



THE GODS AND THEIR MACHINES

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Teaching Guide

By Judy Deacon

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This book has been selected for use in the junior cycle of second-level schools and with mature or fluent readers at primary school level as it deals with always relevant and topical issues of war, racism and fanaticism. An extract appeared in *Irish Writers Against War* (ISBN 978-0-86278-825-4), a powerful anthology of prose and poems that 'speak of dignity in the face of repression', that are 'opposed to all perpetrators of injustice.' *The Gods and their Machines* deals with the following themes:

- Dealing with adversity
- Loyalty
- Identity
- Individual in society
- Family relationships
- Boy/Girl relationships

SUMMARY

When suicide-assassins from Bartokhrin launch an attack on his flying academy in Altima, Chamus is the only survivor. In Bartokhrin, Riadni, a girl who rides a horse and fights better than any boy, becomes involved in her country's fight for freedom when she meets Benyan at a training camp on her father's land. When Chamus is forced to crash-land in Bartokhrin territory he is captured by Riadni who is reluctantly forced to protect him when, after a series of enlightening events, she begins to understand that the extreme fanaticism of some of the Bartokhrin fighters leads inevitably to murder. Both end up on the run, trying to escape from the feared Hadram Cassal. Benyan, who has lost both his parents to violence, has been given a final mission to find and kill all three males of Chamus's powerful family, including Chamus himself.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this guide the book has been divided into four sections. The pace at which the novel is read, however, is entirely at the discretion of the teacher. Possible discussion points are listed at the end of each section.

UNIT 1

SUMMARY

Reliving the plane crash that had crippled his grandfather years before, Chamus oversleeps, misses roll call and the chance to fly. His late arrival at the flying academy means he is the only survivor of the weapon that had appeared from nowhere, cast by an unknown Fringelander. In Bartokhrin, Riadni's life seems in stark contrast. Her father has allowed rebels to train their young recruits on a camp on his land. Riadni has been warned that she must stay away. While out riding her horse, Rumbler, she meets one of the young fighters, Benyan, and they find themselves attracted to each other. Later, she purposefully goes to spy on the training, is caught and brought to the camp leader who invites her to train with the young men. Chamus has discovered that his grandfather is deeply involved in a plan to help the Bartokhrians fight a terrifying epidemic.

Read Chapters Twenty to Sixteen

DISCUSSION

- The chapters of the book are numbered backwards from Twenty to Zero. Why might the author have used this device and what, if anything, does it suggest?
- The Altimans refer to the areas around

their lands as the Fringelands, and to the people as Fringelanders. The name Altima itself might, along with Fringelands, denote or suggest certain things. Why do you think the author chose these particular names?

- 'People had stopped being shocked at what men could do to themselves, and to other people, because it happened all the time' (p.27). Discuss with reference to current or recent atrocities and conflicts around the world.
- The headmaster tells Chamus that letting some Fringelanders have the same rights and education as 'normal people' has made it easier for them to overturn Altima (p.31). Discuss how people form opinions through personal experience, exposure to the media and listening to the opinions of others.
- 'You're never too young to fight' (p.41). Discuss with reference to the use of children's armies in areas of the world. Read *War Children* (978-0-86278-776-9), stories of young Irish people, willing and unwilling participants in historical situations they only vaguely understand. Also consult www.child-soldiers.org.
- 'Like so many her age, Riadni had little respect for the rituals of her religion; most of which seemed unnecessary and some downright daft' (p.47). Does this reflect the attitude of many teenagers?
- The rebel leader offers Bartokhrians a stark choice (p.51). Discuss the choices offered and say which might be the more effective in a conflict situation.
- Mrs Archaw tells her class that 'most people become fanatical for a reason' and goes on to explain her reasoning

with a story (p.67). Read her proposal for obtaining a peaceful resolution (p.71) and discuss with reference to Northern Ireland or Middle East peace talks.

ACTIVITIES

- 'There are times when we have to do horrible things in order to be free to live a decent life ...You have to fight to win peace' (p.38). Consider American and European reactions to the events of September 11th, 2001 and organise a class debate on this motion above.
- Chamus is the son of one of the most important families in Altima, a secular superpower and a technologically advanced culture. Riadni is from a technologically primitive world, a rebellious tomboy in a male-dominated environment. List other differences and similarities and add to this list as you find out more about the characters.
- Chamus was 'the boy no one wanted to talk to', his embarrassed school colleagues not knowing what to say to someone who had survived an attack that had killed all his friends (p.24). How difficult is it to find the words to express sympathy when we have no experience of what the other person has suffered? Compile a list of common phrases used to express sympathy and consider carefully what you might write in a letter of condolence if you were writing to someone who has recently lost a loved one to a terrorist attack.

