



BREAKING THE WISHBONE

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SIOBHÁN PARKINSON

Teaching Guide

By Liz Morris

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This book has been selected for use in the junior cycle of secondary schools as it deals with some very relevant and important themes:

- Homelessness
- Families
- Betrayal
- Abuse of power/authority
- Unplanned (teen) pregnancy
- Substance misuse
- Conflict
- Powerlessness
- Relationships
- Peer pressure

SUMMARY

The story of five homeless teenagers, this book is written in a documentary style which allows the reader to relate directly to the characters as they recount the circumstances which led to their living in a semi-derelict squat. Johnner, the youngest, has escaped from his abusive father and for a while sees this new life as an adventure – 'it's like being on your holidays all the time' he says. Samantha, who has grown up rough, is going out with the simple but thoughtful and sensitive Curly. Together these two do their best to care for and support their friends. Caroline, devastated by the death of her parents, is in a destructive relationship with the only character who does not speak for himself, the cruel and dangerous Beano. Through the voices of these young people, the reader experiences at first-hand the frightening truth about life on the streets: the cynical and manipulative approach of the pimp as

he tries to convince a young girl to sell her body and the calculating violence of the drug-pusher as he ensures payment for goods provided. There is hope, however, and humour too as together they make the best of a bad lot.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the novel has been divided into four units, which largely correspond to those listed in the book's contents page. The pace at which the novel is read is, however, entirely up to the teacher. Possible discussion points and language-based activities are listed at the end of each unit.

UNIT 1

SUMMARY

Part One introduces four of the five main characters. Speaking to camera, each character speaks in monologue, setting the scene of the book. Life in the squat means very different things to each and Johnner, Samantha, Curly and Caroline separately tell the stories of how they came to be in this derelict house in a rundown city street. While telling their own stories, they also tell us about each other and their impressions help to create a realistic picture of the difficulties which led each to the squat. The shady figure of Beano, the only main character who does not have his own voice, lurks menacingly in the background.

Read pp.11–67.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Structure** The Author's Note tells us that, although the characters are 'entirely fictitious', many of the 'details in the story are authentic' and that an account of an actual party held in a squat 'was the initial sparking point for this story'. Does this note raise certain expectations in the reader and if so what?
- **Structure** Consider the Prologue in which the reader is advised to 'see it as a documentary, if you like...'. The reader is being asked to suspend disbelief – to agree to the idea that this is a documentary. Why might the author have chosen to include this Prologue? Is she supporting or undermining the idea that the novel is a documentary?
- **Structure** The book is written in five parts, rather than in chapters, reflecting more the structure of TV dramas than of novels. It opens with directions which might be used by a camera-operator or film/theatre director. Consider the rather sparse directions and also the font-type used in the chapter heading. Does the detail enhance or detract from the reader's own visualisation?
- **Literary devices** Each character makes constant use of particular words and phrases. Johnner constantly uses words such as 'yeah', 'I mean' and 'like' while Samantha repeats phrases such as 'and that's a fact', or 'so I do/so it does/so it is'. Examine the text for other examples of this device and suggest reasons for its use. Might it tell us anything about the characters themselves, about their background/origins/ self-image? Is this device successful?

- **Media studies** Consider the documentary as a particular style of TV. Might this book have been written as a drama? If so, would it have been more or less effective? Does documentary or drama approximate closer to the novel form? Which is the more interesting to read? Think again about the Prologue and consider whether the idea that this is a documentary is in fact credible.

ACTIVITIES

1. MA-THINGS Caroline remembers that when she was younger, her ma used to settle her clothes and put her hand on her forehead to check for possible temperature (p.58). List your ideal 'ma-things', those which would make your 'crotchety feelings' disappear.
2. STEREOTYPES Samantha says that she would 'hate to be one of them homeless-looking people with crusty heads and the soles flapping off their shoes' (p.28). Does her description conform to your idea of a 'homeless-looking' person? Consider carefully what such a person might look like and write some word-portraits.
3. MEDIA STUDIES Select a passage from this unit and try to write it as a drama for television and then as an extract from a novel. Compare the versions and say which you think works best. Try to identify the reasons.
4. AGE LIMITS Commenting on the licensing laws which prohibit the sale of alcohol to under-eighteens, Johnner says that 'it's enough to make you want to puke' (p.23). Do you agree with the current legislation? What do you think might happen if the legal age-limit were reduced? Write a letter to your local government representative expressing your views on the licensing laws.
5. INFORMATION CAMPAIGN 'People treat you like a right wimp if you don't smoke' (p.21). Do you agree? Might the same be said of those who don't use illegal substances? Discuss the factors which cause people to smoke/misuse drugs despite the well-publicised adverse effects. Devise a hard-hitting advertising campaign to convince young people not to start smoking/misuse drugs. Does this differ from those campaigns currently targeted at the potential youth market?

