



KATIE'S WAR

ISBN 978-0-86278-525-3 pb

AUBREY FLEGG

Teaching Guide

By Irene Barber

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This novel has been selected for use in the senior classes of primary schools and in the junior cycle of second-level schools, as it deals with the following themes:

- Family responsibilities
- Conflict
- Death and destruction
- First relationships
- Sibling rivalry
- Journeying
- Developing independence
- Growing and maturing
- Love and loss

The novel, dealing as it does with the Irish Civil War, can be readily integrated with the primary school and Junior Certificate history programmes.

SUMMARY

Katie's War is set in County Tipperary during the Irish Civil War. The central character Katie, a spirited teenager, has many worries and concerns. Her shell-shocked father is deeply traumatised by his experiences in the First World War. Her family is divided politically, some siding with Michael Collins and the Free Staters, others with de Valera and the Republicans who wish to continue the struggle in the hope of achieving a united Ireland. Her father's efforts to reopen the slate quarry are jeopardised by the political unrest in the area. Katie's own life, put on hold to nurse her father, now becomes more turbulent as she examines her relationships with Dafydd, the boy from Wales, and Kieran, the Free State soldier she meets in Nenagh town. Eventually, following

much drama, the conflict for the family is resolved. The characters move on and the future looks brighter for all of them.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the book is divided into six units, each of which contains suggested discussion points and language-based activities.

UNIT 1 UP THE REPUBLIC!

SUMMARY

Katie O'Brien lives on a farm in Tipperary with her mother, father and brothers, Seamus (17) and Marty (13). Civil War is brewing following the signing of the Treaty. Katie's father is still shell-shocked from his experiences in the First World War. Visitors arrive from Wales: Griffith Parry, who had fought alongside Father, and his son Dafydd. The Parrys are in Ireland to offer advice on the reopening of the slate mine on the O'Brien farm. Katie is attracted to a Free State soldier (pro-Treaty) she meets in Nenagh.

Read **pp.8–34**.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- What was Katie's nightmare? What do you think it meant?
- Why were the children getting an extra long summer holiday that year?
- Why do you think Katie's father was so upset when he returned from the Great War?
- 'We want them out of Ireland – all of Ireland – once and for all. I can see that

treaty splitting us apart like a badly snagged turnip' (p.19). To snag a turnip means to pull it up out of the ground and, with a sharp knife, to cut away the attached roots, soil and leaves, leaving the vegetable clean and ready for storage. To what extent did Mother's prediction about the treaty come true? In what ways has the Treaty affected the course of Irish history?

ACTIVITIES

1. DIARY

Write Katie's diary entry describing her feelings about her father's upset.

2. ANALYSIS

List five reasons why Katie liked the soldier at the train station (pp.21–23 and 25–26).

3. WORD CARICATURE

A caricature is a drawing which exaggerates someone's characteristics to make them appear comic. Read p.24 and write a word caricature of Dafydd.

4. STORYBOARD

Record Dafydd's story in a series of cartoon pictures, writing short captions underneath each frame. (read pp.28–29)

5. BACK TO THE SOURCE

List the sources of information that the author used in order to research this novel. (See Acknowledgements and pp.190–192) Draft a list of possible sources of information you might access if you were to write a story set in your home town in the late 1960s.

UNIT 2 CIVIL WAR

SUMMARY

Tension grows in the household. Seamus and his mother are Republicans who are opposed to the Treaty (Rebels) and Father is in favour of the Free State (Stater). Seamus flares up at his father and storms out of the house. Katie's anger and resentment grow as her father's need for her diminishes and as she re-assesses her older brother's political outlook.

Read pp.34–57.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- What was the Treaty?
- If you had lived then, might you have been pro- or anti-Treaty? Give your reasons.
- Why was Katie so angry with her father?
- The image of the black dog appears again. What does it symbolise?
- 'She was damned if she was going to let a half-wit tell her what to do' (p.47). What was the nature of Mick-the-Shilling's disability? Do you think Katie's assessment of him was accurate? Did she treat him with respect?

ACTIVITIES

1. WRITING STYLE

Chapter 4 begins with Dafydd's report to his sister Megan.

Ask the pupils to continue the story through the eyes of Dafydd – ending when Katie leaves the room (p 40).

With the class try to comment on Dafydd's style of writing – exaggerated, incomplete sentences, etc.

2. LETTER WRITING

Write the letter that Katie might write to an 'agony aunt', outlining the reasons why she is upset with her father and resentful towards Dafydd. Review layout for a personal letter.

3. NICKNAMES

How do you think Mick-the-Shilling got his nickname? List as many nicknames as you can of people you know. If you are called

by a nickname, is that bullying?

4. SPECULATION

What do you think the line in Welsh at the end of p.51 might mean?

5. SIMILES (1)

A simile is the term given to a comparison where the words 'like' or 'as' are used.

Ask the pupils to find a simile which uses 'as' on p.41. What does the simile mean? What is being compared?

Ask the pupils to complete the following similes: as good as ...; as quiet as ...; as black as ...; as old as ...; as light as ...

