



OUT OF NOWHERE

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GERARD WHELAN

Teaching Guide

By Liz Morris

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This book has been selected for use in the junior cycle of second-level schools because, while it may be read as a straightforward adventure mystery, it deals with fundamental questions such as:

- Intolerance
- Conflict
- Beliefs
- Identity
- Gender
- Nature of reality
- Nature of the spiritual
- Relationships
- Difference

SUMMARY

When Stephen wakes up, not knowing who he is, he finds himself in a world that appears to have gone mad. He is in a multi-faith monastery inhabited by peculiar monks, and several 'wanderers', apparently completely insane, who have been found in the area. Apart from these few, and a girl who – like Stephen himself – has amnesia, the rest of the human race seems to have vanished. But then who are the savage killers who seem determined to destroy them all? And who are the bizarre 'agents' out to stop them? *Out of Nowhere* is a book in which appearances turn out to be almost always deceptive, set in a world where gender, life and even death are very rarely what they seem.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the novel has been divided into five units. The pace at which the novel is read, however, is entirely up to the teacher. Possible discussion points and language-based activities are listed at the end of

each unit.

UNIT 1

SUMMARY

Stephen wakes up in a monastery somewhere in the northwest of Ireland. The only other inhabitants are four monks, four suffering 'unfortunates' who have been found wandering near the abbey and a young girl, Kirsten, who like Stephen, is suffering from total amnesia. Something very terrible has happened. For four days there's been nothing on any radio or television station, houses and villages are empty and only the animals remain. On a foraging expedition into the town, Stephen, Kirsten and the monastery's 'token Irishman' Brother Philip discover the body of a man murdered by someone who had 'enjoyed the work'. They return with shovels to bury it but the body has disappeared – the grass isn't even crushed where the body had lain. Is it the work of the mysterious agents whose 'business is killing'?

Read pp.9–56.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Judging a book by... Consider the strapline on the front cover which announces that 'the world as you know it no longer exists'. Does this phrase raise certain expectations in the reader? What is your opinion of the cover? Read the blurb on the back and say if the illustration creates an image of 'this strange world'.
- Structure Examine the type fonts used on title/ contents pages. Consider also the subtitle of the book : 'An

Entertainment'. What might the reader expect from these visual/ verbal clues?

- The past is another country When the abbot questions Stephen, he replies that, apart from his name, he doesn't 'know a single thing' about himself (p.13) Does the author convey the initial fear and frustration which might be felt on discovering such a loss of memory? Later, Kirsten, reflecting on the nature of memory, says 'the past is gone anyway...Maybe I'd hate it if I knew about it.' (p.19). If you woke up with amnesia, what clues might help others to discover your past? What might your clothes, watch, wallet, mobile phone say about you?
- What's in a name? When Stephen is told that the other amnesia case is Kirsten Herzenweg, he briefly envies his fellow patient the 'tiny luxury of an extra word'. But on reflection, he questions the value of a name: 'what was a name worth on its own, anyway? It was only a couple of words – it didn't make up a whole person' (p.19). Find the part in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* where the characters discuss the importance of names. Would they agree with Stephen? Is your own name important to you? Would you change it for job/marriage/other reason?
- Descriptive writing The old man – 'a big old stick of a man with a gaunt face and raggy white hair that shone silver in the moonlight' – roars out 'Unshade me! It hurts!' (p.25). What might he mean by these words? Does the detailed physical description invoke sympathy for the old man who is moving 'in crazy circles around the well'?

ACTIVITIES

1. THOUGHT FOR THE DAY Kirsten tells Stephen that Paul isn't 'even a Christian...this isn't a Christian order' (p.28). Philip explains that the order is 'more than just multi-faith – it's made up of all faiths and none' (p.49). Write a meditation for use in such a monastery.

2. THE SHOPLIFTING LIST Kirsten and Philip prepare a list for the 'monastery raiding party'. They 'have to be ready for any eventuality' (p.36). What items might be included on this list? Suggest as many as you can.

3. SACRED SITES Philip explained that the lake near the monastery 'had been famous as a holy place long before Christianity existed.' He said that 'even during the centuries of the monastery's ruin it had been visited for religious and superstitious reasons' and that they still found 'offerings of rags tied to it sometimes' (p.46). Write about any similar well or holy place you may know, describing a visit from the point of view of a believer or an unbeliever. You might include any superstitions or customs associated with this place.

