

THE CINNAMON TREE

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AUBREY FLEGG

Teaching Guide

By Gillian Perdue

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This novel has been chosen for use in the junior cycle of the second-level schools because of its thought-provoking treatment of themes such as:

- Appalling consequences of war
- Courage and bravery
- Hope and rehabilitation
- Ancient traditions and beliefs
- Boy/girl relationships
- Accountability and responsibility of 'first world' nations
- Involvement in working for a better world

SUMMARY

The Cinnamon Tree tells the story of Yola, a thirteen-year-old girl who is horrifically injured by a land mine that had been hidden in a nearby field during the civil war in her country. She recovers, but her leg is amputated from just above the knee. She returns to her tribe where her father is Chief and where, up till now, she had been a high-spirited girl walking or running the two miles to school each day. She returns on crutches where a boring life of sitting still grinding maize seems to await her. Into her life, however, comes Hans from Northern People's Aid (NPA) who wants her to train as a mines awareness teacher. Teaming up with an Irish nun from Yola's school, they arrange for her to travel to Ireland. There she is fitted with a good artificial leg and she attends school. After many months, she returns to Kasemba having learned how to use her new leg and developed a strong friendship with a young Irish student, Fintan. She is trained by the NPA and begins teaching

mines awareness classes. Things hot up when she meets Fintan once more and they learn of a plan to produce a new land mine, one that is activated by the use of a mine sweeper. An Irish company is about to become the unwitting manufacturer of this deadly device. Courage and bravery are required if they are to stop this plan in its tracks. This is a complex story – vast in its scope of subject – as it examines the best and worst in all of us.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the novel has been divided into five units, covering five or more chapters at a time. However, the pace at which the story 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 unit.

UNIT 1

SUMMARY

We meet Yola and her young cousin, Gabbin whose job is to mind the herd. He calls to her, terrified, when the prize bull wanders off up the hill. Yola goes to get the bull, trying to keep to the safe path. In trying to climb the cinnamon tree, she steps off the path and detonates a land mine. Gabbin saves her life by stemming the flow of blood. Yola is brought to hospital and her left leg is amputated. When she returns to her village, things are very hard for her. She cannot now walk the two miles to school and must remain at home,

grinding corn. She has a poor relationship with her father's junior wife, Sindu, who seems threatened by her. She meets Hans from Northern People's Aid and a plan is formulated for her to be trained as a mines awareness teacher.

Read pp.9–55.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Social structure of tribe What signs are there that a structured social system exists in Yola's tribe? Examine the roles of women and men as you have observed them thus far.
- Healthcare in developing world Discuss Yola's operation and hospital treatment (pp.16–17). Would it be acceptable in your country?
- Polygamy What is the name that Yola cannot remember for men who have more than one wife (p.22)? Can you think of any practical reasons for a chief to have several wives in a country such as Yola's?
- Education in developing world Yola views education as a privilege worth walking four miles for every day. The United Nations describes it as a right. Discuss your attitude to education. Is it a privilege, a right, or a chore?
- Fertility Can you think of any reasons for Sindu not having had any babies yet (p.28)? Why might this be a source of great shame to her? How does our society view people who are childless, either by choice or through fertility problems? Do you think you will choose to have children? Give reasons.

ACTIVITIES

1. PRECONCEPTIONS Read the opening

paragraph of the novel. What did you think of Yola when you read this first? Did you imagine her being fluent in two languages with a mother who works as a secretary and a father running a local government? Does Yola have preconceived ideas about Europeans? Collect photos from magazines and newspapers of different people who are in the media for a particular reason. Separate from text and show to your classmates. Ask them to speculate as to the reason they are in the news. Compare with actual reason. Record your observations.

2. LANDMINES Use a Web search to find out about landmines and their manufacture. List countries that still produce and export landmines. Currently, for every mine that is cleared, another twenty are laid. Landmines primarily affect civilians, with children particularly at risk. Organise a class debate on the motion: The production, sale and use of landmines is a crime against humanity.

For information, contact:

War Child Landmine Project:
www.warchild.org/Interactive_Galleries/Landmines/landmines.html

International Campaign to Ban Landmines: www.icbl.org

Mines Advisory Group (MAG):
www.mag.org.uk

People Against Landmines:
www.mgm.org

3. PUNISHMENT What would Gabbin's punishment have been for losing Managu (p.9)? What was Yola's for attacking her mother Sindu? Write a paragraph explaining the severity of these punishments. Would they be out of place in our society? Examine the Code of Discipline extant in your school. What is your opinion of the sanctions/punishments it contains? Devise your own Code of Behaviour for your class.