UNIT 2

SUMMARY

Johnner's party is more successful than anyone had dared to hope. A fire makes the room appear cosy and the candles contribute to a feeling of warmth and well-being. Drink and cigarettes are passed around as a friend strums a guitar and Samantha tells ghost stories. But, some time later, Samantha wakes to the sounds of Caro's screams. Too drunk to be of much use herself, she wakes Curly who eventually overpowers Beano. The candles have long since burned out and, by the light of a match, they see that Caroline is bleeding from a stab wound to the shoulder. A Stanley knife lies beside her. They attempt to clean the wound and insist on taking her to the hospital, though Caro fears what will happen if the authorities find out that she is pregnant.

Read pp.68–90.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Unplanned pregnancy** It now becomes clear that Caroline is pregnant. Re-read pp.55–56 in the light of this knowledge and consider Caroline's state of mind as she explored her options. Does the author successfully convey her confusion and fears? Examine the various incidents in Part One which might have indicated to the reader that both Caroline and Samantha knew about the pregnancy. Contrast the reactions of the two girls. Why might the author have chosen to introduce the subject obliquely?
- **Great expectations** Johnner had wanted 'everyone to have a great time...like a family together' and although he realises that his party wasn't 'the main thing', he admits that he is 'awful disappointed' (p.79-80). Is this a natural or realistic reaction in the circumstances? What does it tell us about Johnner's personality?
- **The unheard voice** We have not actually heard Beano's version of events in his own words though he told Samantha that 'he just saw red...because she hadn't told him about it or nothing...', that he had got 'even madder' when he found 'his place' full of spaced out people. Does this explanation evoke some sympathy

for Beano's position? Suggest possible reasons why the author has chosen not to allow Beano his own voice.

- **Substance misuse** Samantha asks Johnner to help, saying that 'Beano is probably flying on something' (p.76). Consider Beano's aggressive, driven behaviour and say what might have caused him to react as he did. For information about drug addiction and misuse, contact the Education Officer at your local Health Board.

ACTIVITIES

1. BEANO'S VIEWPOINT Curly didn't know that Caro was pregnant until Samantha told him the following morning (p.87). Beano himself only realised when a friend described another woman's 'symptoms' (p.89). What does this tell us about the maturity or otherwise of the two young men? Write Beano's thoughts as he listens to his friend, detailing his feelings and emotions as he leaves to confront Caroline.
2. THE OFFICIAL VIEWPOINT Caroline is reluctant 'to go near a hospital in case they found out that she's pregnant and living rough' (p.88). What might happen if the authorities did discover the truth? Write the dialogue that might take place between a pregnant, homeless teenager and a nurse or doctor from a non-maternity/general hospital.
3. ALL YOU NEED IS... Johnner's flatmates defined the basic requirements for a party as 'electricity, running water and a roof that...keeps at least most of the rain out' (p.12) whereas he believed that 'a few mates, a bit of imagination and a lot of crack' were more important. Read pp.68–71 and give your opinion of Johnner's party preparations. Make a list of those 'basics' which you consider necessary for a party.
4. YOU ARE INVITED TO... Only a few guests were invited to Johnner's party. Design and write an invitation to his party which would give the time and details of venue, making the latter appear as attractive as possible.
5. 'BAD LANGUAGE' There are a few instances in this and subsequent units of what some people might consider 'bad language'. Find these words and say if you think they are offensive in the context. Do these words tell us something particular about the character or their emotional

state? Try to write the passages without using any 'bad language'. Which version is the more effective?

UNIT 3

SUMMARY

Caroline and Samantha have now moved to a hostel and Curly and Johnner are left alone in the squat. Each must make decisions about the future but must first come to terms with their pasts. Caroline accepts her pregnancy and plans a life for herself and the baby whom she hopes will replace the family she has lost. Samantha, who has taken on the role of carer for the group, insists that Curly should continue with his Youthreach programme. The absent Beano finally shows up at Lorraine's flat, forcing her to hand over the family allowance. Johnner is shocked and deeply depressed to realise that his sister is in debt to Beano. Curly tries to comfort and console him but knows there is very little he can say. Both realise how much they had come to depend on the girls.

