

# UNDER THE HAWTHORN TREE

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## Teaching Guide

By Irene Barber

### RATIONALE AND THEMES

Reading *Under the Hawthorn Tree* with your class should be a worthwhile team-building experience, which will sustain established readers and encourage less enthusiastic and less fluent readers. The guided activities meet curricular needs in a fresh, interesting and varied manner. They are designed to stimulate reading, comprehension, analysis, evaluation, summarisation, imagination and empathy, and to hone oral and written expression. These activities will also develop research skills and encourage personal expression. This novel has been selected for use in the senior cycle of primary schools and in the junior cycle of secondary schools because it deals with important themes such as:

- Childhood
- Journeys
- Dealing with adversity
- Survival
- Family
- Coping with bereavement

*Under the Hawthorn Tree* has achieved international critical acclaim and has won many awards. It has been translated into Irish, French, German, Dutch, Danish, Swedish and Japanese.

### SUMMARY

This story is set in Ireland in the middle of the nineteenth century. The potato crop has failed and famine stalks the land. Three children, Eily, Michael and Peggy O'Driscoll, are left to fend for themselves when they are separated from their parents. In desperation, they set out on a perilous journey in search of their great-aunts, their last resort.

The journey is full of adventure and danger but eventually the children reach their goal.

**APPROACH** This book has been divided into four units, with suggested discussion points and activities listed at the end of each unit. The Channel 4 film, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* is available from The O'Brien Press. This film consists of four episodes, each lasting twenty minutes. These episodes correspond to the four units suggested in this Guide. An episode of the video might be watched after each reading session or after each set of activities. Teachers should be aware that some of the film scenes might be upsetting for any students who have been bereaved.

### UNIT 1 HUNGER

#### SUMMARY

We meet the three main characters, Eily, Michael and Peggy O'Driscoll at a point where famine is becoming widespread due to failure of the potato crop. Their parents, Margaret and John, work a small plot of land but, when the potatoes are destroyed by blight, John goes to seek work on a government relief scheme. We meet Mary Kate, a wise woman with healing powers, but even she cannot save their baby sister, Bridget, who dies of fever and is buried under a hawthorn tree.

Read pp.1–26.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Why was Peggy 'hopping from one

foot to the other with excitement' (p.18) at the prospect of going to the bog?

- How did Eily feel when they buried Bridget? Try to express her feelings as she thought about each member of the family.
- When it was first realised that the potatoes had rotted in the ground, 'the men cursed and the women prayed to God to save them' (p.11). Can you suggest reasons why the reactions of men and women were so different? How might you have reacted?
- 'Time had taught him a lesson... Things were better left unsaid' (p.12). Examine these statements and say if it is always best to leave things unsaid. What might Michael have said to those in authority who were in a position to relieve his suffering and the suffering of others?
- Michael's request for more food had been met 'by a sadness in his father's eyes and his mother bursting into tears' (p.12). Which reaction would have most upset him? Give reasons for your answer.

#### ACTIVITIES

##### 1. DIARY WRITING

Write a journal entry for Eily entitled: 'May, 1846: The day we buried Bridget'.

##### 2. IMAGERY

The hawthorn is an image that is used often in the book. It is referred to on pp.24, 53, 117 and 150.

Read these four pages. Work out together and record the purpose of the hawthorn image at these particular points of the

story.

### 3. HAIKU

A haiku, or hokku, is a three-line poem. The first line has 5 syllables, the second 7 syllables and the third 5 syllables.

The rules for writing this brief poem are strict. Almost always some word is used which refers to a season of the year. One of the most famous writers of haiku was the Japanese poet Basho. Read and discuss the following example of his work:

Scent of plum blossoms

On the misty mountain path

A big rising sun.

Many search engines give information on haiku. You might use a search engine to find more haikus.

Read and discuss the examples given and then write your own haiku entitled:

'For Bridget', or

'The Hawthorn Tree', or

'A Day on the Bog', or

'Famine'.

