



SISTERS ... NO WAY!

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RATIONALE AND THEMES

This book has been selected for use in the junior classes of secondary schools because it deals with important themes such as:

- Death of a parent
- One-parent families
- Re-marriage of parent
- Coping with step-siblings
- Pregnancy of parent
- Accepting parental fallibility
- First love and relationships
- Conflict
- Peer pressure

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the reader has begun with Cindy's Diary, though, as with the novel itself, the teacher is free to begin with Ashling's diary. Teachers might ask the class to consider both covers, deciding by consensus which diary to read first. The teacher could then use first those units appropriate. The book has been divided into five units, two dealing specifically with each girl's diary: possible discussion points and activities are listed at the end of these units. A fifth unit encourages students to reconsider various key events in the light of the different entries.

SUMMARY

Sisters...no way! is the story, told from their completely different perspectives, of Cindy and Ashling, teenagers who must cope with major family upheavals along with the more usual relationship problems. Written in diary form, the reader follows Cindy as she struggles to come to terms with her father's new

relationship. Not only is he about to marry very soon after her mother's death, but his new partner brings with her two teenage children. Flipping over the book to read Ashling's diary, the reader is forced to adjust their sympathies as they view the same events through the eyes of a very different teenager. This extremely clever book is at once insightful and very funny.

UNIT 1 CINDY'S DIARY

SUMMARY

Cindy's diary opens with a critical assessment of her father's 'unnatural calmness' evident in the weeks after her mother's burial. She wonders if he ever loved her mother in the first place and when he begins 'a secret affair' with her teacher she is resentful and angry. What could her urbane father see in the 'remarkably unintelligent' woman and the 'prim and proper' daughters she meets during a Sunday lunch? His suggestion that Margaret should move in is met with such hostility that Cindy convinces herself that her father has dropped the idea.

Read pp.3–53.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Funeral eulogies In a recent letter to the priests of the Armagh Archdiocese, the Roman Catholic Archbishop Seán Brady referred to funeral eulogies. He said that 'requests by members of the family to speak...should be firmly but

sensitively refused as 'it can cause unnecessarily severe emotional stress to expect a member of the family to address the congregation...'. The full text is available on www.ireland.com (archive search; keywords: Archbishop + Eulogies + Armagh). Would you like a close friend or family member to give a eulogy at your funeral service? Consider the possible effects of this eulogy on all those present at your funeral.

- How others see us Considering Dad's behaviour after the funeral, Cindy describes him as 'a merry widower, released from the burden of domestic responsibility and a clinging, houseproud, under-achieving wife' (p.10). Noting the objects which Cindy herself chose to represent her mother's life at the offertory, re-read pp.3–11 and give your opinion of this assessment.
- All in a name Cindy is much given to using nicknames, see examples pp.6, 7, 31–32 among others. Consider these and say what if anything they tell us about Cindy herself and about those she is describing.
- Courtesy pays Realising why she had felt 'thoroughly left out' at the lunch, Cindy says that 'true courtesy involves making the other person feel less uncomfortable' (p.33). Do you agree? Do you think that she contributed in any way to the tension around the table? What might the others have done to make her feel more at ease?
- When you say nothing at all In Bewley's, Imelda 'sat and listened' but 'didn't say anything' (p.39) and when Cindy threw her 'spectacular tantrum' Dad 'spoke softly' to her and stroked her hair (p.40). Do you think that

Imelda and Dad showed understanding of Cindy's fears and unhappiness? Can you suggest an approach which might better have helped her to come to terms with the new situation? For information on bereavement counselling and advice, contact the Health Promotion Unit of your local Health Board.

- **Prejudices** Cindy is scathing in her depiction of the Magee house as she imagines it will be (p.46). What does this diary-entry tell us about Cindy's character? Read the description of the actual house on p.49 and say in what way, if any, she was inaccurate or unfair.

ACTIVITIES

1. FIRST IMPRESSIONS Cindy is very definite about what constitutes appropriate behaviour. She doesn't understand why her father should be 'tolerant when people say insensitive, senseless things', believing that he 'should be distraught...jumping down into the grave, sobbing and tearing his clothes...' (p.3). What does this first paragraph tell us about Cindy? Write a passage detailing your initial impressions of her character and personality, citing evidence from the first page.

2. THIS IS YOUR LIFE Consider the objects which Cindy chooses to represent her mother's life at the offertory (p.4). List the objects you might choose to represent your life or that of a close friend. Give reasons for your choice.

