



WAR CHILDREN

Mulligan's Drop

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Teaching Guide

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RATIONALE AND THEMES

The short stories in *War Children* are set at the time of the Irish War of Independence and deal with themes such as:

- ▶ Death and conflict
- ▶ Betrayal
- ▶ Loss of childhood innocence
- ▶ Revenge
- ▶ Family life

SUMMARY

Statia is fed-up being treated differently to her brothers and longs to do some 'real' work on the farm. An opportunity arises when the family needs her to take the donkey and cart to borrow a sack of meal. She knows she needs to look out for patrols and as she approaches Mulligan's Drop, she meets two lorries full of Auxiliaries. She is surprised to notice a stranger waving from the river. There is a huge explosion and she realises that the bridge has been blown up. Knowing that the Auxies believe her to be part of the ambush she flees, running until she passes out. When she comes to again fear grips her heart – she knows the Auxies will want revenge and that her home is the first house in their path. She is still a long way from home when she smells the burning.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Discuss how Statia and her brothers are treated by their parents, remembering to consider the period in which the story is set. Do you feel that boys and girls are treated differently in your family or school? Discuss the grounds on which discrimination is currently outlawed in Ireland. Consult www.equality.ie.
- Were people in the 1920s more reliant on one another than is the case now, and can you suggest possible reasons

why this might have been so? Is it possible to feel lonely and isolated while surrounded by people? See www.alone.ie, or consult www.samaritans.org.uk

- 'They were like big hunting animals completely out of place in this quiet countryside' (p51). Why might the author have chosen to compare the lorries with animals, 'bristling' dark and dangerous? Does the arrival of the lorries on the scene change the whole mood of the story? If so, say how.
- Why was Mulligan's Drop an ideal place for an ambush? Compare and contrast the description of the riverbank on p47 with the description of the scene of the ambush on p55. Do you think the riverbank could ever again be a place of peace for Statia? Suggest and describe other places that are forever associated with some terrible historical event.
- 'Pure animal fear drove her scrambling across the road and over the ditch' (p58). Did you ever act instinctively? What compelled you to act in this way? Discuss the power of instinct and say if you think it can be positive or negative, depending on the given situation.
- '...the coldness in Statia's stomach came again. It wasn't a stab of cold this time, but a spreading thing like a wave, and it spread till it chilled her whole body' (p61). Discuss the whole range of emotions evoked with these words.
- 'She stopped and stared...;then, slowly and determinedly now, she began to walk towards the fires' (p63). A dramatic event can change the course of people's lives. Can you suggest a moment in either *The Guns of Easter* (978-0-86278-449-2) or in *A Winter of Spies* (978-0-86278-566-6) where a single moment might be said to change the course of several lives forever?

ACTIVITIES

1. 'COLOUR' WRITING

A newspaper article that evokes sounds, smells, feelings and sense of an occasion is called a 'colour' piece. It might be about a football match, describing the noise, cheers and supporters while not mentioning the game. Statia's favourite place by the riverbank is described on pp46, 47. Write a colour passage about your favourite place. You might say why this place means so much to you.

2. PERSONAL SAFETY

Statia is warned to be wary of strangers. List personal safety rules to be followed in particular situations, eg, shopping in town with friends/using internet chat rooms/travelling home from a friend's house by bus after dark. Make a note of phone numbers you could call in an emergency, and a list of those you might contact first.

3. FEAR

Look at a newspaper or news bulletin and identify countries where people live in daily fear of their lives. How do you think people cope with constant fear? Read accounts from people who survived when held hostage for years, eg, Brian Keenan, Terry Waite. How did Anne Frank cope with the fear that her hiding place would be discovered by the Nazis? See www.annefrank.com. Write a paragraph describing your feelings as you wait, hoping for release, fearing death.

4. PREDICTION

What do you think may have happened to Statia's family? Do you like the fact that the author has left this to the reader to decide? Imagine you are Statia and you are now an adult. Describe returning home on that awful day, tell what you saw and experienced and say how your life from then on was affected by the events.