



# 17 Martin Street

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## Teaching Guide

By PETER HEANEY

### RATIONALE AND THEMES

This novel is ideal for use in the senior classes of primary school and junior classes of secondary school because it deals with one of the darkest periods in European history, with themes which are also relevant in contemporary Ireland.

The themes which are woven seamlessly into the fabric of daily life are:

- Courage
- Prejudice
- Bereavement
- Illness
- Poverty
- Friendship
- Social conscience
- Loyalty
- Family support

### SUMMARY

The story begins with a prologue – the diary of Renata Stern, a 15-year-old Jewish girl, describing how hard life has become in Berlin under Nazi rule, and her fears at having to travel to Ireland on her own to try and find her father. This sets the scene for the climax later in the story when, as an illegal refugee, Renata has to go ‘on the run’ in Dublin. Meanwhile in Dublin, Ben Byrne’s life is thrown into turmoil when he meets Hetty Golden, his new Jewish neighbour. Despite his father’s prejudice, Ben enters the slightly exotic world of Jewish tradition, observance and family ritual, eventually befriending Hetty.

Ben’s story of courage and loyalty develops against a background of poverty, the terminal illness of his mother and the industrial agitation of neutral Dublin during the ‘Emergency’. Together Ben and Hetty overcome their mutual suspicions to build trust and friendship that bridges the divisions of race and religion. They find common cause in a determination to find

and help a German Jewish refugee who is desperately trying to avoid being deported as an illegal immigrant.

### APPROACH

The themes of poverty, prejudice, courage and loyalty are powerful and compelling, resonating with clarity in both historical and contemporary contexts. Consequently the resources in the story should provide the opportunity for discussion and development of personal opinion.

The book has been divided into five main sections to reflect the important events in the story.

### UNIT 1 New Neighbours at 17 Martin Street PAGES 11-56

### SUMMARY

Twelve-year-old Ben Byrne meets Hetty for the first time when he helps her rescue young puppies from the frozen canal. Weeks later Ben is watching from his bedroom window for the ‘Glimmer Man’. His thoughts of his mam, ill in bed in the next room, are interrupted when a family arrives to move in next door. Ben realises the youngest girl is the one involved in rescuing the puppies.

At tea he receives a stern warning from his da to give the Goldens a wide berth because they are Jewish, in contrast to his mam’s reminder that Jews and Christians have the same roots.

As the Goldens unpack, Hetty thinks she recognises Ben and wonders to her sister Mabel why he didn’t come down. With the help of relatives bringing food the Goldens’ mother lights the traditional Sabbath candles and the family begin to settle in Martin Street.

When a window is broken during a street football game, Ben is apprehended. The old man he knocked down offers to pay for the window. Ben can earn the money to pay him back by undertaking to light the fire for a Jewish family every Sabbath. When the old man gives him the address, Ben realises it is the Goldens’ house and that the old man is Hetty’s grandfather. Every Saturday, Ben helps the Golden family as their ‘Shabbos Goy’.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read pp 19-21: Ben has decided, against his better judgement, to attempt to rescue the puppies. Do you think Ben made a sensible decision? Why did Ben attempt the rescue? Was it worth the risk?
- Read pp 28-31: Ben’s mam and dad have different views about their Jewish neighbours. Whose opinion do you think is the more accurate? What shapes opinions about other people, especially from another religion or culture?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. The Suitcase:

**Read pp 15-16:** Renata has to flee Berlin to escape the Nazis and comes to Ireland to find her father. Her mother helps her to pack. What should she pack and why? Make a list of each item and the reason for including it.

#### 2. The Ideal Neighbours:

**Read pp 24-25:** When Ben sees his new neighbours moving in he hopes there will be someone that he can be pals with. If new neighbours were to move in beside you, what would your ideal neighbour be like? Write a character profile of your ideal neighbour.

### 3. They're Foreigners:

**Read pp 27-31:** Ben's father is suspicious of the new Jewish neighbours. What could Ben say to convince him that they are not a threat and should be welcomed? Work in small groups to decide on the best two arguments to convince Ben's dad.

### 4. The Broken Window:

**Read pp 45-47:** Ben has been caught by the Guard for breaking the shop window. When the Guard returns to the station, he has to write a report on the incident. Try writing the Guard's report. You will need to state the **facts** clearly, including witness statements, report what the final outcome of the incident was, and whether there is to be any further action.

## UNIT 2 Hanukkah then Christmas PAGES 57-90

### SUMMARY

Ben's mam's health has deteriorated and she is transferred to a TB sanatorium. Ben visits her with his granny and this has a dramatic effect on him.

It is the festival of Hanukkah and the Goldens offer a gift of a cake, which is refused by Ben's dad.

As the Goldens prepare for Hanukkah, their dad loses money betting on yet another 'dead cert'. However the festival meal and family gifts are saved by the generosity of their aunt and uncle.