Now ask them to be a bit more creative with the endings, e.g. as good as I am when I'm trying to coax my mother into buying a really expensive pair of runners that I REALLY REALLY NEED!

UNIT 3 HIDDEN ARMS

SUMMARY

Katie and Dafydd sneak off in the trap to Nenagh to warn the young Free State soldier that a mutiny is planned. On the way, a felled tree blocks their way. Suspicious and angry soldiers tell them that the Rebels have shot a soldier and an innocent bystander. A cache of guns and ammunition are stolen by the rebels. Seamus is involved. Katie confides in Dafydd about her father's state of health, her fear that he is mad and her conviction that he was a coward. Dafydd assures her of her father's bravery by telling her of the military medals for bravery he had received. Meanwhile Father, with the support of the local priest and the advice of the Parrys, plans to reopen the slate mine as a co-operative movement.

Read pp.58–94.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Reread the dream on p.58. What do you think it means?
- Why didn't Katie's father tell her the whole story of his bravery in battle?
- What is a co-op? Is it a good idea? What are the advantages? What are the disadvantages?

ACTIVITIES

1. NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

Write a newspaper account of the theft of guns and ammunition from Nenagh by the Rebels. Write from a pro-Treaty or anti-Treaty point of view.

2. DICTIONARY WORK

Ask the pupils to put the following list in alphabetical order: bereaved, byre, bullocks, bullseye, barracks, barbarians.

Ask them to write the dictionary explanation beside each one. Then together compose a sentence that contains all these words.

3. SPECULATION

Could goats really predict a landslide? What other animals are thought to predict natural disasters?

4. ILLUSTRATION

'The road to the quarry ran behind the farm. Along this an ancient gnome of a man was advancing, so bandy-legged that Katie thought he'd be more comfortable sitting on a barrel than on a chair. This was Paddy Scully.'

Illustrate, using the medium of your choice.

5. RESEARCH

Find out how slate is formed and quarried. On a map, show the location of slate quarries in Ireland or in your own locality.

What is slate used for?

UNIT 4 SECRETS AND LIES

SUMMARY

Katie and Dafydd explore the quarry, seeking the hidden guns and ammunition. They find a gunpowder store. Meanwhile Father brings men to the cave in the quarry in order to explain his ideas for reopening the mine. Suddenly a voice rings out: 'Go back to England where you belong, O'Brien, and die for King and Country if you wish.' The men disperse. Father's condition worsens. Marty brings news that all the roads to Nenagh are blocked, thus delaying the Parrys'

departure. Mr Parry talks to Katie about her father's mental state and compliments her for her bravery in nursing him back to normal. They agree that the war situation in Ireland is triggering off attacks and Mr Parry suggests that Father goes back with them to Wales to learn more about quarrying.

Read pp.94–124.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Both the poppy and the black dog are used as symbols of something else. Can you explain these two symbols?
- Why, do you think, did Mr Parry discuss Father's condition with Katie rather than her mother?
- Was it a good idea for Father to go to Wales with the Parrys? If so, why?
- Read the rhyme left by the hen-thief (p.110). Who might have stolen the hens and why? Did this really happen, do you think? Give your opinion and then check your answer on page 192.

ACTIVITIES

1. ADJECTIVES AND NOUNS

On p.100, all the following adjectives appear: short, buckled, frightening, little, narrow, iron, goat-sized. What nouns do they describe?

Using dictionaries, make a list of 10 nouns, one on each line down the right hand side of a page. Swap with a partner and fill in suitable adjectives. If possible, pick an adjective which begins with the same letter as the noun.

2. EVALUATION

Should Father go to Wales?

Make a list of all the reasons why he should go and, opposite, those reasons why he should remain. You might write the dialogue which might have taken place as Father and Mother discuss his proposed trip.

3. EMPATHISING

List the emotions you think Father might have felt when the voice in the cave barked out, 'Go back to England where you belong, O'Brien, and die for King and Country if you wish.' Suggest a reason for each emotion.

4. ILLUSTRATION

Read pp.111–112, and illustrate using the medium of your choice. Entitle your picture 'Washday'. Try to capture a sense of bustle and heat and organised chaos.

5. RESEARCH

Using some or all of the following sources, see what the class can find out about gun powder: dictionary; encyclopedia (using the index first); CD ROM/books on guns, war, ammunition; the Internet.

UNIT 5 BEST-LAID PLANS

SUMMARY

Katie is concerned about her father's health. Seamus comes back to the house and uncharacteristically plans, with some of the lads, to draw in the hay and stack it in the quarry yard. Katie and Dafydd discover that the guns and ammunition stolen in Nenagh are hidden in the hay and now stored in the quarry yard. Katie confronts Seamus but gets no satisfaction. He moves the guns to another hiding place. Kieran, the soldier from Nenagh, calls looking for a job in the quarry. Seamus watches him, gun in hand. Acting on a tip off, the army arrives looking for the Nenagh haul. Kieran, Dafydd and Katie find the cache of arms in the quarry and resolve to bury it under tons of waste slate from the tip, so that neither side will have access to it.

