

THE ISLAND OF GHOSTS



by Eilís Dillon

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When Dara and Brendan fail to return from a sailing trip to the Island of Ghosts, they are presumed drowned by all but their sisters, Barbara and Cáit. The girls are convinced that the eccentric Mr Webb is somehow involved in their disappearance, and eventually they take a boat and set sail, without permission, for the island. When they too are held captive, they fear that they will never be discovered, as the villagers believe the island to be haunted and will never willingly set foot there. The children are forced to rely on their own ingenuity and inner strengths, and learn much about the insecurities of the adult world. But these superstitious fears are eventually overcome and the entire community learns important lessons about the power of human relationships.

LANGUAGE – ENGLISH

- ◆ Vocabulary extension: e.g. scudding, discourse, satirical, husbandry, salved, queasy, inimical, sougning, listless, equinoctial, churlish, ingenuity, assigned, devised, existence.
- ◆ Vocabulary of boats: e.g. halliard, hoisting, mainsheet, boom, abeam, helm, athwart, stern, amidships, tacking, gunwale.
- ◆ Similes: e.g. 'sea was calm and shining, like a polished pewter plate' (p.61); 'blown seagulls squalling above our heads like lost souls' (p.16).
- ◆ Proverbs: e.g. 'can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear' (p.37); 'curiosity killed the cat' (p.40).
- ◆ Prediction: The opening paragraphs speak of leaving home, leaving the island and what it might mean to the writer. What do you think the future holds for the writer?
- ◆ Importance of certain words: Consider the importance of names in the community. Only George Webb, affectionately known as Bardal, and the schoolmaster are referred to by the title 'Mr'. Why might this be so? Consider also what Dara says about names on p.9.
- ◆ Character analysis: Read the profile of Mr Webb (pp. 8, 13) and say what you learn about the personality and local perception of him. What significance, if any, might be attached to the fact that 'a more foreign name couldn't be imagined' than George Webb (p.8) and that his house was 'set back from the road'?
- ◆ Discussion: Dara could see from the way the neighbours looked at him that 'they expected a great deal' from him, and he was naturally afraid that he would never live up to their expectations (p.44). Have you ever felt that people expect more from you than you can deliver? Do the expectations of those close to you encourage or intimidate you? What do you think is expected of you?
- ◆ Discussion: Mr Webb told Dara and Brendan that 'Mathematics, when you pursue the subject far enough, presents the ideal world, a world of order, a world under control.' He also believed that there would be 'peace among all men and nations' when the world 'responded to the challenge of mathematics' (p.18). Give your opinion of this theory.
- ◆ Discussion: On the very first page, Dara describes emigration to Portland, Maine, as 'the natural thing', and later we learn that some of Brendan's cousins live in 'Chicago. New York'

(p.49). Discuss the economic and other factors which caused emigration from Ireland in the 1950s and consider the treatment of economic and other migrants to this country in the 1990s.

◆ Discussion: What did Mr Webb mean when he said that 'all knowledge is useless. In fact it's dangerous' without an 'ordered mind' (p.19)? Read his argument. Do you agree with him?

◆ Debate: 'The pursuit of knowledge needs no reason' (p.72). Organise a class debate.

◆ Creative: As Dara was due to leave for the mainland, several neighbours called in to wish him well (p.43). Consider the presents he received and list those which might be given nowadays to a child leaving home for boarding school. What presents would you most like to receive on leaving home for the first time?

◆ Further reading: In *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)*, the children bring a picnic to the island. Read about Beverley's list of 'requirements' and the items they brought, and compare these with the preparations, or lack of preparations, by Dara and Brendan for a day on their own wandering around their island (pp. 30–31).

◆ More reading: In *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, the hawthorn is an image referred to on pp. 24, 53, 117 and 150. Does the 'single hawthorn tree' which 'pointed spiky arms at the darkening sky' (p.68) have any significance in this story?

◆ Storytelling: In bad weather, 'some devil' got into the men and 'made them dredge up every gloomy story they could remember' (p.14). Try to organise a class visit to a storyteller. (Your local library may be able to put you in touch with local storytellers.) You might also listen to the *Boyne Valley Book and Tape of Irish Legends*, or to the tape/CD of *Boom Chicka Boom*.

◆ Read also: *Brendan the Navigator* by George Otto Simms [See p.18].

LANGUAGE – GAEILGE

◆ Logainmneacha: m.sh. Rosmuc; Inishglass or 'grey island'; (p.9); Inishrone or 'the peninsula of the seal'; Carraroe /An Cheathrú Rua; Barna. Explore placenames in your area.

SESE – GEOGRAPHY

◆ Human environments: learning about and appreciating the peoples and communities who live and work in coastal villages and in contrasting parts of Ireland. Examining the interdependence of neighbours (pp. 43–44,

106) and the roles of the postmaster (pp. 9, 43) and the teacher (p.10).

◆ Human environments: becoming aware of natural features in islands and coastal areas, and their interrelationship with and impact on the lives of the people who live there. Examine how cliffs (pp. 62, 141), rocks and stones (p.66), coves and harbours (pp. 9, 61), turf supplies (p.63), weather (pp. 37, 63), the sea and the soil influence farming and daily life on the island and compare with features in a contrasting locality.

◆ Weather, climate and atmosphere: Collecting weather lore, especially local traditions and knowledge. Study the Beaufort Scale and assess the force of the storm (p.76).

SESE – HISTORY

◆ Life, society, work and culture in the past: life in Ireland since the 1950s. Children might examine homes (pp. 48, 63–65), farming, foods and cooking (pp. 26, 66, 83, 95), technologies used (pp. 68, 86, 96, 154) and education (pp. 10, 24, 29, 85, 91). For further information, see *Ways of Old: Traditional Life in Ireland* by Olive Sharkey. For foods which might have been eaten on the island, see *Traditional Irish Recipes* by George L Thomson.

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◆ Myself: safety and protection. Discussing the implications of taking risks; why Mr Webb took risks (p.121). Realising the importance of making your whereabouts known at all times: Dara and Brendan, and later Cáit and Barbara, made the journey to the island in secret.

◆ Myself and others: my friends and other people. Discussing and appreciating the different aspects of friendship and the difference between close friends and acquaintances. Brendan and Dara had been close friends since early childhood (p.10); the boys thought of Mr Webb as their friend (pp. 53, 71). Also, exploring how the opinions and expectations of others influenced the children (pp. 44, 78, 87, 114).

◆ Myself and others: relating to others. Examining ways in which language can be used to isolate and discriminate against people by discussing the depictions of Mr Webb and Mr Lennon throughout the book. Also, identifying and discussing various responses to conflict situations: how the two boys responded differently to capture (pp. 89, 92–93).