Read pp.91–136.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Structure** The author describes the 'large rambling house' in some detail and we are also told that Caroline appears withdrawn, 'sitting on a bed...staring out of the window' (p.91). Suggest reasons why the author chose to be so specific with directions.
- **Romantic illusions?** Consider the reasons Caroline gives for her former fascination with Beano (p.92). In Unit 1, she had responded to his physical gestures with pleasure, saying 'it's nice to feel precious for a change'. Can you sympathise with these reasons? Was she really 'very stupid' to have expected 'an us' or to have believed that it 'was like a romance you'd read about...' (p.93)?
- **Decisions** Having previously considered a termination, Caroline says 'I thought for sure...I was going to lose it, then I realised...well, I didn't want to lose it, did I' (p.93)? Is this confused reaction common to many young women who find themselves unexpectedly pregnant? Trace the

events which led her to the conclusion that she really wanted to be 'somebody's ma'.

- **Domestic violence** Johnner's da had kept a bamboo cane hanging on a Sacred Heart picture hook but later used only his fists to beat the boys of the family. Explore the confused morality which led him to hang the cane from a religious picture and which allowed him to boast that he'd 'never hit a woman' (p.100).
- **Education system** Examine the role of Youthreach or other such schemes which act as a safety-net for early school leavers. Samantha threatened to leave Curly if he didn't stick with his Youthreach course yet she 'wouldn't go near a course with a barge-pole herself' (p.107). What might this tell us about Samantha's attitude to/experience of the education system?

ACTIVITIES

1. JUNK... 'Gear is a bit like love...it's fabulous in the beginning...this big, marvellous, golden cloud, and you want to wrap yourself up in it forever...' (p.94).

Do you think that drugs awareness programmes should accept/teach that many addictive substances are 'great' in the beginning? List the possible advantages and disadvantages which arise when those in authority tell only of the dangers associated with illegal substances.

2. AS BEANO SEES IT Beano wanted Caro to 'get rid of' the pregnancy (p.94) but we don't hear his reasons in his own voice.

Write the letter Beano might have sent Caro, setting out his reasons and outlining for her their possible future together. You might also outline your thoughts on the future he envisages for them. Would it be good for Caroline? Does Beano really mean what he says?

3. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE When Johnner's ma moved to the women's refuge with her children, her husband 'promised to stop hitting' them and said that he loved and missed them (p.104). Do you think he meant what he said?

Write his thoughts as he stood outside 'crying and everything'. Those experiencing domestic violence should contact ISPC at 29 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin 2, Tel 01 676 7960. The Childline helpline can be reached at 1800 66 66 66 in Ireland or

0800 1111 in UK.

4. LIFE GOES ON While their father is in Wheatfield prison, Johnner teaches Dawn and Jordan to support a different football team. Johnner says 'That's what happens when you get put away, things go on without you' (p.126).

Write Damien's thoughts as he sits in prison, thinking about Dawn and Jordan, about the child he has never seen and about how Lorraine is managing without him.

5. BEING HOMELESS As they discuss the disadvantages of living in the hostel, Caroline announces that she's 'not homeless'. 'I have a home' she says (pp.113–114). Focus Ireland is an organisation that works with homeless people. Read their website at www.focusireland.ie.

Would you say that Caroline's attitude to her homelessness is typical? Consider her earlier description of family life (p.98) and say how this influenced her attitude to her current situation. Find out about other organisations concerned with homelessness (e.g., Simon Community, Threshold, Shelter).

UNIT 4

SUMMARY

In the hostel, Caroline reflects on the dreadful circumstances which led to her becoming homeless and reliant on Beano for support and companionship. Although she is not certain that she could resist him, despite everything, she realises that Samantha, Curly and Johnner have become extremely important to her. One night she breaks out with Samantha and together they visit the lads in the squat where they laugh and enjoy one another's company. But back on the streets it is raining heavily and the girls discover that the hostel is locked for the night. When they get back to the squat, they are freezing and wet through. Caroline begins to bleed and, by the time they reach the hospital, it is too late. Baby James is born dead. This traumatic event leads to re-evaluation and reflection. After the funeral, Caroline returns 'home' to stay with her aunt. Curly and Samantha plan careers as a

chef and child-carer respectively and tentatively become engaged. Johnner, proud to have done the reading at the funeral, may return to school in September.