3. INVOLVEMENT IN AFRICA Use a web search, encyclopaedia or books to research the developed world's involvement in Africa. List countries that have, since the fifteenth century, claimed to own parts of Africa. What reasons can you give for this involvement? Find out about Kongo, a kingdom in West Central Africa that flourished from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century in the region that is now Angola, Cabinda, the Republic

of Congo and part of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Record your findings.

5. SURVIVAL MECHANISMS Fear is one of our most primitive emotions and causes chemical changes in the body. Write a piece about the role of adrenalin in the human body and its effects. Why do you think Yola had such an extreme reaction to seeing the landmine (pp.40–41)? Discuss Hans' comment that 'it is good to feel afraid, because then you can be safe'.

UNIT 2

SUMMARY

Yola leaves her village before dawn and drives with Hans and some other men to Simbada. On their way, they are almost forced out of their vehicle by rebel gunmen, but they manage to escape. In Simbada, Yola stays at the NPA headquarters and meets Isabella, a beautiful Angolan woman who is Hans' wife. Yola battles with her feelings and realises that she had been developing a crush on Hans. She and Isabella get on very well and shop for clothes for Yola's stay in Ireland. In Ireland, Yola meets a talkative girl called Catherine and Fintan, who works in the hospital. Just as she is about to be fitted for the cast, she suffers a post-traumatic stress episode and begins screaming. Meeting Fintan's eyes, she sees herself reflected in a poor light and calms down. Their friendship begins.

Read pp.56–89.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Tradition** We read that Yola's people have firm ideas about roles in society and respect for elders/seniors. Discuss Senior Mother's instructions to Yola on the morning she leaves (p.57).
- **Respect for life** On p.59 we learn that the edges of the road are mined though this is where women – and children – invariably walk. What does this tell us about the people who lay the mines? Discuss the notion of a 'fair' target. Does it exist?
- **Super-powers** What countries are mentioned as having sold guns to 'one side or the other' on p.60? Discuss the theory that you are not hurting anyone if you only manufacture or sell

weapons/drugs/landmines etc. Contact Afri which campaigns against the arms trade: www.afri.ie

- **Different world** Discuss the assault on Yola's senses and mind when she arrives at Dublin airport. What would it be like to see cars, lights, electrical equipment, shops, fast-food restaurants and so on, coming from a rural background with no cars and no electricity? Do you think it would all seem positive? Would any of it seem wasteful or extravagant?

ACTIVITIES

1. LETTER HOME Write a letter from Yola to either her mother or friend Shimima describing the journey from Nopani to Dublin.
2. NEWS REPORT Imagine you are the reporter assigned to cover Yola's arrival in Dublin and first weeks at the hospital. Write an article for your paper or script for delivery to camera. You could interview her new friends, Fintan and Catherine, or write their first impressions of her.
3. FIND OUT about the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) and visit their website: www.caat.org.uk
4. CHARMS/RELICS On the plane, a woman gives Yola a St Christopher medal. Write a short piece about St Christopher and how he came to be patron saint of travellers. List five lucky charms or items with religious significance that you know about. (e.g., rabbit's foot)
5. PERSONALITY PROFILE Write a profile of Catherine Maloney, Yola's first friend in Ireland. What is her attitude to her own disability and to the others in the ward? What might you do if subjected to her famous handshake?
6. REFERENCE You have been asked to write a character reference for Fintan O'Farrell in order for him to get a job or place on a course. Is he responsible, trustworthy, intelligent? What have you learned about him to date?

UNIT 3

SUMMARY

Fintan realises that he is becoming very attached to Yola. Meanwhile, Yola has a

dream and sees little Gabbin with a Kalashnikov rifle. Catherine teases Yola about Fintan, so Yola tells her that she's engaged to be married to the son of a chief back home. Catherine makes sure Fintan hears about it. Yola adjusts to her artificial leg and leaves the hospital for a convent school. She makes friends and enjoys her lessons but soon it's time to return to Kasemba. To her delight, she is offered a job with NPA which now has an office in her home town, Nopani. She begins working in de-mining and learns how to use the highly trained de-miner dogs. Unexpectedly, Fintan turns up in Nopani. His father is about to go into business with Mr Birthistle producing a sensor for car air-bags. Yola meets Fintan on the bridge and he narrowly escapes stepping on a mine through her expertise. They go out for dinner and he tells her of a worrying dream he had.