Hetty's older sister Mabel is in a whirl about the 'hop'. Hetty is glad to see her cousin Eddie. In the midst of their celebration, the spectre of the war in Europe haunts their thoughts. Hetty suggests that they should try to find and help a refugee girl, rumoured to be hiding in Dublin.

Meanwhile Ben longs for his mother's return as they prepare for their traditional Christmas Eve visit to his Uncle Matt, who, with Aunt Bridie, hosts a party for friends and family. Ben overhears one of the neighbours, a Guard, confirm that immigration authorities are indeed searching for illegal immigrants, suspected of being spies; one of these is a young girl from Berlin.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read pp 57-58:** Ben's mam is seriously ill in the sanatorium. When Ben visits,

or whenever she is mentioned, everyone is very optimistic. Do you think that by not telling Ben the truth, the adults are really helping him to deal with the situation? In these circumstances is it right to hide the truth? How do you think that difficult news should be given to children?

- **Read pp 59-63:** In the sanatorium there is evidence everywhere of religious belief. There are pictures and statues; granny recites the rosary and the girl beside Mam tells them that her family are saying Novenas. They believe in the 'power of prayer'. What do you believe this to be? Can prayer cure or is it only for comfort?
- **Read p78:** Hetty speaks defiantly in the adult discussion and is warned by her father not to interrupt. Her opinion is disregarded because she is a child. Do you think that this is fair? Why do you think the adults ignored what she had to say? Can you think of other situations where someone's opinion is ignored either because they are different or they are trying to say something that is uncomfortable?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. Hanukkah:

The Goldens celebrate Hanukkah around Christmas time. Find out what you can about other Jewish festivals. Go to [http://www.akhlah.com/holidays/jewish\\_holidays.php](http://www.akhlah.com/holidays/jewish_holidays.php) Click on images for information about some Jewish festivals.

#### 2. If You...

**Read pp 77 & 90:** Hetty and Ben have both discovered similar quotations that could influence their lives.

Ben's is 'Send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee' and Hetty's is 'If I am for myself alone, what am I?'

Where do these quotations come from? What do you think they mean?

#### 3. Fears & Fairness:

**Read pp 88-89:** Ben's dad and his Uncle Matt have very different opinions about things. At the party, they have a discussion about whether Ireland should welcome refugees from Europe and each tries to convince the other that they are right. What do you think that they might say to each other? In small groups rehearse the arguments they each might make. Then you could perform the discussion for the

class and ask them to vote on the most successful argument.

### 4. She Moved Thro' the Fair:

**Read pp 87:** Ben's mam always sang this song. If you read the lyrics of the song can you say why you think it was popular? You can read them at:

<http://tinyurl.com/cq9s2f>

You can listen to the song at:

<http://tinyurl.com/3793j2>

In small groups, choose a modern song which might still be popular with your own grandchildren. Sing the song for the rest of the class. Have a class vote for the song that you think will stand the test of time.

## UNIT 3 The Refugee PAGES 91-131

### SUMMARY

Eddie discovers an address on his father's desk, where he believes the refugee might be staying, and tells Hetty.

Ben has overheard Hetty and Eddie discussing plans for finding the refugee. His brother Sean warns him to inform the Guards. Ben confides his dilemma to Uncle Matt, who advises him to stay silent. Ben realises for the first time the implications of Nazi domination, when Uncle Matt explains that if Ireland were under Nazi rule all Jewish families, trade unionists like himself, and many others would be sent to prison camps, possibly to their deaths.

In the meantime, Hetty and Eddie make their way to the address in Dalkey, to find that they have just missed the refugee girl. They leave their contact details in the hope that she might get in touch.

Events take a sinister turn when Dublin is bombed and Eddie's house is hit. Miraculously, they all survive. Hetty is taken aback by the immediate support from Ben's family and all the neighbours.

Things are fraught for Hetty at home after her dad loses money betting again, and then his wages are cut. Renata, the refugee girl, calls to Hetty's house and leaves a note. Ben tries and fails to speak to her before she disappears.

