



COULD I LOVE A STRANGER?

ISBN 0-86278-442-5 pb

MARILYN TAYLOR

Teaching Guide

By Liz Morris

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This book has been selected for use in the junior cycle of second-level schools as it deals with the topic of ethnic minorities and religious tolerance and illustrates how racism can lead to the destruction and murder of millions of people as it did in the Jewish Holocaust. The book also explores the tensions and strains that can develop within families and friendships, as young people try to understand and cope with relationships, especially across a religious divide. Other themes explored in this book include:

- Growing up
- First love and peer-group relationships
- Loyalty and betrayal
- Conflict
- Individual and society
- Identity

SUMMARY

The second novel of a trilogy, *Could I Love A Stranger?* continues the story of Jackie and her relationships with her friends and with her 'on-off' boyfriend, Kev. With many of her friends away and those who are left behind working locally for the summer, Jackie expects little from these holidays. But the arrival of Deirdre's long-lost cousin, Daniel, changes everything and Jackie's developing friendship with him creates tension between herself and her friends, and also causes her to doubt her relationship with Kev. Aware of Deirdre's hostility towards him, Jackie is torn between her desire to learn the contents of Daniel's secret family diary and her waning interest in Kev. Encouraged and supported by her father, Jackie makes choices that affect

not only herself, but also those closest to her.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the novel has been divided into four units, covering several chapters at a time. The pace at which the novel is read is, however, entirely up to the teacher. Possible discussion points and language-based activities are listed at the end of each unit. To facilitate further research and development, useful website and other addresses are also included.

UNIT 1

SUMMARY

With their 'on-off boyfriends' Kev and Andy in Germany job-hunting and other friends away in 'exotic places', Jackie and Deirdre are not expecting the holidays to be exciting or interesting. Their summer jobs in the local hairdressers and newsagents aren't exactly stimulating and Deirdre's hostility towards the long-lost cousin now staying with her family is beginning to cause strains on their friendship. However, Jackie feels strangely drawn to the mysterious Daniel and, when he reads to her from his family diary, she begins to understand why he appears so withdrawn and sad. This diary tells the story of the family he never knew and of the dreadful things that happened to them in Nazi Germany. Jackie is horrified and can scarcely believe what she hears.

Read pp.7–38.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Friends Jackie believes that 'you have to sympathise with your best friend, even if she's being unreasonable' (p.7). Do you agree with her? Can you suggest other, perhaps more important, qualities necessary for friendship?
- School of life The teacher, Miss Kinsella, says that 'Holiday jobs can help to broaden one's experience of life' (p.8). Would you agree that this is always the case? Can you think of any scenarios when this might not be true?
- Changing roles Since his firm's financial crash and subsequent heart attack, Jackie's dad had become 'more relaxed' and now 'cheerfully helped with household chores' (p.12). Discuss the possible effects on the family of his changing role and lack of paid employment.
- Prejudiced assumptions Jackie wonders why Daniel's mother was considered 'unsuitable' by her husband's family and she remembers how her own family had once made assumptions about Kev, just because he came from a disadvantaged area. What are the criteria by which people form their initial impressions of strangers? Do you think it is inevitable that people should judge others by their social position? Can you suggest ways to combat this type of prejudice?

ACTIVITIES

1. CHARACTER ANALYSIS Jackie says that she is 'hung up about lots of things' (p.15) and we know that Ruth spends her holiday in Greece 'worrying about her health' (p.7).

Examine the text for other clues about the personalities of Jackie and her friends and write a personality profile of each girl.

2. PREDICTION Jackie's younger brother, Philip, has just left the family to spend some weeks in the Gaeltacht. We know that Mum doubts that he will settle down and come back 'jabbering away in Irish' (p.28). How do you think Philip will spend his time? Will he enjoy himself or will he get into trouble with the college authorities?

Write a paragraph describing Philip's time in the Gaeltacht.

3. FORMAL LETTER-WRITING An aspiring councillor for a political party, Deirdre's mum is very involved with local and national politics. We first meet her as she organises a Bring and Buy Sale in aid of medical supplies for Bosnia (p.29).

Write the letter she might send to local business and other interests requesting support in the form of financial or other contributions.