3. CREATE A STYLE Saying that 'all this talk about personality types and skin tones and seasons and everything is so much codswallop' Cindy states that 'if you need a system, then it isn't a look' (pp.10, 11). Do you agree with her? Write a brief description of the clothes you would wear for preference and say how your personal style might differ if you were to follow the advice of a colour co-ordinator.

4. FAMILY RITUALS Describing their 'traditional Sunday lunch', Cindy mentions family customs such as reading a particular Sunday newspaper and listening to a certain radio programme (p.17). Write a factual or completely fictitious account of your usual Sunday routine.

5. ALCOHOL MISUSE Cindy chooses not to join her friends 'on a drinking binge' as

'that sort of thing is terribly immature' (p.27). Consider Dad's theory that 'if children drink at home with parental approval they are less likely to drink because of peer pressure' (p.32). Do you agree with him? In the light of recent reports on underage drinking, write a recommendation to the Health Education Board on how best to deal with the problem of alcohol misuse in teenagers. Contact the Health Education Officer in your local Health Board for information.

UNIT 2 CINDY'S DIARY

SUMMARY

Cindy is devastated to learn of Margaret's pregnancy. And when her father announces that they intend to get married almost immediately, Cindy tries to adjust to the idea that she must soon share her home with a stepmother, two stepsisters and a new baby. Ignoring the wedding ceremony, she visits instead her mother's grave, arriving home only for the family meal. Life at school is difficult now her father is married to a teacher and home life is tense as the new family learns to cope with the unfamiliar situation. Avoiding Ashling's birthday party, Cindy spends the weekend with Imelda She meets Robbie and has her first real kiss. Days later Robbie visits the house to return the boot she had lost as she raced for the bus and is introduced to the family. But the pleasantries on this occasion mask the tension which erupts in a dreadful fight soon afterwards and Cindy realises that her new family is settling into a normalish sort of family – people who live together and row a lot.

Read pp.53–112.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Literary style** Cindy's writing is colourful and dramatic. Consider the effect of phrases such as 'God's teeth!' (p.3) or 'ignorance is bliss to a blind horse, or whatever' (p.33) and her references to the books of William Trevor and Anita Brookner (p.43) and Seamus Heaney (p.65). Say what if anything such references contribute to the immediacy and appeal of the writing.

- **Tantrums** When Dad announces that Margaret is pregnant, Cindy 'was so stunned that she forgot to throw a tantrum' (p.56). Contrast this behaviour to that when Dad proposed that Margaret and her daughters might move in (p.40). Does the author successfully convey the differing strengths of Cindy's shock on each occasion and, if so, how?
- **School policy** Cindy loosely quotes the school policy on unplanned pregnancy and questions how 'pregnancy is a bad reason to get married if you are sixteen but really the only reason if you are forty' (pp.56–57). Explore the reasons listed for the school's pro-adoption policy and give your opinion.
- **The blind eye** 'Grief embarrasses people. They pretend they don't want to embarrass you by not letting on they've seen your grief, but really it is themselves they don't want to embarrass' (p.65). Analyse the truth or otherwise of this statement.
- **Happy families** The reality of Lisa's family life (pp.77–78) is in stark contrast to Cindy's perceptions of the 'nice, normal family' (p.26). While Lisa makes light of her father's aggressive behaviour towards her mother, domestic violence is a major problem in society. Suggest ways to heighten awareness of this problem. Contact ISPC at www.ispcc.ie or NSPCC at www.nspcc.org.uk for further information.
- **More happy families** On their first journey as a family, Cindy and Ashling 'made long-suffering faces at each other' and 'exchanged meaningful looks' (p.87) though underlying tensions become evident some days later (pp.105–108). Discuss Cindy's assessment that 'that's how families just are...not about playing charades...more about fighting over shoes and who gets to sit on the hump in the back seat' (p.110).

ACTIVITIES

1. WEDDING ETIQUETTE You have been asked to write an article for a wedding magazine outlining a suggested protocol for second marriages which would instruct the participants and guests on the correct procedures to adopt. Remember to cater for the many possible combinations of family members.

2. DIARY ENTRY Cindy dreads the arrival of Margaret into her home and describes these fears on p.61. Imagine how Margaret must feel as she prepares to move into the home of another woman. Write the diary entry Margaret might make as she contemplates her future living arrangements.

3. DIALOGUE ‘Sometimes it’s easier to talk in a car, as you don’t have to look the other person in the face’ (p.74). Write the replies Cindy might have given Margaret had she not been making ‘a major effort at self-control’ or write the dialogue which might take place between a parent and child in similarly fraught circumstances.