Ben has begun to look forward to his 'Shabbos Goy' duties and the opportunity it gives to meet Hetty. Hetty's grandfather, Zaida, tells him about his own refugee

journey years before from Lithuania to Ireland. Hetty watches Ben as he listens and understands, and for a moment a link is forged between them.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Read pp 89 & 102-103:* Some people will always be hostile to and suspicious of refugees and immigrants. Others believe that new people with new skills will benefit the economy and should be welcomed. What is the difference between a refugee and an immigrant? How should Irish emigrant workers be treated in other countries? Should we welcome and support refugees and immigrants into Ireland?
- *Read pp 105:* Eddie is looking forward to wearing long trousers after his Bar Mitzvah because they will hide his leg brace, (due to a serious illness, polio, which many children suffered from at that time.) What do people think about Eddie when they see his leg brace? Would their opinion be different if they couldn't see it? Making a judgement about a group of people because of something that you can see or imagine is creating a stereotype. Can you think of any other stereotypes that are common in Ireland?
- *Read pp 112-113:* Donore Avenue has taken a direct hit from a German bomb, perhaps dropped accidentally (as the South of Ireland was neutral in the war). Although no one was killed, the area has been devastated. During World War 2, the Nazis bombed European and British cities. Later Britain and their allies bombed German cities in return. Do you think that when there is a dangerous and evil enemy, out to destroy you, bombing civilian targets can be effective to defeat that enemy?
- *Read pp 119-120:* Hetty's dad is addicted to gambling. Is gambling a sensible way to spend your money? Why do you think that he gambles? How might he put his money to better use? Is gambling ever really just harmless fun?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. The Journey:

*Read pp 105-106:* Hetty and Eddie take a tram from Nelson's Pillar to Dalkey. It is an interesting journey and they can see different sights along the route in detail. Describe a journey through the centre of your own town or area with the same

attention to detail. You could use maps, illustrations or even SATNAV instructions.

#### 2. Its OK dear... I'm here beside you:

*Read pp 113-116:* Aunt Millie and Uncle Sam were in bed when the bomb demolished their home and trapped them in the rubble. As they lay beside each other in the darkness, waiting for help, injured and unable to move, what might they have said to each other? Could you recreate their conversation? Work in small groups to write a short play; then perform it for the rest of the class.

#### 3. The Evening Herald:

*Read pp 117-118:* The bombing of Donore Avenue has caused shock throughout Dublin. Could you report from the scene for the Evening Herald? You will need to describe the destruction as well as how everyone helped out. Interview witnesses for their reactions. You can include a sketch of the damaged street.

#### 4. The Bombings:

Dublin was hit by bombs several times during World War 2. Can you find out more about these bombings?

See Historical note at the end of the book.

Imagine that the lead German bomber was flown by Haupt Kapitan Kurt Meisner. Write a letter to tell him what happened because of his actions.

#### 5. The Wage Cut:

*Read pp 121-122:* Mr Golden's gambling has put a strain on the family finances and now his wages have been cut. It is a devastating shock for Mrs Golden who fears that they will not have enough money to survive. They must make drastic savings. Make a list of how much you spend each week and what you spend it on. Now reduce the amount by 25%. How would you redistribute your finances for next week? What changes to your spending would there have to be?

## Unit 4 My Mother Wore a Yellow Dress PAGES 132-162

### SUMMARY

Despite the tensions in the Golden household, Eddie's Bar Mitzvah is a big

day, and they are all proud of him. Mabel has to be comforted when Michael is unkind to her at the dance afterwards. However Hetty and Eddie's thoughts return quickly to the search for Renata.

Sean casually invites Ben and Smiler to a Shamrock Rovers game. Ben meets Eddie who reveals his dad is a member and invites them to join him to watch the match together. The game lives up to expectations and they shout themselves hoarse.

When they get home Ben and Sean's dad tells them sadly that their mam has died. Ben enters a dark tunnel of grief, loss and anger. After the funeral, life very slowly returns to normal. Ben's granny is a comfort and encourages him to resume his 'Shabbos Goy' duties.

Hetty has a day off school and is asked by her mum to mind Solly. She takes him for a walk, and bumps into Ben. After an awkward start, Hetty offers him sympathy on the death of his mother. They chat, but then Ben confesses to a furious Hetty how he almost reported Renata; however he manages to reassure her that he now only wants to help her find and rescue the girl.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Read pp 135-136:* Mabel is very anxious to have a boyfriend because all her friends seem to have one. She is impressed by what Michael does and she fails to notice the type of person that he is. Why is this? What do you think is most important when you are choosing a friend? What advice would you give to Mabel?
- *Read pp 149-150:* The Byrne family is grieving for Mam. After the funeral, each of them tries to cope in a different way. Whose behaviour do you think is the healthiest? How would you console Ben?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. Goodbye Me Darling Boy:

*Read pp 147:* After Ben's mum died their Uncle Matt reads a letter from her that she had written before she died. She wrote it to comfort and advise them. Work in small groups to make a list of some of the things that might be written in such a letter; perhaps her memories of them as children?

#### 2. Me Mam:

*Read pp 148-149 & 176:* After the funeral, Ben finds it comforting to remember his

mam. Imagine he writes a short description of his favourite memory of his mam and illustrates it. He tries to include details of colour and smell as well as describing what they did, where they went and how he felt. Use your imagination to help Ben write the description and illustrate his memory.

