



# WAR CHILDREN

## *The Empty Steps*

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### Teaching Guide

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#### RATIONALE AND THEMES

The six short stories in *War Children* are set in the time of the Irish War of Independence and will be of particular interest to students in the senior cycle of primary school, and in the junior cycle of second-level schools. The stories deal with themes such as:

- ▶ Death and loss
- ▶ Conflict
- ▶ Betrayal
- ▶ Loss of innocence
- ▶ Revenge
- ▶ Influences of memories and childhood experiences on later life
- ▶ Selfishness

#### SUMMARY

Nancy is in the kitchen with her mother when Mattie Foley enters with a gun she has found following a search of the area by soldiers and Auxies. Nancy's Ma is horrified at the thought of what would happen if the gun were to be found in her home and is sure that it belongs to a man who has been staying with their neighbours. Mattie is fascinated by the words stamped on the metal – *Waffenfabrik Mauser ... Obendorf ... A.Neckar* – and wonders what they could mean. She imagines a master gunsmith called Antonio Neckar and spins imaginative tales about him, tales that fascinate Nancy. When the Auxies and soldiers return, they throw the visitor into the street to find his gun. Mattie appears, fires it at a soldier and is gunned down. Nancy's dad is accused of informing on the owner of the gun when some strangers come to call but Chancer Foley, Mattie's da, confesses

and later commits suicide as the knowledge that his daughter's blood is on his hands becomes too much to bear.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Consider the title of this story and discuss the images it evokes. (Might it suggest a life leading nowhere, or a life with an abrupt end or steps which lead upwards to an imaginative world?) Can you think of an alternative title?
- Do the nicknames *Dancer* and *Chancer* suit Mattie and her Da? Do you think there is significance in the fact that they rhyme? Why do people give one another nicknames? Do you have a nickname? Are you proud of it? Would you prefer a different one?
- The gun 'looked evil and it looked twice as evil there on the floury table beside the big lump of floury dough' (p8). Suggest reasons why the dough might have made such a contrast with the gun.
- 'That kind of poverty made you greedy' (p11). What does the author mean by this, and do you agree? In what ways might Chancer and/or Mattie have been greedy? Is it possible that Mattie was greedy for attention, and/or love, or food for the imagination?
- 'You and me Nan, we're two of a kind' (p16). Why might Mattie have said this? How do you think Nancy felt about Mattie? List the reasons you would /would not like Mattie for your friend.
- 'She's the most unfortunate class of an orphan....The kind whose Ma and Da are still alive.' (p.16). Do you agree with Nancy's Ma? Discuss what Mattie's life might have been like had she been a true orphan.

#### ACTIVITIES

##### 1. IMAGINATIVE WRITING

Look at the writing on an ordinary item eg a piece of cutlery/crockery (preferably one with a foreign mark). Invent a mysterious foreigner and weave a fantasy just as Mattie would have done.

##### MORE IMAGINATIVE WRITING

You found the proceeds of a robbery and spent the money indulging your fantasies. Now you have everything you wanted but have to live with the fear of the robbers' return and the guilt of not telling the authorities. Write about your conflicting emotions or plan how to enjoy the fruits of crime and continue to evade the law.

##### AND MORE...

You are seventy years old and visiting a museum. You see something in a glass case and the memories flood back ... Describe your feelings as you look at the object.

##### 2. DEBATE

Discuss the appropriateness of punishments given to teenagers by parents and teachers. Do you feel less guilty when you have been punished? Hold a debate on capital punishment.

##### 3. ADVERTISEMENTS

Informants were despised by Nancy and her family. Do you think it is always necessary to inform adults of things you see happening in school? Consider recent government promotions that ask you to inform on insurance cheats/people who use software illegally. Write an ad that encourages teenagers to inform on peers who bully or who push drugs.