Read pp.137–188.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Bereavement** Caroline lost both parents within a few months of one another. Why was her mum's death 'even worse' than her father's dying? Do you think that her guilt about not having visited her mother in hospital contributed to her subsequent anger and unhappiness? Give reasons.
- **Buy and sell** Do you agree with Beano's theory that 'everyone has something to sell...that's the basic method of communication...' (p.138). Why/why not? Later he persuaded Caroline that her body was 'a renewable resource' that she was only 'lending to the punters' (p.144). Do you think that he actually believes this? Why might he have chosen this approach to persuade Caroline to work as a prostitute for him? Does it prove or disprove his own theory? Examine also the reasons, sometimes romantic as in this case, why girls agree to act as prostitutes for their lovers. What does this tell us about these relationships?
- **Self-esteem** Though she knows she would 'end up being sorry, bitter sorry' Caroline admits that she 'can't guarantee' that she wouldn't go back to Beano if he said the 'right words in the right tone of voice' (p.145). Do you have any sympathy for her position? What does this tell us about her character/self-esteem/romantic attachment to Beano?
- **Ante-natal care** Consider the effect Caroline's situation might have had on her pregnancy. She is homeless, her diet is almost certainly lacking in vitamins and necessary nutrition, she may have dabbled in drugs. Discuss the effects of her economic background on her pregnancy.
- **Accepting loss** Caroline names her dead baby James and describes just how tiny he was when born. 'He looked like a little bird, little birdy chest...'. Later she thinks that his death might be 'all for the best' (p.166). Examine the reasons she gives for this

thought. Can the death of a child ever be considered seriously as being 'all for the best'? Explore further the effects of a stillbirth by reading and discussing *All Shining in the Spring*, O'Brien Press (ISBN 978-0-86278-387-7). Read also *When Someone Close Dies*, a handbook on adult and child bereavement, available from the Health Promotion Unit, Department of Health, Dublin.

ACTIVITIES

1. **BREAKING THE WISHBONE** Caroline says that James is so tiny he 'looked like you could break him if you applied any pressure, like breaking the wishbone' (p.164). Consider why people usually break a wishbone and say if you think the title of the book is appropriate/inappropriate. Can you suggest other titles that would convey as much?

2. **BEREAVEMENT** Having been through so much after the death of her parents, Caroline never went back to school. She decided that she was 'too grown up', she couldn't 'face going into a place where it was all kids...kids' stuff' (p.142).

Can you understand her reasoning? Do you sympathise? Had she returned to school, what services might have been made available to support her?

Write the discussion which might have

taken place in the schoolyard as her former classmates consider her situation.

3. **PREDICTION** Curly and Samantha are 'getting engaged', Sam plans to do a child-care course and Curly is pursuing his ambition to become a chef (p.188).

Write an account of how you see this couple a year from the day when Curly gave Samantha a ring.

4. **MORE PREDICTION** Samantha tells Johnner that, after the summer, he is to go to school. She warns him that if she sees 'so much as a single aerosol, even the whiff of it' he'll be in deep trouble (p.188). Bearing in mind his sister's problems, and his youth, do you think he will return to school and, if he does, will he remain there for any length of time?

Write an account of the most probable outcome.

5. **ANALYSIS** On the very first page of the book we read a comment by the president of Focus Ireland, Sr Stanislaus Kennedy, which describes the book as 'very funny...heartbreakingly sad, but above all absolutely accurate'.

Having read the book, do you agree? Summarise your thoughts on the book and write a comment similar in length if not content.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, SIOBHÁN PARKINSON



SIOBHÁN PARKINSON is an award-winning Irish author who has written many novels to great critical acclaim. She lives in Dublin with her husband and son. Appointed as the Dublin Corporation Irish Writers' Centre Writer-in-Residence in 1999, Siobhán's primary interests are reading and writing. Many of Siobhán's novels have been translated into a variety of languages, including German, Danish, Italian and French.

Reviews for *Breaking the Wishbone*

'The story...is full of insights into life on the street, but does not overwhelm with horror.'

Julie Parsons, author of *Mary, Mary* and *The Courtship Gift*

Ms Parkinson is a very brave writer, [the book] has the air of chilling authenticity and...is a powerful read.'

Books Ireland



Also by The O'Brien Press: *When Love Comes to Town* by Tom Lennon:

This funny and original book deals honestly with the emotional crises faced by a gay teenager in present-day Dublin.

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