

CALL OF THE WHALES

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SIOBHÁN PARKINSON

Teaching Guides

By Liz Morris

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This story is set in the remote, icy wilderness of the Arctic. A captivating and lyrical coming-of-age novel, it introduces and develops many universal themes of relevance to students in the senior classes of primary schools and in the junior cycle of second-level schools, including:

- Accepting parental fallibility
- Friendship and loyalty
- Family duties and responsibility
- Transition from childhood to adulthood
- Cultural differences
- Questioning previously-held beliefs

SUMMARY

From the time he was eight or nine, Tyke would accompany his father on his expeditions 'somewhere north of civilisation'. A chance meeting with a childhood friend revives memories of those long summers. The 'retina-stretching' whiteness and 'hummocky flatness' of the landscape, the 'huge inky shapes of the bowheads' and the magical narwhal, or sea unicorn, are recalled and relived by the adult Tyke, as are the conflicting and confusing emotions experienced during his first whale-hunt. The young boy's relationship with his parents, in particular his father, and his growing understanding of the realities of the adult world, are sensitively and humorously depicted.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the novel has been divided into four units, each of which contains suggested

discussion points and language-based activities.

UNIT 1 DREAMING OF WHALES

SUMMARY

A chance meeting with a childhood friend stirs Tyke's memories and rekindles his youthful enthusiasm for the Arctic wastes he had visited as a boy. His anthropologist father had taken him all over the Arctic on research trips. Now a college lecturer, much of the detail of these summer trips has been forgotten, though, twenty years later, certain incidents and people remain clear in his memory.

Tyke remembers Turaq, with whom he had gone fishing for Arctic char, and who had saved him from certain death after he slipped into the icy waters; and he remembers Turaq's grandmother, who had explained the Inuit belief that a kindness is repaid by helping someone else in trouble. But Tyke's 'upside-down sort of life' meant that he had returned to Dublin shortly afterwards and had never met Turaq again.

Read pp.9–41.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- 'It's not your world. It belongs to other peoples.' (p.9) The narrator is speaking of the world of the Arctic north, of his recognition that he couldn't 'linger forever in that blue-lit dreamy childhood world ...' Do you agree with him? Are there parts of the world which belong only to certain people? Is

there any part of the world that you can say you own?

- The adult narrator tells us that meeting Henry again 'stirred up the memories' that were now arousing in him an 'unrealisable longing for childhood adventure' (p.13). Ask your parents/guardians or teacher to tell you about similar interests acquired in childhood which may never have left them and which may still influence their lives.
- Watching Turaq play with the smaller children, Tyke observes differences between European and Inuit games (p.22). Which is the more enjoyable, playing or winning? Why do children play? Discuss your own experience of play through the years. How does it compare to Inuit play?
- Tyke's mother doesn't 'really know much about the mother-stuff', she is 'not what you might call reliable' (p.33). In view of the fact that Tyke has nearly drowned while in his father's care, do you consider that either parent behaves responsibly?
- Do you agree that you wouldn't talk to a ten-year-old about their kindness, this being 'too grown-up a concept' (p.36)? Are there things about being a child which you have already resolved not to forget when an adult?

ACTIVITIES

1. DEFINING MOMENTS

'You grow up, things change, you settle into your own you-shaped groove ...' (p.9). Write a paragraph detailing those significant moments which have helped to define your own 'you-shaped groove'.

Now fast-forward ten years and rewrite the paragraph for an older you.

2. DEBATE

To the outsider, it might have looked as if Tyke and Henry were 'on different sides of the debate' (p.12). Consider the arguments for and against the killing of whales for commercial and other reasons and debate these in class.

3. SIMILES

The author uses similes to add colour and interest to the story, e.g. 'the whole hummocky flatness of the countryside spread out and rumped like a badly made bed' (p.17), or 'the friendships forged in wild northern places still glow for me like bright beads of experience in the murky shadows of my childhood past' (p.20). Make a list of colourful similes you've encountered in this unit. Which is your favourite and why?

4. MAN-STUFF

Tyke's mother has 'an artistic temperament' and her son and husband choose not to tell her things that might 'worry' her (p.32). What does she really think about their adventures? Write the conversation she might have with a close female friend as she gives her point of view on their Arctic expeditions.