4. ANOTHER PREDICTION By the end of this unit, Jackie has learnt something of how Daniel's family had been affected by the introduction of the Nuremburg Laws in September 1935. These laws defined the Jews as second-class citizens and led to their being driven from public and professional life.

Consider what you know about the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany and predict what might have happened to the family members. Write a short paragraph outlining their possible fate.

UNIT 2

SUMMARY

Torn between her desire to hear further extracts from Daniel's diary and her guilty awareness that she is now keeping secrets from her best friend, Jackie finds it hard to maintain her former interest in Kev and her old relationships. She finds herself irritated by Deirdre's casual and inaccurate assumptions about Daniel and is unaccountably pleased when he proves her wrong about his abilities as a swimmer. As together they read the diary and learn more about the horrors visited upon his family, Jackie tries to imagine how difficult it must be for him

having so recently lost his mother. Her own family life is disturbed as Philip re-appears during a surprise party for Nana and they discover that he has been caught ordering alcohol in a Gaeltacht pub and has run away to avoid being expelled.

Read pp.39–75.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Surprise!** The family decides to hold a surprise party for Nana, despite Jackie's fears that it is 'a bit risky' as Nana 'might not like people knowing her age' (p.44). Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of surprise parties and decide if the possible risks involved outweigh the potential pleasures.
- **Decision-making** Deirdre is presented with the dilemma of choosing between boyfriends. She must decide whether she wants to stay with the fun-loving but conceited Andy or the reliable but boring Mark (p. 45). From the evidence in the book to date, discuss the personalities of the two boys and try to arrive at a class consensus on which of the two she should choose.
- **Peer pressure** In the diary, Miriam's friend Rosalie is pressurised by some schoolfriends to ignore her. Rosalie is told that she will not 'be allowed to come camping with the Hitler Youth' if she continues to speak to Jews (p.56). [See also p.94.] Put yourself in Rosalie's position and try to imagine how you might have reacted in a similar situation. Explore the difficulties experienced by non-Jews who may genuinely have wished to continue their former friendships with Jews in the Germany of the time.
- **Character analysis** Jackie is 'incredibly happy at the thought of being alone with Daniel again' but feels 'bad about deceiving Deirdre' (p.52). What, if anything, does this tell us about her character and feelings for both friends?
- **Racial conflict** Dad is appalled when he hears of the attacks on bread queues in Bosnia and says that 'This "ethnic cleansing" is pure racism' (p.62). What is meant by the term "ethnic cleansing"? Consider areas of the world where there has recently been racial conflict and try to identify the peoples involved.

- **Holiday romance** Deirdre, possibly quoting from a teen-magazine, says that 'A holiday romance rarely leads to a lasting relationship' (p.65). Do you agree with this statement? Give reasons for your opinion.

ACTIVITIES

1. PC OR NOT PC Deirdre, Therese and Jackie jokingly use 'politically correct' words when discussing the Bring and Buy Sale (p.41).

What is meant by the term 'politically correct'? Search <http://go.to/antipc> or www.huberspace.com/cartoons and list some politically correct terms.

2. LOVE LETTERS Kev's postcard, when it finally arrived, 'certainly wasn't much of a love letter' (p.42). It was impersonal and more about Andy's love life than about their own.

Write the postcard that Jackie would have liked to receive from Kev **or** write the love letter she might have sent him describing her summer holidays to date.

3. PROVERBS Speaking about Philip's trip to the Gaeltacht, Gran says that 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder' (p.43).

Make a list of other much-used proverbs and say if you think these sayings have anything to teach us in modern society.

4. REPORT FROM A WAR-ZONE Listening to the news, Dad hears a correspondent describing a bomb attack on a bread queue in Bosnia (p.61).

Write the script which might be used by a correspondent reporting from Chechnya/Sierra Leone/Zimbabwe/Nigeria or other area of racial conflict. Decide if this script will be presented live to camera or if it will appear in a newspaper and write accordingly.

5. PRODIGAL'S RETURN Read the New Testament story of the Prodigal Son, referred to on p.64.

Then write your own story of a similar surprise return by someone who has been changed during their absence.