Read pp.90–138.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Communication** What is your opinion of Yola's decision to 'cool things off' with Fintan (p.94)? What past experience could have prompted this? Is it possible for two people from vastly different cultures to sustain a relationship? Discuss.
- **Judging** Yola's mother listens without judging, her soft 'eeeh' simply saying: 'I am here for you.' Is there anyone you can talk to in this way? Do you listen to others, without judging or interrupting? Discuss the merits of this approach.
- **Teasing** On p.104, we read that Yola loves being teased. It makes her feel accepted. What is your opinion of this, and of her nickname – Hopalong? When does teasing become verbal abuse and bullying?
- **Landmine game** Do you think Yola's landmine game was effective (pp.121–122)?

ACTIVITIES

1. **SIXTH SENSE** Yola's father, Yola herself and Fintan all seem to be able to sense danger and to have elements of ESP. In Yola's culture, great attention is paid to dreams (p.135). Look up ESP and write a definition. Have you ever had an experience of pre-cognition, telepathy or clairvoyance? Write an account.

2. **WELCOME POLICY** Some neighbourhoods in America have a Welcome Committee, whose job it is to welcome newcomers and help them settle in their community. Yola seems to have settled in well in the Irish school. In class, draw up a policy for welcoming people into your school community. It could be used for any class and should contain practical suggestions and clear tasks for committee members. Bear in mind that some newcomers may be non-nationals. Circulate Welcome Policy to entire school.

3. **RESEARCH** What can you find out about Irish Neutrality? Write a short account. List other countries which have declared themselves neutral. Do you agree with this policy? Are there any circumstances in which a country should not be neutral? Discuss.

4. **SLAVE TRADE** The cinnamon tree of this novel had been 'planted long ago by the white people' and on p.117, we read that the 'white men came up the Ruri river in search of slaves'. Find out about the slave trade in Africa which began in the fifteenth century and in which the British, French, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese played their part. When was slavery abolished by Britain and the US? Record your findings. Does slavery and/or similar systems of enforced labour exist nowadays?

5. **PAY CHEQUE** Read pp.115–116 and discuss what Yola did with her first pay packet. Write a short essay on this subject and tell what you would do with your first pay. Would your parent(s)/guardians expect a share in it?

UNIT 4

SUMMARY

Fintan stays at NPA and Yola brings him to see the de-mining dogs in the morning. Yola is worried about Gabbin and Fintan has worries of his own. They bring an injured NPA worker to hospital and, while there, witness an operation to save the life of a little girl. Fintan videos the operation as he feels that people need to see this tragedy. The girl dies from her wounds and loss of blood. Later, back at the barracks, Hans shows Fintan the various types of landmine. Fintan is stunned and almost faints. The airbag stabiliser that O'Farrell

Engineering is about to make is, in fact, a landmine. Worse, it has a microchip which is programmed to listen for the sound of mine detectors. Together, Fintan and Yola set up a sting operation and entrap Birthistle into giving details of his arms operations. Fintan's father leaves for Dublin to alert the police and Interpol. Yola is about to see Fintan off when she hears Gabbin is in trouble. Fintan and Yola part.

Read pp.139–170.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Violation** Discuss the reasons for Fintan's videoing the little girl's operation. Do you think it was a further violation for her? What good can come from seeing horrific images from real life?
- **Death** Do you agree with Fintan that: 'we hear of deaths but we never think of the process ... of dying.' Is there a good way to die? Discuss.
- **Sex object** Compare our picture of Yola to date with the scene in which she is dressed as a 'good-time girl' (pp.158–160). In what way do women, men and Aid workers respond to her? Why do you think Yola is surprised and horrified by their response?
- **Division of wealth** A drink in the Palace Hotel costs more than a day's wages for most Kasembans. What is your opinion of this? Are there hotels/restaurants in our own country that reflect the same extremities?
- **Evil** Hans says the arms dealers are 'more evil than any African who ever pulled a trigger'. Do you agree? Discuss.

ACTIVITIES

1. **VOICE-OVER** Write the voice-over for the film that Fintan made of the desperate attempts to save the little girl's life. Imagine it is a documentary to be shown in secondary schools.

2. **OFFICIAL REPORT** Hans will have to report to his supervisors and backers about the development of this mine that is programmed to kill de-miners. Write his report and his plans to combat it.