5. ADVERTISING COPY

Imagine you're an estate agent trying to sell both Turaq's home (see p.37) and your own house. Write a description of each property to attract potential buyers.

6. HOLIDAYS

The other children describe their 'ordinary' holidays when they return to school in August (p.37). Think of some aspect of a holiday that you have taken, real or imagined, and elaborate on this detail. You might exaggerate some actual event or encounter or invent the entire episode.

UNIT 2 DECISIONS

SUMMARY

In spring, Tyke and his dad set off for the northern coast of Alaska, hoping to see

the bowheads as they migrate to their summer grounds in the Beaufort Sea. A whaling captain, Matulik, offers them accommodation and a chance to help out at a whaling camp. Tyke tries to rationalise his feelings about the whales – he wants desperately to see them, but he does not want to have anything to do with killing them. Reluctantly, he agrees to go along. When the bowhead whales begin pushing their way through the ice, Tyke realises that, in a small way, he is vital to the success of the hunt, and this fact confuses him further. His group catches a whale and the camp celebrates, though Tyke and Henry are kept busy supplying the men with hot coffee. Later, as they sit in the igloo built to store the meat, Henry tells a story about hunting.

Read pp.42–78.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- On tackling his father about the quota system, Tyke learns that the whales are to be killed, though he admits that, deep down, he 'must have known' (p.52). Do you understand why he had been so reluctant to admit that 'this was all about hunting'? Do you think his father really understands his 'emotional relationship' with the bowheads? (See pp.53–54).
- Tyke is 'utterly confused', torn between a desire and need to see the 'magical beasts' of his imaginings and his unwillingness to have anything to do with the killing (p.54). He tries to justify his desire to participate in the whaling expedition, telling himself that the whales were going to be killed anyway, with or without his involvement. What advice might you have given him? Have your loyalties and emotions ever been similarly confused?
- Do you agree with Dad when he says that 'We get nothing for nothing in this world' (p.55)?
- 'Vegetarianism isn't really an option in the Arctic ... Meat is what you eat up here or you die' (p.56). Vegetarianism is a luxury for those who can afford to buy meat. Discuss.
- 'Girls are girls ... Boys are boys. Only boys can be boyers.' What is your opinion of Henry's argument that 'if the women did the men's work, who

would do the women's work?' (See pp.61–62)

ACTIVITIES

1. DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

The author uses language imaginatively and creatively to heighten the experience so that the reader's very senses become involved in the story, e.g. on p.49 we are told that the helicopter 'whippa-chunk, whippa-chunk, whippa-chunked away', and on pp.69–70 that 'the sky started to pinken', and that the rising sun gilded the whalers' bodies so that they looked 'like some sort of shining gods'. Find other examples and list them. Choose a paragraph and rewrite it, omitting any such descriptive writing. Compare and discuss.

2. DEBATE

Read all of Dad's arguments on pp.55–57. Organise a class debate on the motion 'We live off each other. The best we can do is to do it with a minimum of cruelty.'

3. WHALEY THINGS

The author describes the bowhead whales in great physical detail, and asks the reader to imagine what it must feel like – how whales organise their families, how long it would take to turn around, how much food would be necessary (pp.39–41). Tyke says that rather than just hearing it, he seems to *feel* the movement and sound of the whales 'right inside' his body (p.63). Read these pages and write a life-account of an animal or bird of your choice.

4. PARENTAL FALLIBILITY

Tyke says that he hated Henry just as he had resented his father on a previous occasion 'for being right' (p.78). Have you ever experienced a similar resentment? Write a fictional or factual account.

5. STORYTELLING

This is common across the globe and every culture has its own legends/stories. Read again the story Henry told as they lay inside the igloo (pp.74–77). Do you know the Irish version mentioned by Tyke? What are the five main Irish legends that you can recall? Which is your favourite and why? Either rewrite a famous Irish legend or write your own – perhaps a new adventure for Fionn or Oisín.

