanwhile James calls on Peggy to say goodbye, to reiterate his love for her and to explain his earlier awkward proposal. This time Peggy has

no second thoughts. She packs her bags, arranges for her wages to be sent to Eily in Ireland, and says goodbye to all at Rushton. James and she marry and head west with James's family.

Read pp.155–189.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Eily and Peggy's idea of security and happiness was to own land. Why is this? For you and your generation what would be seen to guarantee security and happiness for your future?
- Can you identify at least three marketing strategies which enhanced sales of Eily's produce on market day? (See pp.161–163)
- Robert Dunbar, speaking in Waterstones at the launch of this book in 1996, says that for him at all the author's work to date 'has had at its centre an urge to find a harbour, a haven, where her various protagonists, usually after harrowing journeys, earn their ease and experience their self-fulfilment.' Do you agree?
- Do you find the ending of this story satisfactory? Why? What do you think Michael will do next? Will Peggy ever meet up with her family again?

#### ACTIVITIES

### 1. PEGGY'S STORY

Five chapters in this book tell Peggy's story. Can you identify them? Summarise her story from the time of Roxanne's wedding to her own wedding and her journey out west.

### 2. JOURNEYS

Peggy has made three very important journeys in her life so far. Can you briefly describe each journey and link it to the book from the *Children of the Famine* trilogy which tells that part of her story. (If you haven't read these books there are clues at the back of *Fields of Home*.) Which journey do you think was the most memorable for Peggy? Why?

### 3. ADJECTIVES

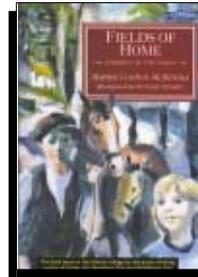
Examine agent Hussey's part in the lead-up to the attempted eviction (pp.175–180). Make a list of adjectives which accurately describe his personality. Make sure you have evidence for each adjective from the text.

### 4. FURTHER READING

Peggy reflects that all of the important parts of her life have involved journeys. As a class, brainstorm all the stories you can think of where the plot centres around a journey. Display your findings.

### 5. BOOK COVERS

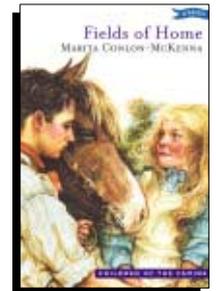
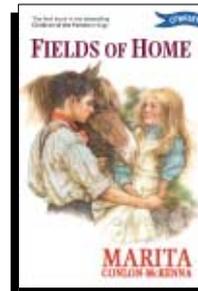
Compare the covers of the three editions of *Fields of Home*, either here or at [www.obrien.ie](http://www.obrien.ie).



In what ways are the covers similar? In what ways are they different?

Which do you prefer and why?

Why do you think the publisher might have changed the cover?



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

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR, MARITA CONLON-MCKENNA



MARITA CONLON-MCKENNA was brought up in Dublin. She is married with four children, and lives in the Stillorgan area. She decided to write *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, the first of the CHILDREN OF THE FAMINE trilogy, when she heard a radio report of an unmarked children's grave from the Famine period being found under a hawthorn tree. It was Marita's first book, and was an immediate success on its publication in May 1990.

#### REVIEWS for *Fields of Home*

'A very rich and appropriate end to the trilogy'  
*The Big Guide to Irish Children's Books*

'Brings to a satisfying conclusion one of the undoubted achievements of contemporary Irish children's literature'  
*Children's Books in Ireland*

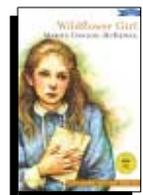


#### Two other award-winning books in the CHILDREN OF THE FAMINE series by Marita Conlon-McKenna:

*Under the Hawthorn Tree* (ISBN 978-0-86278-206-1) deals with the tragedy of the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s seen through the eyes of three young survivors, Eily, Michael and Peggy.



*Wildflower Girl* (ISBN 978-0-86278-283-2) is the story of Peggy after the Famine, as she sets off alone to a new life in America.



#### ALSO AVAILABLE:

\* A Channel 4 Schools video of *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (ISBN 979-1-86215-496-1).

\* A *Study Guide* to both the novel and the film, by Irene Barber is available for free download at [www.obrien.ie](http://www.obrien.ie).