### 4. FAMINE

Read A Simple History of the Great Famine at the end of the book (pp.151–153) and answer the following questions:

What were the circumstances that contributed to the Famine? List them.

Why did so many people die in the years 1845–1850?

What help was available to the people?

What were the long-term effects of the Famine on Ireland?

### 5. IRELAND IN THE 1840s

Divide the class into small groups and ask each group to research, from the book, aspects of everyday life in Ireland of the 1840s. Give page references to each group.

Housing/Bedding pp.9, 11, 14

Food/Fuel pp.11–13, 15, 16, 19–21

Clothes pp.9, 10, 22

Medicine p.13

Washing/Hygiene pp.12–13

Recreation pp.17, 19

Education p.10

Reports may be given orally and/or presented as written accounts.

## UNIT 2 ON THEIR OWN

### SUMMARY

Mother goes to the village to exchange a dress and shawl for some food. The village is devastated by famine, houses are boarded up, whole families have died or emigrated, people are starving. She learns that the road works are about twenty miles away and hopes that her husband John will be there. An old woman and her son call to the house looking for food but Michael's quick thinking sends them away. Mother returns with food and that night the children forget their troubles as they listen to her stories of old times. Shortly afterwards Mother decides to leave in search of John. Eily now tries to comfort her siblings by telling stories of their mother's youth and of the great-aunts in Castletaggart.

Read pp.27–44.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Why didn't the children show hospitality to the woman and her son?
- What evidence of hardship did Margaret see in the village?
- Was it irresponsible of Mother to go and leave the children alone?
- What do you think happened to the strangers after they gathered up their bundle of rags and set off down the lane?
- The Relief Committees organised road-building and bridge-building schemes, but the wages paid were less than those formerly paid to labourers. Discuss the feelings of the men who worked on these schemes, separated from home and family.
- Mother is angry that 'in a beautiful country like this, people are starving, children hungry' (p.38). Suggest other countries about which the same might be true today and list reasons why people are still dying from starvation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- 'For every £1 which arrives in aid from development agencies and other sources, another £4 is leaving these countries in debt repayments.' (Justin Kilcullen, Trócaire Director). Discuss the efforts of campaigners who are seeking a 'once-off cancellation of the

unpayable debts of the developing world.' The Irish President, Mary McAleese, and U2's Bono have supported the call for prompt action on the issue. Is Jubilee 2000 a practical way to alleviate the suffering? Think of other practical solutions and list these. For further information on debt repayments and the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC), and for Teacher Resource Packs, contact Trócaire Tel. 01 874 3875 or check out the Trócaire website at [www.trocaire.org](http://www.trocaire.org)

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. HOME ALONE

This is the advice Margaret O'Driscoll gave her children before she went to the village:

'Keep the fire going.'

'Get some water in.'

'Stay indoors.'

'Keep the door shut.'

Give the reasons behind each piece of advice.

What advice might your parent/guardian give you if you were to be left alone? Suggest reasons for each piece of advice and list these in chart or other form.

#### 2. TERMS OF ENDEARMENT

Margaret uses many terms of affection when talking to her children, some in the Irish language: a stór (darling) and a ghile (beloved).

What might an adult call you, other than your first name, if they were feeling affectionate towards you? Do you have affectionate names for your special friends?

Display your findings on a chart entitled 'Terms of Endearment'.

#### 3. WORD PORTRAIT

Draw a character sketch of Margaret O'Driscoll, as you imagine her, heading off to the village.

Write a list of those adjectives that you think best describe her so far.

#### 4. THE GOOD OLD DAYS

Read pp.34–35 (as far as 'dancing lesson'). Write a short account of Margaret on her eighth birthday. Try to convey the feeling of warmth, happiness and security.

#### 5. SAYING GOODBYE

Read pp.41–42. Allocate parts for Margaret, Eily, Michael and Peggy.

In groups of four, interpret the leave-taking in a short play or mime.