6. FURTHER READING

The first cut of the whale meat is divided among the villagers, each family receiving a portion: only the whalers themselves get nothing (p.71). Stories of island life off the coast of Ireland give similar accounts of the fish catch being divided among the villagers.

7. RESEARCH

The quota system affects the lives and traditions of whalers such as Matulik. It also affects the lives of farmers and others living in the EU. Visit <http://europa.eu> to find out more about the quota system. Read pp.49 and 74 again and write an opinion of the merits and demerits of the quota system.

UNIT 3 TO THE RESCUE

SUMMARY

Days later, as they prepare to leave the camp, Tyke notices that Henry is missing. He wanders along the shoreline and eventually spots him on one of the drifting ice floes. Without stopping to think, he leaps into an umiaq and heads off, paddling frantically in the direction of the tiny figure. After what seems like hours, he reaches the ice floe and Henry manages to jump aboard: only then do the two boys realise just how close they have come to death. The pods of whales which swim close by the small boat delay their progress towards the camp but, as the sun sets, they reach the safety of the ice shore. Exhausted, Tyke collapses, but recovers in time for the feast, although he doesn't eat any of the whale meat. Henry tells another story, in an attempt to explain to Tyke about the whale hunt.

Read pp.79–104.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Tyke's father decides not to tell anyone that Henry might be missing. Instead he chooses to search the other camps in case Henry had gone to visit a friend (p.81). What character traits might this indicate in Tyke's father?
- Tyke imagines that if he 'thought hard enough' about Henry he would 'conjure up an image of where he was'

in his head (p.83). Do you think it is possible to visualise what is normally out of sight?

- Henry says that there is a difference between killing 'out of anger' and 'hunting' (p.92). Do you agree? What, in your opinion, are the most important differences between killing for sport and killing out of necessity?
- It is gradually beginning to dawn on Tyke that perhaps his father has good reason for keeping the truth about their adventures hidden (p.95). Is this understanding likely to have an effect on his relationship with his parents?
- When Tyke samples the whale meat he is 'kind of glad' he doesn't enjoy it – he feels it is 'more principled' of him not to like it, considering how he feels about the whales (p.98). What do you think of Tyke's 'principles'? Can you sympathise with him?

ACTIVITIES

1. ICE

'The ice stretched in a glaring white expanse for miles and miles ... gleaming, retina-stretching white' (p.82). List as many adjectives and phrases as you can that describe ice. Write a poem about ice or perhaps a piece about what it would be like to spend the night in an igloo.

2. RESCUE

Read again those pages which describe Tyke's long and intense struggle to reach Henry and bring him aboard (pp.84–89). Now write your own account, fictional or other, of a rescue attempt.

3. WISH LIST

'We would often be sorry if our wishes were gratified.' (Aesop). 'There are two tragedies in life. One is to lose your heart's desire. The other is to find it.' (George Bernard Shaw). Might Tyke agree when he finally achieves the 'realisation of his dreams' (p.90)? Write a paragraph detailing your own dreams and say how you might expect to feel on their realisation.

4. THE INUIT WAY

The Inuit way, according to Turaq's grandmother, is to repay a kindness by helping another person (p.36). Now Tyke has saved Henry's life as Turaq had saved

his (p.96). Many religions believe that people should help one another. Do you think that this philosophy would, if followed, help to make the world more just? List some common themes of world religions. Why might particular themes be universal? Can you identify common goals?

5. STORYTELLING

Dymphna, a character in the author's *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)*, comments that 'when you tell a story, it's your story. Your telling it makes it yours.' Do you agree?

In the Author's Note to *Call of the Whales* we learn that the story of Sedna (pp.100–103) is retold from an older version of the story, like those found at www.rahoorkhuit.net/goddess/goddess_quest/sedna.html. Read another version of the Sedna story and compare the two versions. Do you agree that 'stories are not just stories but the way we explain the world to ourselves' (p.104)?