4. PREDICTION The words 'Death on legs...blood smoking in the dust and mothers crying.' (p.41) serve as the reader's introduction to the agents. Later we learn that their 'business was killing' (p.44). What part do you expect these agents to play in the story? Do you think that they have contributed in any way to the situation in which the other characters find themselves?

5. PREDICTION When asked by Stephen where he fits in, Philip hesitates. 'You might say I'm an experiment of Paul's. I-' (p.50). He breaks off and stops the truck, staring fixedly out the window. Write what you think he might have said.

UNIT 2

SUMMARY

This unit opens with an agent's account of the rural Irish landscape through which they travel, admiring the scenery and listening to sad, lonesome music on the cassette player of an abandoned car. The mystery of their presence is heightened as they calmly unshade two crazed young boys and by their reference to an exclusion zone and crystal works in the area. In the deserted town, Philip hands Stephen a small pistol which comes in useful

when, moments later, he is attacked by a youth whose dirty face is 'twisted into a look of utter hatred' although it is Philip's intervention which saves Stephen. Later, as he recuperates, the abbot reminds him of the strange *pulling* sensation he had experienced earlier and suggests the possibility of a double, or doppelganger. Paul asks Stephen to tell Kirsten about these manifestations but he is interrupted by the arrival of a car which has three occupants. One of these in particular causes real terror – the man in the front seat has no head.

Read pp.57–102.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Structure** Much of the first unit is written in straightforward third person narrative which introduces the characters and predates a scenario. This unit begins with a first-person narrative and the action may be said to start. Might the reader expect some elucidation in this part? Does this happen or could the mystery be said to have increased?
- **Life is sweet?** As the agents make their way down the mountain track, they notice a prosperous-looking bungalow with a car parked outside. As they drive, they play a cassette and observe the scenery. Do these glimpses of very ordinary and everyday life make the strange events of the story appear more normal or more strange?
- **Prediction** The agents first mention the exclusion zone, the birthing lake and the crystals on pp. 60–61. Say how you think these places will feature in the story and discuss their possible importance.
- **Decisions** Philip says that Paul doesn't believe 'anything dangerous can happen in a library' (p.67) but earlier Kirsten had said that 'anywhere is dangerous... if it's the wrong street and the wrong time' (p.63). Knowing that there were killer(s) abroad, would you have returned to the safety of the abbey, or would you have continued the search for supplies?
- **Doppelganger** Consider the 'hallucinations' of Stephen and Kirsten. Stephen had thought he was weak as he had been in bed for days (p.32) yet Kirsten had reported 'an odd passing weakness' at the same time. And Stephen had experienced a 'weird

twisting sensation' when he heard Kirsten scream (p.87). Can you explain the peculiar feelings and manifestations? Discuss the relevance of the fetch (ghost or apparition of a living person) or doppelganger.

- **Powerful ideas** Paul says that their order doesn't believe that 'ideas can be enforced by mere physical might any more than they can be suppressed by it' (p.95). Consider the conflict in Northern Ireland/Chechnya/the Balkans/parts of Africa and say if you agree with Philip.

ACTIVITIES

1. CREATIVE WRITING The chapter titles in this unit are graphic/vivid/imaginative and unusual. Pick any one of these titles and write your own creative passage.

2. DOPPELGANGER Stephen is unhappy with the idea that another version of himself may appear somewhere without his knowing about it. Imagine that you meet your doppelganger (duplicate of a living person, from the German 'double-goer') and write your reaction.

3. HONEY OF GENERATION Stephen thinks that Kirsten had 'seemed almost relieved by the loss of her past' (p.98). If you could obliterate your past and invent a new one, how would it differ from the reality? Write a passage outlining your actual past and then describe the past as you would most like it to have been.

4. DEBATE The abbot, choosing his words carefully, says that 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom-fighter... a freedom-fighter is what history calls a terrorist who succeeds' (p.92). Use either phrase as the motion for a class debate.

5. CLIFFHANGERS Unit 2 ends with the cliffhanger sentence 'The man in the front seat had no head' (p.102) and is followed by a complete change of scene in the next chapter. Write your own opening paragraphs for Unit 3.

UNIT 3

SUMMARY

In this unit the reader skips back and takes a look at 'the bigger picture'. On Monday morning it had become clear that strange things were happening in

the northwest corner of Ireland. People had woken up in places where they had not gone to sleep, and none could remember how they'd got to where they were. Someone or something had evicted the people. The police were interested, as were the media, and crowds soon arrived. Government officials, national and international, and other important men sat in conference rooms and discussed the Phenomenon – an enormous wall of insubstantial haze through which animals, but no humans, could be seen moving. The experts talked and talked until midday on Saturday, when they were interrupted by a fat little old woman who apologetically announced that their worries were over and that the 'exclusion zone' would be removed before midnight.