3. **COUNT THE COST** Imagine you are going for an outing to the cinema, followed by a meal in a restaurant. You may buy sweets, crisps etc. at the film and a poster or other memento. Record the cost of your

day, item by item, and total. What do you think a homeless person in our own country would do with that sum of money? What might Yola or other Kasemban do with it? Write an account.

4. CHARACTER ANALYSIS We know that Birthistle is unscrupulous, self-seeking and dangerous. On pp.160–165, we discover that he is also lecherous and chauvinistic. Write a character sketch about him, describing his personality and appearance.

5. DESIGN A BOARD GAME Fintan gets Birthistle to ‘talk’ by pretending they are discussing a board game. Design your own board game, either humorous or otherwise. How do you collect points or move on? What actions cause you to go back or lose a piece? Discuss, design and play.

UNIT 5

SUMMARY

Yola goes back home to discover that Uncle Banda is on trial. He confesses to having turned Gabbin into a child soldier and he describes the training camp in the Noose. The KLA has regrouped again and is poised for war. In a horrific scene to test Gabbin’s loyalty and to have power over his mind, the child is forced to execute his own god-father. Banda is not dead, but Gabbin thinks he is. Yola and Banda plan to enter the camp and release Gabbin. Yola resigns from NPA as she doesn’t want to compromise their neutrality. At the edge of the forest, she waits with Banda. Fintan appears unexpectedly. They use Sailor in the

search, because the soldiers already have the new mine. In the camp, they are stopped by Gabbin and Yola has to enter his tormented mind in order to help him. Fintan saves Yola’s life. Gabbin realises that he hadn’t killed Banda. They destroy the arms store, though Fintan is injured. Crisis is averted and farmers return to the land in safety. Fintan must return to Ireland, but it looks as if Yola might be going too ...

Read pp.171–208.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **The cause** Why do you think Banda became involved with the KLA? Is there a basic need in people to strive for an ideal? At what age are people most idealistic? Discuss.
- **Cycle of violence** What is meant by this term? What resources would a person require in order to put past traumas behind them and forget enmity?
- **Bloody test** Read the account of Gabbin’s ‘bleeding’ (pp.175–176). What might you have done in his situation? Why might it be easy to control a person’s mind after they had done something like this?
- **Resignation** What is your opinion of Yola’s decision to resign (p.180)?
- **Freedom** Discuss Yola’s statement that: ‘Free people do not need guns.’ Do you think she was wise in her decision to get the boys to lay down their weapons?

ACTIVITIES

1. FIND OUT You may like to find out

about child soldiers. The War Child website describes their many projects, including a project on child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo. You can access the website at www.warchild.org.uk.

2. DEBATE Discuss the motion: ‘Armies and governments do not own the land.’

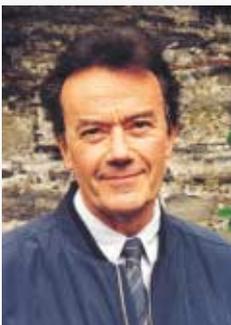
3. FEELINGS On p.183, Yola hears not only Fintan’s words, but also his feelings for her. Are words the only way in which we pick up information? Experiment: Prepare some boring pieces of prose to be read aloud in class. Take it in turns to read them, acting out a different emotion each time. Can your classmates gauge the emotion correctly? What information do they recall from the piece?

4. FORMAL SPEECH We have read that the Kasembans greet each other formally with the phrase: ‘I see you.’ On pp.191–192, read the conversation between Banda and the child soldiers. Do we have a formal greeting and farewell? At what other times do we use formal speech? Consider the marriage ceremony and the language it uses. Write the dialogue for an informal marriage ceremony, making sure both parties still promise the same things. Read in class and discuss.

5. ENDING AND A NEW BEGINNING Imagine you are the author, about to write a sequel to *The Cinnamon Tree*. Write the opening pages, outlining briefly where Fintan, Yola and Gabbin find themselves some months or years hence.

6. DE-MINING Should you or your school wish to raise money for de-mining, donations can be sent to the Irish Red Cross Society, ‘Landmine Appeal’, 16 Merrion Square, Dublin 2.

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. His first book, *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.

The Louise Trilogy

Aubrey Flegg is also the author of the Louise trilogy. *Wings Over Delft*, the first part of the series, won the Bisto Book of the Year Award, Ireland’s premier children’s book award.



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