UNIT 3

SUMMARY

Daniel reads the next extract of the diary, which tells of the events of Kristallnacht. But he and Jackie are seen by Deirdre who assumes the worst about the meeting in the park, and the girls' friendship continues to deteriorate. Having confided in her dad, Jackie decides that she should continue to meet and support Daniel but does explain to Deirdre about the diary. Slightly mollified, Deirdre begins to make an effort to be more accepting of Daniel. The next reading of the diary, which tells of the worsening situation in Germany, takes place at Jackie's house where Daniel meets Philip and her dad. Her friendship with Daniel no longer a secret, Jackie meets him at the Bring and Buy Sale where, deep in conversation, they fail to notice the surprise arrival of Kev.

Read pp.76–115.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Spare the rod...** Nana is concerned about Philip's behaviour, saying that what he needs is 'proper discipline' like she had 'in her day' (p.77). Consider what might have been meant by 'proper discipline' in Nana's youth and, in the light of advertising campaigns by the ISPCA and RSPCA, discuss the effects of corporal punishment on children.
- **All men are equal but...** Dad tells Jackie that 'prejudice and racism are always around', pointing out that 'even here in Ireland, people are prejudiced against Travellers, just because they have a different lifestyle' (pp.86–87). Do you agree with Dad's opinion? Consider what you know about the public perception of the Traveller lifestyle and the effects of media coverage on that perception. Contact the Equality Authority at Freephone 1890 245545 or Dublin 417 3333 (textphone) or info@equality.ie for further information on racism and prejudice in Ireland.
- **Refugee 'quotas'** Daniel reads that his grandfather had queued daily for visas (p.94). But despite the Conference held at Evian, France in 1938, refugee quotas were almost everywhere rigidly limited. Some 800,000 Jews, less than

one in seven of the Jews murdered, were able to escape from Nazi-dominated Europe, or to find refuge in other lands. Consider what you know about refugee 'quotas' in Europe today and discuss the policies and attitudes of present-day governments towards refugees.

- **Religious tolerance** Explaining her interest in the diary, Jackie says that 'Even if you don't know people, and they're a different religion, you can still care when something dreadful happens to them' (p.103). Do you agree with her? Consider any action which you or your class/school may have taken/could take on behalf of those less fortunate and discuss the effects of that action.

ACTIVITIES

1. VOCABULARY WORK The following words appear in this unit:

plaintively, snide, array, aggrieved, incoherent, scathingly, leer, baffled, suppress, harassed.

Arrange in alphabetical order and write a definition for each word, consulting a dictionary, if necessary.

2. FORMAL LETTER-WRITING Nana refers to Philip's previous involvement in 'joy-riding' (p.77).

Write a letter to your local councillor or politician expressing your concern about this or similar issue of local interest and asking him/her to raise the matter at government level. You might also try to think of a more appropriate term for the crime of 'joy-riding'.

3. DELEGATING Dad says that Mrs Lennon will 'go far as a councillor' as she's 'very good at delegating work to everyone' (p.108).

Compile the list of jobs to be done for the Bring and Buy Sale and select the classmate to whom you would delegate each job. Say why you believe each classmate to be suitable for the position assigned to them.

4. POETRY ANALYSIS Read the following extract from a poem by AE Housman and write a short analysis, noting what you believe to be the main theme(s):

Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?
And what has he been after that they groan

and shake their fists?

And wherefore is he wearing such a conscience-stricken air?

Oh they're taking him to prison for the colour of his hair....

Oh a deal of pains he's taken and a pretty price he's paid

To hide his poll or dye it of a mentionable shade;

But they've pulled the beggar's hat off for the world to see and stare,

And they're taking him to justice for the colour of his hair.

UNIT 4

SUMMARY

After a strained conversation, Kev leaves immediately for Wexford. That evening, Jackie meets Daniel to listen to a harrowing diary extract about Papa's arrest and the plans for the children's escape on the Kindertransport. Thinking about the diary, Jackie finds it difficult to enjoy Philip's birthday celebrations and, when her father is questioned about his company's finances, she shares her worries with Daniel explaining about her father's heart attack and of her fear that their house may now have to be sold. He responds sympathetically. Reading the diary, they learn of the illness that prevented Max from reaching the safety of London with his sisters. The trip to Wexford, which Jackie had hoped would be relaxing and enjoyable, almost ends in a drowning tragedy. Daniel's courage in the rescue prompts both Deirdre and Kev to reconsider their former opinions and belatedly admit that they had misjudged him. However, Jackie's happiness is shortlived. Daniel, having shared with Jackie the final pages of the diary, announces that he must join his father in America and she realises that their first kiss will be their last. But Kev has learned from his mistakes and, as he and Jackie walk off together, they talk openly, glad that they still have each other.