## UNIT 3 THE JOURNEY

### SUMMARY

The landlord's agent instructs the children to go to the workhouse as they have no means of support. They decide to go to Castletaggart in search of the great-aunts. With the help of Mary Kate, they escape from the workhouse group. They set out on their journey full of excitement. The going is difficult and becomes more so when Michael injures his leg. Peggy is upset when Michael kills a baby rabbit for food. However, later on she eats it with relish.

Read pp.44–77.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- What was the workhouse? Consider Kitty O'Hara's reasons for wanting to go to. Can you think of anything else she might have done instead?
- Re-read pp.61–64 and consider the ways Mary Kate helped the children. What do you think was her greatest contribution to the children's welfare?
- What might you have done in the children's position? Might you have
  - (a) Stayed in the cottage
  - (b) Gone to the workhouse
  - (c) Gone to the great-aunts
  - (d) Other (specify)Try to reach a class consensus on the most appropriate form of action.
- Daily magazines and newspapers were very influential in the mid-1800s and their featured cartoons and editorials caused many English people to believe that the famine was caused by the laziness and bad practices of the Irish farm-labourers. Assess the impact of ill-judged and stereotyped reporting or a disaster on the willingness of the public to contribute to famine relief.
- In the mid-1980s, Bob Geldof and fellow-musicians used modern technology and the media to broadcast Live Aid to audiences world-wide, raising millions of pounds for famine relief in Ethiopia.

Discuss the way in which one person can influence and shape world-opinion using the media.

- The author describes in detail the wildflowers, birds and animals noticed by the children on their journey. List the references and discuss the effects of these descriptions on the atmosphere of the story. Do they serve to point up the abnormal horrors witnessed by the children or do they lighten the atmosphere of the story?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. JOURNEY

Discuss books which tell the story of sea, land or air travel. Consider also physical, emotional, spiritual and imagined journeys in different ages and places. Did the character(s) travel unaccompanied, or in small/large groups?

Write a brief account of your findings.

#### 2. WORKHOUSE: PROS AND CONS

Consider the options facing the children when their mother failed to return.

List three good reasons why the children should have gone to the workhouse and three equally valid reasons why they should not have gone to the workhouse.

Contact the Workhouse Museum in Derry, which tells the history of a workhouse and the Great Famine. Visit <http://www.derrycity.gov.uk/museums/workhouse.asp> for more information.

#### 3. MARY KATE

List at least three medicines and three pieces of advice that Mary Kate gave to the children before they set out on their journey.

#### 4. BALANCED DIET

Mary Kate gave the children a canful of Nanny's milk and they had some cold meal mix (p.68).

Re-read pp.65–77, listing all the foods eaten by the children. Draw a food pyramid and place each item in its correct food group. In which areas did the children's diet lack balance?

#### 5. FAMILY TREE

Draw a family tree showing the relationships between the following people: Nano, Lena, Mary Ellen, Peadar, John, Margaret, Eily, Michael, Peggy and Bridget. You might also choose to draw your own family tree, tracing back at least three generations if possible.

## UNIT 4 THE SEARCH

### SUMMARY

The children are driven by hunger to seek food in the soup kitchen. Later they come upon the body of a dead man and, though horrified, they respect the dead and say a prayer for him. They travel on, always hungry, often despondent and exhausted. Peggy is attacked by dogs and becomes feverish. Michael goes to the workhouse in search of food but is refused. He bleeds a cow and cooks the blood. Peggy recovers and eventually they reach Castletaggart and meet the great-aunts who, though poor themselves, accept them as part of the family. Eily has mixed emotions as she thinks back to the little thatched cottage and happier times.

Read pp.78–150.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- This novel is based on historical fact. Can you find evidence which suggests that the author carefully researched the period? Do you think that the story is realistic? Do you feel that it is possible to learn about historical events through novels alone? Did you learn as much about the Irish Famine from this novel as you might do from a chapter in a history book?
- Was the ending of the story satisfactory? Give reasons.
- Compare the book with the any film or documentary about famine which you may have seen. Which impressed you most and why?
- Many soup kitchens were set up by Protestant groups, some of whom demanded that people should abandon their Roman Catholic faith in return for food. Re-read pp.79–83 and discuss the old man's fears that 'the heathens would try to convert them'.