Read pp.104–124.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Structure** In the first page of Chapter 19, the prose mirrors what is actually happening in the room and in the film being watched. Discuss the author's use of cinematic language to heighten the tension and increase the mystery.
- **Structure** This unit is again told in a third person narrative voice, but one completely different from that used to narrate Stephen's story. Is this voice more or less omniscient?
- **Literary devices** This novel is sub-titled 'An Entertainment'. Can you find evidence in this unit to suggest use of humour to break the tension and/or to highlight certain observations about modern society in general?
- **Alternative solutions** General Tubb, the senior US security representative, suggests launching a 'teensie' nuclear bomb to penetrate the barrier (p.120). What do you think the author was trying to convey by offering this solution? What might you have suggested had you been in that room bearing in mind that 'only living or once-living organic material will penetrate the haze' (p.115)?
- **Human behaviour** Do you think the author's treatment of human behaviour in this unit is realistic? Faced with something like the Phenomenon, do you think humanity would act in this fashion?

ACTIVITIES

1. **PREDICTION** The beginning of this unit makes clear that 'someone or something had evicted all the people' from a corner of Ireland. The unit closes with the refusal of the little fat woman to explain the 'situation'. Can you suggest your own explanation for the Phenomenon?
2. **CODE-NAMES** The Phenomenon, code-named Reputation One, is also known by more colloquial terms such as The Ball that's a Wall. Suggest your own names for the translucent bubble.
3. **TV REPORT** 'Almost three million people surrounded the base of the Big Bubble...The number of churches and temples had grown to twenty-eight, the number of illegal bars to a hundred and seventy-five' (p.119). Write the report which you would present, live to camera, describing the scene for your viewers.
4. **REPORTAGE** Those in the underground rooms and bunkers below Government Buildings in Dublin, all men, are described in detail (see p.118). Write a similar, humorous description of any of those three million people camped around the base outside. Say what brought them to this area and what they hope to see.

UNIT 4

SUMMARY

Stephen forces himself out into the courtyard where Philip is standing, gun in hand. The headless man climbs out of the car, the abbot leads him into the monastery and fetches some strong thread with which to reattach the head. Kirsten and Paul go to confront Philip while Stephen helps in the kitchens. Shots ring out and Kirsten explains that Paul had been shot when Philip tried to shoot an image of Stephen. She asks the driver for help, fearing that Paul may die. Initially, he refuses, but, having discussed the matter with his friend and with the Sug, they agree to intervene. As they watch the strange men kneel beside the abbot, Simon tells Stephen something of Philip's past history. Kirsten goes in search of the tormented man and finds him in the chapel. The Sug unexpectedly takes the bullet intended for Stephen.

Read pp.126–178.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Character analysis** The violence which has been building in Philip explodes in this unit, forcing the others to consider their own beliefs and values. Do you think that the characters are surprised by their reactions to this violence?
- **Character development** Many of the events take the Tellene by surprise as when the Sug 'formally requests [their] assistance' (p.159). The Sug again acts in an unexpected manner when he says 'I will do this thing for you, Tellene' (p.172). The agent makes clear his surprise: 'A Sug that I can trust and a human worth trying to save. Surprises never end here...' (p. 178). Trace the developments which lead to such unanticipated behaviour. Do they alter the Tellene's sense of superiority?
- **Virtual reality** The driver asks the abbot for a place where his friend can recuperate and 'his demeanour made the whole situation seem quite unreal...In the real world people don't "recuperate" after being beheaded' (p.129). Explore the extent to which reality is questioned in this book.
- **Name-games** 'Simon is like a rock' (p.137). Consider the significance, if any, of the characters' names.
- **Mind-games** 'Blaming yourself is just another way of making yourself out to be more important than you are' (p.162). Do you agree?
- **Words of wisdom?** Explore what is meant by the following sentence: 'Squeamishness baulks at the bread; prudence eats the cheese' (p.173).