UNIT 4 INTO ADULTHOOD

SUMMARY

When he learns of the birth of his twin siblings Tyke is pleased, but he is also upset as he realises that his mother was alone in Dublin during her pregnancy while he and his father were 'playing whalers' in the Arctic. On their return to Ireland, Tyke finds he really enjoys caring for the twins, who demand the full-time attention of the entire family. So he is surprised when his father suggests a summer trip to Thule. The expedition proves to be, as Dad had promised, the 'ultimate Arctic experience', and Tyke takes another step from childhood to adulthood on discovering that the magical unicorn in which he had believed for so long doesn't exist. As together they watch the Aurora Borealis, Tyke knows for sure what he has only suspected before – that he will make no more trips with his father.

But his adult dreams are pervaded by the call of the whales and, though he tries to resist, he thinks he may return ...

Read pp.105–140.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- When he learns of the birth of his twin siblings, Tyke reflects that it seems rather 'out of character' for his mother to 'go through with something so ... physical' (p.107). How well does Tyke know or understand the character of his mother? He feels 'really bad' about being so far away, 'playing whalers' while his mother has to go through the pregnancy on her own (p.107). Consider the response when Tyke mentions this guilty feeling to his father. What might this tell us about his father's character?
- It finally occurs to Tyke that his mother may have worried when they were away and he wonders if she had put on the 'surprised look' because she didn't want to look anxious or lonely (p.115). Has your perception of someone's character changed with the benefit of hindsight?
- In Unit 2, Tyke tells us that 'tourist' was a word his father used 'like a swear-word' (p.53). What do you think he must feel when Leon uses this word to describe him and Tyke? (p.123)
- The original title proposed for this novel was 'Fighting for the Crown'. Read pp.14–16, 111–113 and 132–133 and give your opinion of this title.

- The first two paragraphs of the Prologue are repeated word for word in the Epilogue (see p.9 and pp.139–140). Discuss possible reasons for the author's use of this literary device.

ACTIVITIES

1. DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

As he looks out the window of the plane, Tyke says that it is like 'flying into an ice-cream sundae ... catapulted off the face of the earth ... into an icing-sugar paradise ...' He wonders if he is 'not looking at the earth at all ... but at the floor of heaven itself.' Write a paragraph describing your own first view of some awe-inspiring location.

2. VITALLY IMPORTANT THINGS

Write a formal document outlining to your teacher or guardian the reasons why you consider it a waste of your time to study for/sit your Junior Certificate or other examination.

3. GROWING UP

Even before they left, Tyke knew that it was going to be the last trip with his father, as he needed his summers for doing his own stuff (p.114). Write the dialogue as you try to tell your parent/guardian, gently, that you


would in future like to spend your holidays with your own friends or in your own company.

4. 'BIG'

Earlier, Tyke has told us that he sometimes felt he 'was the grown-up and [his] mum and dad were the kids' (p.110). Now he remarks that his dad sounded 'sort of wistful, like a child trying to negotiate a later bedtime' and it is Tyke himself who considers the rational arguments for leaving Thule (p.124). Write the thoughts of an adult who mistakenly takes some magic tablet which causes them to behave as a toddler, though they retain their adult body. How does this adult manage to get dressed or get to work?

5. HOME TRUTHS

When Tyke finally learns the truth about the unicorn horn he is, at fifteen, both disillusioned and sorely disappointed (p.132). Have you ever learned some truth about the adult world which left you feeling similarly upset? Write an account, fictional or other.

 Denotes activities that are suitable for both senior cycle primary school use and junior cycle secondary school use.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, SIOBHÁN PARKINSON



SIOBHÁN PARKINSON, an editor by profession, has worked for many years in publishing and in educational software. She has been writing for young people since 1992. The first children's writer in this country to hold a residency (a joint Irish Writers' Centre/Dublin Corporation position in 1999–2000), Siobhán has recently been writer in residence with the Church of Ireland College of Education in Rathmines. She is editor of *Children's Books in Ireland*.

AWARDS for Siobhán

Sisters...no way! – Bisto Book of the Year Award 1997

Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe) – Bisto Merit Award 1998

The Moon King – Bisto Merit Award (1999) and iBby Honour List (2000)

TEACHING GUIDES ALSO AVAILABLE FOR THESE TITLES FROM SIOBHÁN PARKINSON:



Amelia

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No Peace for Amelia

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Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (Maybe)

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Sisters... No Way!

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