UNIT 2

SUMMARY

Riadni's training in the rebel camp gets underway but her father's violent reaction when she arrives home results in her decision to leave altogether. Benyan is chosen to receive the Blessing of the Martyrs, is put through a traumatic preparation ritual, and awakes obsessively focussed on his task. Chamus discovers that his grandfather is afflicted, as he has been himself since the morning of the explosion, with whispering voices in his ears. During a flight in his biplane Chamus has to execute an emergency landing in Bartokhrin where Riadni, who is going to join the rebel camp, captures him.

She decides to let the Hadram Cassal deal with him but changes her mind when she discovers that he will almost certainly be killed. With superior horsemanship, she evades those rebels on her trail, sending them careering over a scree-covered slope, and goes on the run with Chamus in an effort to reach Altima and safety.

Read Chapters Fifteen to Eleven

DISCUSSION

- Riadni's father reacts violently when he discovers she has been training with the rebels (p.76). In view of the generally submissive and deferential role of the female in Bartokhrin society, was his reaction justified? Investigate the status of women under Taliban or other fundamentalist rule and say how Riadni's failure to conform might be dangerous for her and for her family.
- 'Riadni hesitated, half wishing someone would come out and catch her before she could go, persuade her that there was still something worth staying for' (p.82). How often do decisions we make take over, leaving us no alternative but to continue on a chosen path, though we may not be certain we have made a correct decision?
- Benyan suffers many doubts and physical sufferings on his journey to Altima. To relax he prays (pp.96, 98). When Chamus manages to execute his emergency landing safely he mutters 'a prayer of thanks' (p.104). Discuss the fact that both boys pray but in different ways, and at different levels of intensity.
- Chamus realises that Bartokhrin cannot be considered a 'fringeland', his country being smaller (p.109). Riadni realises that the Hadram Cassal are not as honourable as she had first thought (p.115). Discuss how meeting each other has allowed them to rethink their own previously held convictions.

ACTIVITIES

- 'Her mother looked forlornly at her, but she would not go against her husband' (p.77). Write a paragraph contrasting this reaction to male authority with that of Chamus's mother as she checks her son's plane

before flight (pp.92–93).

- Riadni and Chamus begin to question what they have learned of each other's countries and pasts (pp.108, 109). Take a story from your history books, where one country commits an act of aggression against another and write the history chapter from the point of view of the aggressor. Give motives and reasons. You might also turn history on its head: write the chapter detailing events after an atomic bomb dropped on America during WWII, or after Napoleon had conquered Russia. Look at the mirror images of conflicts and list motives.
- Riadni was sure 'she had packed everything she needed' (p.81). List the essential items you would bring if you were running away. Include one or two frivolous items, like Riadni's new dress.
- By page 110, the reader is aware, though Chamus and Riadni are not, that Benyan and the Hadram Cassal want Chamus dead. List other books where being an informed 'on-looker' heightens the suspense for the reader.

UNIT 3

SUMMARY

Benyan suffers a nightmare about a family of saboteurs whose deaths leave an indelible mark on his mind: when released from the cargo crate in which he has been travelling, he is traumatised. Chamus and Riadni continue their journey to Altima. Riadni is now in charge as she is better versed in the art of survival. A hair-raising escape from Bartokhrins forces them to discuss issues and review their beliefs. They realise that they have information regarding the disease that has killed many. The leader of the group chasing Riadni finds Chamus's plane and realises its significance. Benyan must be stopped as Chamus is now more valuable alive than dead. In his state of heightened awareness, Benyan kills his would-be assassins and is seriously injured. Chamus's grandfather Thomex is contacted by the rebels and tricked into believing that they hold Chamus. He is required to inform them of future military operations.