Were his fears justified? Did Eily make the correct decision when she chose to accept the food on offer?

- 'There was no God, and if there was he was a monster' (p.125). Michael was forced to this conclusion by the scenes he witnessed outside the workhouse. What events might bring him to a similar conclusion today?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. ALTERNATIVE ENDINGS

Had Eily not remembered Mary Kate's medicine, Peggy might well have died of fever.

Write an alternative ending to the story, using the attack of the dogs as your starting point but imagining that the children were without medicine of any kind. Remember to detail the emotions and distress of the children as they watched Peggy suffer and describe their efforts to save her.

Were they successful? How?

### 2. BOOK REVIEW

Read and discuss the extracts from reviews listed on pp.57–58 of The O'Brien Press Reading Programme, Real Books for Primary Schools (ISBN

978-0-86278-609-0, £8.99).

Then write a book review that includes:

- title,
- author,
- publisher,
- ISBN,
- main characters,
- setting,
- plot,
- summary (see p.149), and
- your own opinion of the book.

Give the book a rating out of ten.

### 3. PREDICTION

Project the characters forward in time to the year 1866.

Where are they now, twenty years on?

Eily? Michael? Peggy? Mary Kate? Margaret? John?

Wildflower Girl and Fields of Home are sequels to Under the Hawthorn Tree. Read them and see how accurate your predictions were.

### 4. BOOK COVER

Pretend that you have been asked to design a cover for the latest edition of Under the Hawthorn Tree.

You will need to consider the plot, the

appearance of the characters, any important or symbolic details you want on the cover and an appropriate colour scheme. Do some rough designs, select your best, improve on it and finish cover.

## 5. BOYS' WORK AND GIRLS' WORK?

Before their mother leaves, she gives each of the children a role. This is what she says:

To Eily: 'You must take my place'.


To Michael: 'The man of the house'.

To Peggy: 'My baby'.

Consider each of the following events and decide if the children lived up to their mother's expectations:

- (a) catching and cooking the rabbit
- (b) coping with the attack by the dogs
- (c) dealing with Peggy's fever
- (d) bleeding the cow
- (e) enduring the thunderstorm
- (f) robbing the orchard.

Analyse your findings and display for consideration by the whole class.

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

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR, MARITA CONLON-MCKENNA



MARITA CONLON-MCKENNA lives in Dublin with her husband and four children. She began writing around 1990 and her first published novel was Under the Hawthorn Tree, which shot her to the top of the bestselling lists immediately. She has won several awards, including an International Reading Association Award, a Reading Association of Ireland Award, and a Bisto Book of the Year Award.

### REVIEWS FOR UNDER THE HAWTHORN TREE:

'A well-told story, narrated simply ... it nevertheless manages to convey something of the bewilderment, the horror and the quiet heroism of those plagued years. This story seems to have reached out, triggered the race memory ... so there is a resonance to it that a children's adventure story set in modern times rarely matches.' Education Matters

'... the first book for children to deal with the painful period of the Famine, is above all a story of survival. Self-reliance, resourcefulness and bravery are the strengths the children have to draw on to see them through the horrors that surround and impede them on their pilgrimage to a safer place.' Article by Dr Emer O'Sullivan, Children's Books in Ireland

### ALSO AVAILABLE IN THE SERIES:

Two sequels to Under the Hawthorn Tree by Marita Conlon-McKenna:

The award-winning Wildflower Girl (ISBN 978-0-86278-283-2) is the story of Peggy after she emigrates to America, while in Fields of Home (ISBN 978-0-86278-509-3), we catch up with the fortunes of all three children twenty years after the end of the Famine.

ALSO AVAILABLE: A Channel 4 Schools video of Under the Hawthorn Tree (ISBN 979-1-86215-496-3); and a Study Guide to both the novel and the film by Irene Barber, which is available for free download from [www.obrien.ie](http://www.obrien.ie)