Read pp.121–152.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Was Seamus deliberately trying to hurt his father?
- What did Seamus think of his father?
- What did Father think of Seamus?
- Why did Kieran come to the farm before he left for Galway?
- What do you think of their plan to blow the tip head to bury the cache?
- Think about the ways in which life in rural Ireland has changed since the 1920s. Discuss developments which have affected household chores (washing clothes, cooking, lighting), transport, communication, farming. Consider those benefits derived from the increasing use of technology and

also the increasing instances of stress and disease caused by modern lifestyles and say which time would you prefer to live in: now or the 1920s?

ACTIVITIES

1. SIMILES (2)

'They stood like shaggy giants caught on the move, now standing frozen, wondering if they'd been seen' (p.133). What were 'they'?

What do you call a comparison using 'like'? Here the haycocks are being compared to shaggy giants. Is that a good comparison?

Compose similes to describe: a convoy of trucks on the M50, a group of schoolchildren coming out after a difficult exam, a pack of cyclists in the Tour de France. Begin each sentence with 'They advanced like ...'

2. ANALYSIS

List the telltale signs that the arms and ammunition were hidden in the first two haycocks (pp.126–129).

3. POETRY

A haiku is a three-lined poem with the following structure:

Line 1	5 Syllables
Line 2	7 Syllables
Line 3	5 Syllables

Reread the description of the lark (p.130). Write a haiku describing its flight and song.

4. POINT OF VIEW

Pretend you are Kieran. Write his account of the story from the time of his conversation with Katie's mother (p.137) to the discovery of the cache (p.150). Try to keep his account in character.

How would you describe him from what you've heard him say so far? What do these snippets say about him?

'My name is Kieran and I'm an expert in helping Katies to think.'

'They'd suspect a trick. They'd never trust anyone from here.'

'You two are crazy.'

Find your own examples.

5. RESEARCH

What is hay? How is it harvested (saved) and stored? What is it used for?

Silage has become more common nowadays. Why? What effect has this on wildlife? Write a short account of the advantages/disadvantages of using silage instead of hay.

UNIT 6 LOOK TO THE FUTURE

SUMMARY

Republicans plan to ambush the Staters at the quarry. Meanwhile Katie, Kieran and Dafydd explode the tip of waste slate and cause it to slide, burying the guns for ever and exposing new workable slate on the surface. Kieran leaves for County Clare when things settle down again. The Parrys and Father go to Wales. Seamus leaves the republican movement and later goes to Wales to work in the Parry's mine. Much later, Kieran returns to Tipperary to meet up again with Katie.

Read pp.152–187.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- When Dafydd, Kieran and Katie were blowing up the slate tip, did any of the three emerge as group leader?
- Why did Katie begin her letter to Dafydd, 'Dear Megan'?
- Did you find the ending of the novel satisfactory?

- How did it come about that Mick-the-Shilling became Mick-the-Guinea (pp.188–189)? Can you suggest a reason why he never spent the sovereign but 'carried it with him ... as the greatest treasure on earth'? What is a guinea? Why, do you think, did the author introduce this character into the story? What, if anything, does his presence add to the story?

ACTIVITIES

1. CREATIVE WRITING

Reread the mock execution of Seamus (p.181). Write Seamus's account of what happened.

2. CHARACTER SKETCH

Flick through the whole book looking for references to Marty. (Assign page numbers to each pupil.) Ask the pupils to jot down adjectives that describe the Marty in their references. Pool the responses. What kind of person emerges?

3. BIRDS OF A FEATHER

'The sparrow is safest under the hawk's nest.' What does this mean? Do you agree with this?

Extract the meanings from the following proverbs:

Birds of a feather flock together.

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

The early bird catches the worm.

No bird flies too high if he flies on his own wing. [Blake]

Crows everywhere are equally black. [Chinese]

When the cock is drunk, he forgets about the hawk. [African]

When the hen gets fat, she stops laying. [Afghan]

4. BOOK REVIEW

Write a review of *Katie's War*, including the following elements:

- (a) Title, author
- (b) Publisher, year, year(s) of reprint(s)
- (c) ISBN
- (d) Cover illustrator
- (e) Short summary
- (f) Your opinion of the book
- (g) Marks out of 10

5. SILHOUETTE

Read the description of the landslide (bottom p.160 'Under the slopes ...'). Paint, draw or cut out a silhouette of the slide – frozen for an instant in time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, AUBREY FLEGG



AUBREY FLEGG was born in Dublin, educated at Trinity College, Dublin, joined the Geological Survey of Ireland in 1968, and has now taken early retirement. *Katie's War*, published in 1997, won the Peter Pan Award 2000 – an award created by IBBY Sweden for a children's book, translated into Swedish, which gives information on another culture.

Reviews for *Katie's War*:

'Well-written and entertaining, [*Katie's War*] also gives an authentic historical perspective on the time.' *Irish Times*

'Very, very impressive indeed.' Robert Dunbar,
The Gay Byrne Show

'*Katie's War* is certainly well researched ... The gripping climax, spotlighting Katie's bravery and Dafydd's logic and cunning is compelling reading. *Katie's War* is a satisfying read and a fascinating dip into life at the time of the Civil War.' *Children's Books in Ireland*, No. 17

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