### 3. When I was your age:

**Read pp 151:** Ben's granny describes to him what life was like for her as a child and how hard she had to work. Is there someone at home that you could interview, perhaps a granny or uncle, to discover how their life as a child was different from yours? What type of information would you like to discover? What questions could you ask? What would be the best way to present the information - dialogue, monologue, bullet points or narrative?

### 4. A Day Off:

**Read pp 154-155:** Hetty has a day's holiday from school and is looking forward to doing something exciting. However she has to mind her baby brother. If you were to have a day entirely to yourself, how would you spend it? Could you write a short 'time' diary describing your ideal day? You can add an illustration if you like.

## Unit 5

### Ask Not For Whom the Bell Tolls

PAGES 163-234

#### SUMMARY

Uncle Matt takes Ben to a protest demonstration, where he hears labour leader 'Big Jim' Larkin, cheered by the crowd, give a rousing speech. Afterwards, they meet the Goldens, and as they share an umbrella, they are approached unexpectedly by Renata. Both the Goldens and Uncle Matt offer to help, but the sight of a Guard startles Renata and she runs off.

However, the following Saturday, Renata returns to the Goldens' house. She recounts the full horror of her ordeal in Berlin and later Warsaw, and her flight to Ireland. They are all affected by her story and resolve to do all they can to shelter her and prevent her getting caught.

But when Ben's dad finds out he threatens to inform the Guards. Ben finds the courage to confront his dad and challenge his prejudice, by forcing him to listen as he retells Renata's story.

He is finally persuaded, but their efforts seem to be in vain when the authorities arrive at No.17, where Renata is taken into custody. However early on Monday morning, she returns - the immigration officer has allowed her to escape. Mrs Golden suggests a 'breakfast party' to celebrate Renata's return. Even Ben's dad and Sean make an appearance to offer a 'slainte'.

Ben's Uncle Matt uses his union contacts to locate Renata's father in Longford, and they are finally reunited.

The epilogue reveals that Renata and her father manage to survive the war in Ireland but not without the heartache and uncertainty of wondering what has happened to the rest of their family left behind in Nazi Europe.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read pp 175:** Ben finally realises that apart from unimportant things Hetty and he are really not that different. Is he correct to think that customs, festivals and food are trivial differences? What do you think he means when he says that the 'foreign' neighbours aren't really different from themselves? Do you think that he is correct?
- **Read 179-181:** Renata describes what it is like for a Jew to live under Nazi domination. The Jews were cruelly and unfairly treated. Why do you think they were treated this way? Why did people stand by and let it happen? Could this happen today, perhaps in Ireland or even in your own town?
- **Read pp 191-195:** Ben's dad has discovered the truth about Renata and Ben persuades him not to report her. How did Ben find the courage to face his dad's anger? What do you think that Ben learned about himself and his dad during the exchange? Can you think of other situations where a similar courage might be needed?
- An important theme of the story is the positive power of friendship between young people, especially across barriers. How did this friendship help the young people in the story?

#### ACTIVITIES

##### 1. The Speechwriter:

**Read pp 168-169:** James Larkin was a tremendous speaker and a great champion for the working classes. You can read a little about him and his speeches at:

<http://tinyurl.com/aky77f>

For school on Monday, Ben has to write a report on something interesting that happened to him at the weekend. He decides to write a report on James Larkin and the meeting. Could you help Ben to write his report? Why did Uncle Matt approve of Larkin's speech? How did Ben himself feel at the protest? Add your own illustration to show how excited everyone was to hear him speak.

##### 2. I Accuse:

**Read pp 179-181:** After the war, the Nuremberg War Tribunals gathered evidence about the atrocities committed against the Jews. Imagine Renata has been asked to make a statement to the Tribunal about what happened in the Warsaw Ghetto to her mother, sister and grandparents. She would need to consult the Pavlaks in Warsaw who helped her mother and sheltered her sister Ella. Help her write her account of what happened to her and her family.

See Historical Note at the end of the book.

##### 3. Someone else to rescue:

**Read pp 217:** Hetty, Ben and Eddie have shown courage and compassion in helping Renata. Since WW2 and even today, there are many examples of occasions where people have needed help desperately. Writing to lobby your TD is a very effective way of doing this. Could you use what you have learned from this book to write to your local TD? You will need to identify an issue or circumstance where you think that your TD can ask the government to help, eg Travellers, homeless people or asylum seekers here in Ireland.

##### 4. The Coat:

**Read pp 227:** Zaida has decided that it is time to pass his coat on to his son Leon (Hetty's father). He has worn the coat during all the important events in his life. Each of these events has left a lasting impression on the coat. Could your class make a large outline of the coat and use a patchwork design to cover the outline with images, designs and illustrations which will record some of the events in Zaida's life?

#### Useful resources

There is much factual information in the Historical Note at the end of the book.

You can also look up:

<http://www.jewfaq.org/express.htm>