4. LINGUISTIC DEVICES The author uses language inventively to describe mundane objects in an original way e.g. ‘the phone bleating’ (p.70), ‘a bus-stop sort of kiss’ (p.82), ‘a kitten in a nightdress’ (p.90), ‘disabledist’ (p.67). List other examples and say why the author might have chosen these words and phrases.

5. CHARACTER ANALYSIS Based on your knowledge of his character to date, write Robbie’s thoughts as he leaves the house on that first Sunday afternoon (pp. 97–103). You might choose to write the story he will tell his friend Ger or you might write his thoughts in diary form.

UNIT 1 ASHLING’S DIARY

SUMMARY

At sixteen, Ashling feels responsible for younger sister Alva who still finds it difficult to accept their father’s new family situation. Believing that her mother needs the companionship of kind and interesting men, she is quite happy when her mother begins seeing Richard, a widower, and encourages Alva to be supportive. She finishes her own relationship with Bob, although her family is too absorbed in its own concerns to notice. That her mother is serious about Richard becomes evident when the two families meet for a Sunday lunch but Alva’s reaction is extremely negative and Ashling finds that she misses Bob, though he is an unnecessary complication at the moment.

Read pp.3–47.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Character analysis** Ashling tells us that she ‘usually didn’t answer’ Dad’s ‘sweet and meaningless’ comments, preferring Mum’s ‘entirely relevant questions’ such as if she wanted jam (p.5). What if anything does this comment tell us about Ashling’s personality?
- **Single-sex education** Dad’s only contribution to the family economy was to pay the school fees and half the mortgage, yet he didn’t ‘agree with single-sex education’ (p.7). Some research has shown that girls perform better academically in single-sex schools. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages, both social and academic, of mixed and single-sex schools.
- **Don’t do as I do...** Ashling says that ‘it’s no joke being an older sister...it’s a terrible responsibility’ (pp.13/4). Debate the issue of personal responsibility and say if you agree that older siblings have a duty to look out for younger family members, or is this the sole responsibility of parents or guardians?
- **Invisibility** Days after her break-up with Bob (p.31) her family remains unaware that the relationship has ended, ‘nobody has noticed the Bob-shaped gap yet’ and Ashling asks ‘How come nobody notices’ (p.38). What might this tell us about Ashling’s relationship with Bob and/or her relationships with those around her?
- **Excess baggage** Within a short time, Ashling and Alva visit the current partners and children of their parents (pp.38–42, 44–45). Does the author successfully convey the confusion and mixed feelings of both girls as they try to adapt? Do you sympathise with Ashling when she decides that ‘Bob’s just a complication I don’t need in my life at the moment?’ (p.47).

ACTIVITIES

1. ANCIENT FESTIVALS: Bob and Ashling celebrate Bealtaine by drinking ‘to each other’s health and fertility’ from a cup of ‘mead’ (p.13). Write a paragraph on how you might celebrate this or any other pagan festival.

2. CHARACTER SKETCH Ashling’s relationship with her mother is not always that of parent and child (p.16) and she sometimes feels obliged to be the ‘grown-up’ (p.24). Draw a personality profile of Ashling showing the complexity of her character.

3. PERCEPTIONS Mrs Merrigan likes to present being babysat as a treat’ (p.31) but how do the children view being babysat? Write the dialogue which might take place between Darren and Tanya as they await the arrival of a ‘visitor’.

4. EFFECTIVE ADVERTISING Mr George’s notice was ‘so self-effacing it almost looked as if it didn’t want to be read’ (p.33). Design a full-page advertisement which would attract the attention of potential employees, ensuring that the job requirements are immediately obvious. Then write the letter of application for the same post.

5. ROLE-PLAY Ashling’s interview with Mr George was rather unusual in that he neither asked her age, nor where she was at school (p.34). Select a panel of interviewers, prepare the questions which they will ask prospective applicants and try to arrive at a class consensus on the most suitable candidate. Remember that it is against the law to discriminate on grounds of gender, race, disability or sexual orientation.

UNIT 2 ASHLING’S DIARY

SUMMARY

When she finds a pregnancy test packet, Ashling is at first convinced that Alva must be pregnant. The truth is even more dreadful: her mother admits that she is pregnant and is to be married soon. Alva, already upset by on-going strains in her father’s new family, is deeply distressed. Ashling finds herself trying to comfort and console both mother and sister, and wishes that she too could share her unhappiness with someone. Settled into Richard’s house after the wedding, both Ashling and Alva try to make the best of the new situation but all their reserves of generosity and tolerance are called for when Cindy introduces her new boyfriend, Robbie, unaware that he was until recently the boyfriend of Ashling.

Ashling regrets her noble gesture when Cindy lashes out at Alva soon afterwards but reflects that this fight may well be an indication that, in their particular fairy tale, they may well live happily.