Read pp.116–172.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Economic migrants** Jackie learns that 'domestic service was the only work women refugees were allowed to do'

(p.124). Read about the current UK and Irish regulations governing the work permits for economic and other migrants and give your opinion of these regulations. Contact the Irish Refugee Council at refugee@iol.ie or the Refugee Information Service on refinfo@eircom.net for details.

- **A fresh start** Daniel reassures Jackie that 'moving house isn't the end of the world', adding that 'sometimes it's good to make a new start in a new place' (p.135). Do you agree with him?
- **Substance misuse** Kev left Germany because he was afraid to get involved with drug traffickers but Andy stayed believing he could 'play them along' (p.145). Discuss the factors which cause many young people to become involved in substance misuse, considering themes such as self-esteem, decision-making, feelings and influences. Contact the Education Officer or Drugs Services in your local Health Board for information.
- **We shall remember them** When told of the fate of Daniel's family, Dad says that 'we all owe it to those people who died always to watch out for any kind of prejudice. It can start with abuse and end like this' (p. 169). Do you agree with him? Consider the political situation in Austria, Belgium, France and other European countries

and suggest ways to combat those racial and religious prejudices still widely held in Europe today.

ACTIVITIES

1. FAMILY TREES Jackie thinks that 'it must be so strange to learn about your family history from a diary' (p.123).

Research your own family history and present it in diary or chart form.

2. ORGANISED FUN Gran enjoyed the organised activities such as aerobics, make-up sessions, bingo and line-dancing (p.125).

Write the list of activities you would organise for such a cruise, remembering to make available activities that will suit all your passengers.

3. CREATIVE WRITING The diary extracts do not tell us what happened to the baby who was thrust onto the train by its desperate mother (pp.138, 140). Did it survive the journey? Was it adopted on arrival in England?

Write the story.

4. NEWSPAPER REPORT Imagine that you are a reporter from a local newspaper sent to cover the story of the rescue in Wexford.

Prepare questions and write a colour or 'human interest' piece for your paper. Then re-write your article as you might

submit it to one of the daily newspapers, remembering that the requirements for national newspapers differ to those for local papers.

USEFUL ADDRESSES

1. The Holocaust Educational Trust, BCM Box 7892, London WC1N 3XX or www.het.org.uk

Tel: +44 207 222 6822

2. London Museum of Jewish Life, 80 East End Road, London N3 2SY or www.jewmusm.ort.org/education.

Tel: +44 208 349 1143

3. Anne Frank Stichting, Post Bus 730, 1000 A S, Amsterdam, Holland

Tel: +31 20 626 45 33

Fax: +31 20 620 79 99

4. War Memorial Building, 9-11 Waring Street, Belfast BT1 2DW for permanent exhibition on Northern Ireland's part in World War II, open daily.

5. Jewish Communal Office, c/o Stratford College, 1 Zion Road, Rathgar, Dublin 6

Tel: +353 1 492 3751 (not Fridays, Saturdays or festivals)

6. Imperial War Museum, Lambeth Rd., London SE1 6HZ or www.iwm.org.uk

For information on Holocaust exhibition, www.iwm.org.uk/lambeth/holoc-exl

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, MARILYN TAYLOR



MARILYN TAYLOR began her writing career with a trilogy for young teenagers: *Could This Be Love? I Wondered*; *Could I Love a Stranger?*; and *Call Yourself a Friend?* She participates in numerous children's books events, including Books Across the Border and the Belfast Literary Festival, as well as speaking to schoolchildren, librarians and teachers throughout Ireland on children's writing. *Faraway Home*, a historical novel about Jewish refugees in Northern Ireland during World War II, won the Bisto Book of the Year Award (2000).

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REVIEWS of the second book in Marilyn Taylor's trilogy for teenagers, *Could I Love a Stranger?*

'This subtle and well-crafted story celebrates the coming of reflection and maturity.'

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'Taylor convincingly links her teenagers' immediate worlds (Dublin, Ireland, Bosnia) with an earlier period, which, as Jackie certainly comes to understand, still casts its shadow.'

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