Read Chapters Ten to Six

DISCUSSION

- In Riadni's opinion, the Altimans have not used their power responsibly (p.145). Might this also be true of those in power in Europe, America and parts of Asia today? Consider the Kyoto Agreement and check the internet for websites dealing with environmental protection and/or destruction.
- Riadni expresses doubts about some of what she has been taught to believe (p.145). 'You take revenge on someone and they've got to take revenge right back. It could go on forever.' Discuss with reference to Mrs. Archaw's solution to conflict situations (p.71).
- At a conference of the School Library Association/International Association of School Librarianship in Dublin in June 2003, the author stated that he 'didn't want to write a book where the characters discover what is good about each other's cultures. This had to be about each of them realising what is bad about their own. Nothing adds spice to a narrative like the shattering of a few of your characters' illusions'. Do you think that he has achieved his objective?
- Chamus and Riadni constantly debate differences between their worlds and, as they do, examine the norms and social values of own cultures. Riadni says, 'We all live with each other and rely on each other', while Chamus realises that the extended family 'just wasn't necessary in Altima, where social welfare took the place of support from the family' (p.162). Consider the pros and cons of arranged marriages.

ACTIVITIES

- Contrasts and similarities between Chamus and Riadni become ever more apparent. Riadni is better prepared and more capable of surviving in the wild (p.130), though Chamus has more extensive knowledge on matters technical. Explore the chapters looking for similarities and contrasts in their personalities and experiences.
- While on his journey, Chamus noticed 'the wild landscape was marred in every direction by swathes of cleared forest and deep quarries and open strip mines ... and he wondered how much of this had been done by Altiman companies who had left without cleaning up their messes' (pp.154-155). This is very relevant to

our modern world. Find out about the destruction of valuable natural resources by mining, oil and other companies and write asking your local politician what is being done to save both the environment and the livelihood of those who live there.

- Read what Riadni says about the role of women in her society (p.161). Hold a debate on the motion 'Because she runs the home, [woman] has the greatest influence on the lives of children and the future of the family.' Does the hand that rocks the cradle rule the world?
- Consider possible differences between a freedom fighter and a terrorist. Is terrorism still terrorism when it is conducted by the winning side? Use history books to discover if there is any case where a conventional army has defeated a guerilla army and write a paragraph detailing the occasion(s).
- The practice of having journalists 'embedded' with an invading or occupying army is a very recent one. Debate possible and probable impact on the audience of reporting carried out by correspondents who might be said to owe their safety to the army with which they are embedded. Might it be sometimes true that international news corporations concentrate more on the spectacle of war, while ignoring the causes? Could news channels and reporters ever be said to conspire with governments by broadcasting only certain events to their audiences?

UNIT 4

SUMMARY

As Chamus and Riadni approach the house where her father in the company of the Hadram Cassal is waiting for her, a convoy of aid workers approaches and agrees to help. Both are shocked when they enter a village recently attacked by Altiman troops and Chamus explains to Riadni about the murder of his schoolmates. An aid worker agrees to bring Chamus to his nearby plane with a supply of fuel, but he discovers the propeller has been removed. On the return journey, Chamus is taken hostage and is subsequently injured by Altiman bombers. Kellen contacts the Hadram Cassal and informs them that

there will be a silent airstrike that night when radioactive dust will be spread in the area. The Hadram Cassal already know this, and are going to use the attack as propaganda against Altima. Chamus is chosen to receive the ritual of the Blessing of the Martyrs, and the significance of the voices he has been hearing becomes evident. During the ceremony, the spirits that have been haunting him release their power and five of his captors are killed. Chamus later manages to bring down the gliders carrying the radioactive dust but in the process crashes his own plane. The final chapter brings the story to a thought-provoking conclusion. Both Chamus and Benyan have survived and are in the same Altiman hospital. Benyan is still obsessed with his task to kill Chamus, Kellen and Thomex, and drags himself to the ward where they are all gathered. He kills Thomex. The doctors can try to keep Benyan alive if this is the wish of the family. This is the choice they make as they realise that he and his kind must be made to see what they have done in an effort to come to a long-term resolution of the situation.

Read Chapters Five to Zero

DISCUSSION

- When Riadni sees her father she longs to go home with him, with everything as it was before. She realises, however, that this is impossible. 'Things had gone too far to ever be the same again' (p.177). Louise in *Wings Over Delft* (978-0-86278-886-5) has much the same thought: 'I just wanted things to stay the same – just Father and me' (p.12). Discuss the importance of their fathers in the lives of some adolescent girls.
- Chamus was shocked at the joviality of the aid workers after the devastation they had seen. He realised he had only witnessed the results of bombing twice but aid workers 'lived with it every day' (p.186). How important is it for aid workers to get a break in non-conflict areas? Read pp. 59,70 of *The Cinnamon Tree* (978-0-86278-657-1) where aid workers also need to rest and relax.
- When Riadni is reunited with her father after the ambush he gives her 'a tight hug' (p.196). Is she surprised? Consider page 162 where she explains

the importance of the family bond.