Read pp.47–107.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Character analysis** When her father arrives at midnight, Ashling is left to take care of Gavin, while her parents talk in the kitchen. Read pp.47–51 and say what we learn about Ashling's character from her reactions to this visit.
- **Crisis** Ashling feels as if her 'whole world had split open, as if nothing was in the right place anymore' when she realises that her mother must be pregnant (p.62). Analyse her reaction from the moment she found the pregnancy test packet and try to decide how you might have reacted in similar circumstances.
- **Upheaval** Moving house is invariably a stressful experience and Ashling's feelings are complicated by the fact that she must soon regard her stepfather's house as her home. Consider all the upheavals in her life and say which most contributed to her belief that she has reached 'the end of (her) childhood' (p.89).
- **Healthy emotions** After the row, Ashling concludes that it's 'hard to see that display of anger...as healthy' (p.105). Say if you believe that 'it's healthier to fight than to let things fester' and give reasons.
- **Happy ever after?** As she reflects that 'it's beginning to feel just a bit like a family', Ashling recounts the conversation in which Alva says she doesn't 'believe in happily ever after any more', adding that she herself believes 'in happily, but not in ever after' (p.107). Describe your reactions to this final diary entry.

ACTIVITIES

1. BOYFRIENDS Ashling tells Alva that 'having a boyfriend is not the most important thing' but Alva disagrees, saying she knows that 'it shouldn't be the most important thing...there's music, and God, and being kind to children...but none of these will do' (p.74). Write a paragraph saying with whom you most agree and why.

2. HUMILIATION When Bob ignores the proffered chair, Ashling 'felt like the only child in the class that hasn't been picked for the football team' (p.86). Write a paragraph describing a time when you may have felt similarly ignored.

3. UNBIRTHDAY PRESENTS Alva buys Ashling a poster to thank her sister for recent support. List occasions when you might buy an unbirthday present, say what you might buy and for whom.

4. SAVING FACE Ashling says that 'not embarrassing (herself) seemed the most important thing in the world' (p.98). Describe a moment when you may have experienced a similar feeling.

5. SACRIFICE 'With a sudden spurt of generosity' Ashling launches Operation Save Cindy's Face (p.101). How else might she have reacted? Write an alternative scenario in which Ashling is not so generous.

UNIT 5

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Structure** While it is not unusual to tell a story from the perspectives of different characters, the presentation of this book is most unusual. Why might the author have chosen to present the story in this way? Is it effective? Can you suggest an alternate presentation of this story?
- **Once upon a time** References are made throughout to a traditional fairytale, see examples pp.59, 82–83, 101 Cindy's diary. Examine this book for correspondences and differences. Can you suggest reasons why the author chose to use this particular fairytale? Is it effective?
- **Worlds apart** Cindy's interpretation of events is markedly different to Ashling's. Re-read the two accounts of their first meeting during Sunday lunch. Is one version more credible than the other? Give reasons.
- **Character analysis** Examine the character of Richard, based on the comments and opinions of both Ashling and Cindy. Ashling thinks he's 'a very sweet man' and Cindy is obviously close to her father, yet neither seems to expect him to be strong or decisive at times of family crisis. Consider his role in the row over the breakfast table. Does this tell us

anything about his character?

- **Families** Cindy says that 'nobody really knows what goes on in other people's families' Do you agree? Give reasons.
- **More families** Both Cindy and Ashling have sub-plot families: Ashling's dad has a new partner Naomi and son Gavin while Lisa's family provides counter-balance for Cindy's family. What might be the purpose of this device? Consider each of these families and say which, if any, will live 'happily ever after.'
- **Marketing** The publishers decided to present this book in an unusual format. The information generally to be found on the back cover of books appears elsewhere in *Sisters*. Do you think the publishers made the correct decision? Do you think that booksellers, considering how best to display the book, would agree? Can you think of an advertising slogan which might attract potential customers to this book? (e.g.: 'two sisters, two stories, two worlds, one book')
- **For better, for worse** Cindy and Ashling are very different personalities. Which of the two do you prefer and why? Which of the two might make a better friend?

Reviews for *Sisters*...no way!

'An intelligent, witty and well-written novel.'

Books Ireland

'It's racy and funny and full of feeling.'

RTÉ Guide

'Ingenious story – a perceptive novel in which the issue of second families is handled sensitively and humorously.'

Irish Times

'An extremely entertaining novel for teenagers...an intelligent, funny and imaginative story.'

Borger News-Herald, USA

WINNER:-

The Bisto Book of the Year Award 1997.