ACTIVITIES

1. **MYTHOLOGY** Contemplating the driver, the thickset man and the headless one, Philip says 'First the fetch and now the dead coach and the headless rider' (p.131). This image may be taken from Irish folklore or superstition. Write a brief explanation of the reference.
2. **METAPHYSICAL DIFFICULTIES** Asked by Kirsten if he knows them, the driver replies 'On the one hand, I've never seen either of you before in my life. But on the other I do know you, yes' (p.135). What do you think he might mean? Write a possible explanation.
3. **HOME IS...** Explaining that the crystals have 'come home', the agent says that the

word *home* has a 'unique aching beauty' (p.159). Write a piece giving your reaction or expand on the Tellene's reaction.

4. A GUN IN ONE HAND... Simon sneers that Philip is in the chapel with his gun in his hand. 'A most obscene combination... beating your breast and asking for forgiveness with a pistol in your hand' (p.166). Can you suggest other contradictory combinations?

5. PROJECTION Stephen says that 'it's not himself that Philip hates now. It's us – it's me.' But Simon says 'that's how self-hate works, you push it out onto someone else' (p.166). Define 'projection' when used as a psychological term. Why might Philip behave as he does?

UNIT 5

SUMMARY

Convinced that an end is in sight, Simon takes Stephen and Kirsten to the kitchen and it is here, as they prepare coffee, that the driver explains the situation. This explanation, that the Tellene and the Sug had chosen to leave this dimension of the universe and live, without bodies, in a place which was not a place, astonishes his listeners. The driver elaborates, saying that they waited in this Noplace in the hope that humans would become civilised or all kill each other, sometimes assuming human form in order to reproduce. As it dawns on Stephen and Kirsten that they are important Tellene, temporarily living on earth to experience the world, they learn that the Sug had planned to

ruin their homecoming. But nothing prepares them for the revelation, given as they make their way to Nowhere, that Stephen is in fact Kirsten's mother and the driver's little sister.

Read pp.179–240.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Explanations** Earlier, Stephen felt that the driver 'sounded like he knew what he was talking about' (p.135). Consider his explanation on pages 185–191, 196–203. Might you, like Simon, have had to ask the driver to 'explain the explanation'?
- **Truth is stranger than...** As the agent stands outside he guesses that his friend is with the others 'explaining things to them' and he wonders 'what lies' he is telling (p.195). Is he saying that the explanation actually is a lie or is he simply opening the possibility that the explanation may be a lie? Discuss the significance of this chapter-ending.
- **Envoi** Stephen asks the driver to 'share the joke' and is stunned by the revelation that he is 'not a boy', 'not exactly' a girl – but Kirsten's mother, the driver's little sister. Stephen teeters on 'the edge of anger' before joining in the helpless laughter. Bearing in mind the sub-title of the book, is this revelation completely unexpected?

- **Ending** The final sentence of this book is unusually long. Read this aloud. Is it an effective sentence with which to conclude this story?

ACTIVITIES

1. CHARACTER ANALYSIS The abbot has known Philip for a long time. Consider his assessment of Philip's character on pp.182/183. Do you agree that 'some people can't take responsibility for their own feelings. They need to find devils outside of themselves to blame their own guilt on'? Write your opinion.

2. PHILOSOPHY Simon refers to 'a man called Plato who had a famous parable' about the true degree to which matter is a shadow (p.213). Plato (427?–347 BC) regarded the rational soul as immortal and argued for the independent reality of Ideas, or Forms. Use a search engine or encyclopaedia to learn more about Plato's ideas. Are these important in this novel?

3. STEREOTYPES The driver says that he had thought they would have guessed that the Sug were all male as 'who else except men could spend ten thousand years *sulking*?' (p.230). List 10 stereotypical behaviours of men/women/mothers/fathers. List any 10 associated with your own age group.

4. SHAKESPEARE Stephen refers to Kirstin's 'brave new world', a reference to Miranda's speech in *The Tempest* and the code-name given to the Bubble is Reputation One, a reference to the Shakespearean description of fame as 'the bubble, reputation'. Many of the themes in *The Tempest* such as unjust exile, reconciliation and revenge also feature in *Out of Nowhere*. Check the material, including text/plot summaries available at www.enotes.com/tempest. List some thematic similarities between *The Tempest* and *Out of Nowhere*.

About the Author, Gerard Whelan

Also by Gerard Whelan



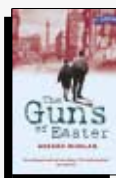
GERARD WHELAN is originally from Enniscorthy, County Wexford, but now lives in Dublin. His books have won several awards, including a Bisto Book of the Year Award (1998), a Bisto Merit Award (1997), and an Eilís Dillon Memorial Award (1997). *Out of Nowhere* was also shortlisted for the Bisto awards 2000.



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