- Paronig explains the method used by the Hadram Cassal to brainwash their martyrs and Chamus realises that the photograph missing from his locker may have been used to imprint an assassin. Discuss the power of superstition on weak or suggestible minds. Will science or logic necessarily prevail when someone is in a traumatised situation?
- 'We can't bargain with these people. They do not respect anything but force' (p.199). Do you think that Chamus would share his grandfather's opinion having seen the results of the air bombardment in Bartokhrin and having realised that the only real difference between it and the bombing of his school was in the identity of the victims? Do you think he could have changed his grandfather's mind now that he understood that only the perception of the attacks was different?
- Discuss the significance of Riadni's action when she discovered Chamus was injured. Would she have used her wig for first aid earlier in the story (p.202)? How have her experiences changed her attitude to the strict rules of her society and can you give other examples of her changed behaviour?
- When Chamus realises that the Hadram Cassal are willing to sacrifice the lives of thousands of their own people just to promote their cause, he is horrified. 'Everything his parents had taught him about life, about right and

wrong, none of it meant anything as long as men like these were able to steer countries with their insane logic' (p.210). Discuss how our perceptions of major acts of inhumanity or of conflict are formed by the media, by education, by government and other influences.

- During his attack on the gliders, Chamus realises that 'he had never considered any cause important enough to risk his life ...' After some thought he decides that he must put his own life on the line 'to save the lives of a bunch of near-strangers' (pp.224, 225).' Compare the differences and similarities between this proposed act of martyrdom and that of Benyan earlier.
- After Benyan's final attack, the doctor gives Chamus's family the right to decide if the hospital should try to keep him alive or if he should be allowed to die. Riadni is disregarded by the doctor during the discussion and says nothing. Despite the fact that she is being disregarded, 'everything she had grown up to believe told her that this family had the right to make that decision' (p.235). Discuss how both she and Chamus, through their experiences, now better understand their own and other value systems.

ACTIVITIES

- Altimans funded Advocate, the aid charity that picked up Chamus and Riadni. Riadni felt 'it was like hearing someone congratulate themselves for

offering a bandage to a person they had just slashed with a knife' (p.182). How relevant are such sentiments in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan? Write a paragraph from the viewpoint of the recipient about the necessity of receiving aid from the oppressor.

- When Riadni and Chamus witness the devastation caused by the Altiman flail bombs they are shocked. Riadni is about to pass a hurtful comment to Chamus when she notices how upset he is too. She realises that 'he was talking because the situation was so big and so brutal that there was no way to make sense of it...' (p.185). Is it possible for anyone to understand the complexity of such conflict situations? Write a paragraph on the stated work and functions of the United Nations and say whether or not you think they achieve their aims.
- Write a short story of an argument or fight from three points of view: from each of the two opponents, and from somebody who doesn't know either of the participants, but who has witnessed the incident.
- We are not given a specific time in which this story is set. However, the author sometimes drops hints that may lead us to form certain conclusions. During talk of the effects of radiation, Chamus thinks the idea might be like what he read in science fiction novels 'like shooting people up to the moon (p.189)'. Find places in the novel where the author has dropped other hints.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, OISÍN MCGANN



Born in Dublin, Oisín studied at Dún Laoghaire School of Art and Design, and worked in illustration, design and film animation, before moving to London to work as an art director and copy writer in advertising. He now lives in Co Louth and works as a freelance illustrator and artist. He has written many books for younger children and is currently working on a number of projects. Find out more about the books and the author on Oisín's own website at www.oisínmcgann.com

Praise for *The Harvest Tide Project*

'a comic fantasy with a serious underlying message ... McGann has a real comic flair ... combined with a topical theme...' *Inis magazine* No 10

Praise for *The Gods and their Machines*

'Completely fantastical yet totally relevant.'
Eoin Colfer

'A pacy, action-filled plot with very real characters facing gripping dilemmas.'
Mark O'Sullivan

'Original, intelligent fantasy with plenty of contemporary relevance.'
Celia Rees, author of Pirates!

'McGann has created a clever, sharply constructed novel with credible characters and dialogue and tension-filled action. An excellent read.'
Sunday Tribune

'... Literary excellence'
Inis magazine