

# A WINTER OF SPIES

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GERARD WHELAN

## Teaching Guide

By Irene Barber

### RATIONALE AND THEMES

Reading *A Winter of Spies* with your students should be a worthwhile team-building experience, which will sustain established readers and encourage less enthusiastic and less able 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 artistic expression. This book can be readily integrated into the English and History programmes in senior classes of primary school, or used in the junior cycle of secondary school, because the main themes of the novel are:

- Childhood memories
- Family relationships
- Conflicts, both personal and political
- Political systems and local politics
- Experiences of death and loss
- Urban life
- Social inequalities

The central character, Sarah Conway, develops and matures through her experiences and she realises that life is not as black-and-white as she had formerly imagined.

### SUMMARY

*A Winter of Spies* is a sequel to *The Guns of Easter*, in which young Dubliner Jimmy Conway witnesses the 1916 Rising at first hand. In this book Jimmy's younger sister, 11-year-old Sarah, gets caught up in the Irish War of Independence. Initially she is thrilled

to be involved, 'doing her bit for Ireland', but her enthusiasm wanes as she gains greater knowledge and understanding of the subterfuge and dirty tricks of war and of their deadly consequences. Eventually she finds that even her family's lives are threatened.

### APPROACH

This book is divided into 5 parts: The Impossible Child, A Secret War, Cogs and Wheels, Big Lies and On the Spot. These parts are treated as separate units for the purpose of this classroom exploration. It may suit to read one chapter a day, or it may be appropriate to read longer sections. Discussion points and activities are listed at the end of each unit.

## UNIT 1

### THE IMPOSSIBLE CHILD

#### SUMMARY

Sarah Conway (11) lives with her mother, father, aunt, brother (Jimmy) and sister (Josie) in Dublin's Northumberland Road. The year is 1920 and the War of Independence is raging. Sarah is thrilled to be asked to smuggle a gun past the English soldiers. Her father, James, is not so pleased when a Volunteer seeks refuge in his house and, to Sarah's disappointment, makes it clear that the safety of the house is not to be threatened in such a way again.

Read pp.9–43.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS:

- How many people lived in the house in Northumberland Road?
- Who were: Tommies, Black and Tans, Auxiliaries, Volunteers?
- Why did James Conway show so little support for the Volunteers?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. FAMILY PORTRAIT

Sketch in words the members of the extended Conway family: parents (James and Lily), children (Jimmy, Josie and Sarah), Uncle Mick and Aunt Ella.

#### 2. OCCUPATIONS/SOURCES OF INCOME

Match the person to their source of income.

Josie	in service in Bray
Ella	messenger boy
Mick	railway job
James	railway porter
Jimmy	separation money
Lily	brewery pension

#### 3. BEGINNINGS

'One of the wheels of the toy baby carriage was bent.' This is the first line of this novel.

What information does it convey?

What kind of story does it lead you to expect?

Does it make you want to read on?

Why is the opening line so important?

Ask the pupils to devise a matching quiz for

their classmates. On one side of their page they list opening lines from five novels the

class might be familiar with. On the other side they list (not in the same order) the titles and authors of these novels. Then they swap and time each other with penalty points for errors.

#### 4. HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Find out all you can about the 'Black and Tans' (see p.20).

Who were they?

Which side did they support?

How did they get their name?

Were they popular? Why?

On the Internet, using search engine Alta Vista, key in 'Black and Tans'.

## UNIT 2 A SECRET WAR

### SUMMARY

Josie tells her parents that Sarah hid a gun for Simon Hughes. This leads to the dramatic revelation that James and Mick are part of a national network of information gatherers for Michael Collins. This explains the imperative for the occupants of the house not to draw attention to themselves. New lodgers arrive next door – Mr Fowles and Rory Moore, two ex-army men. Suspicions are aroused and these two are kept under observation from the Conway house.

Read pp.44–74.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- What exactly did James and Mick do for Michael Collins?
- How do you think Sarah felt when she found out?
- What does Lily think of her family's involvement in the war?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. SCRIPT WRITING

Write the conversation you imagine occurred between Sarah and her father when he discovered she had hidden a gun for Simon Hughes. Begin like this:

James: 'Jimmy came and got me. Is it true, what he says?'

#### 2. ROLE PLAY

Re-read pp.58–59. Act out the scenes beginning with Lily telling Sarah to sit down. Pay particular attention to stage instructions.

You will need six people: James, Lily, Ella, Josie, Jimmy, Sarah.

Props: table and chairs.

#### 3. JOB DESCRIPTION

Write a job description which Michael Collins might have drawn up to describe the job James Conway did for him.

What kind of person would be good for the job? Consider age, gender, personality, occupation, and so on.

#### 4. PERCEPTIONS

'Damn men,' she said. 'And damn honour, I'm sick of it'.

What did Lily mean?

Do you agree with her?

#### 5. AMBITIONS

Sarah has two ambitions: to take a long drive in a fast car and to help free Ireland.

Ask the students to list two ambitions, one funny and one serious, and to write a short account of either.

#### 6. VISUAL ARTS

Illustrate, using a medium of your choice, Simon and Sarah in an upstairs room spying on Mr Fowles as he walked down Ryan's path (see p.68).

## UNIT 3 COGS AND WHEELS

### SUMMARY

Jimmy and Sarah witness the aftermath of the shooting of Detective Reed. They see an acquaintance in the crowd, a Volunteer named Hugh Byrne, and they suspect him to be the killer. Sarah's first sight of real blood quenches her bloodthirsty tendencies. Sarah sees Fowles, the new lodger next door, and it appears that he is a policeman – their fears are confirmed. Following an emergency meeting of the adults, James allows Sarah to accompany him to a meeting with Michael Collins. There follows a

surprise meeting with the lodger they know as Rory Moore. Collins confirms that Moore is a British spy but he may not endanger them as, by a strange coincidence, James saved Moore's life when they were both soldiers in the First World War. Moore insists that he (Moore) is not the threat but that Fowles is the real enemy. He says that Fowles is a nephew of the recently murdered Detective Reed and is wild for revenge. He says it is Fowles's intention to arrest, torture and kill James Conway.

Read pp.75–115.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Do you think that Hugh Byrne killed Detective Reed? Is the evidence sufficient?
- How did Jimmy know that Reed was shot in an artery?
- Would you trust Rory Moore not to inform on Michael Collins?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. WAR POETS

Sarah's view of the war changes as she finds out more about how it works.

Many poets who witnessed at first hand the horrors of the First World War wrote bitterly anti-war poetry.

How many such poems by the following War Poets can the class find, reproduce and memorise?

Siegfried Sassoon	Wilfred Gibson	Eric Bogle	Thomas Kettle	Francis Ledwidge
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#### 2. INTERVIEWING SARAH

Pretend that Sarah is to visit the class tomorrow. Get each pupil to compose a question to ask her. Ask for a volunteer to be Sarah. The volunteer takes the 'hot seat' and answers the questions, in role.

#### 3. NEWSPAPER REPORT

You are a journalist, writing up the day's events for your newspaper. Re-read pp.78–81, then write the questions you would put to an eyewitness. When writing your report, state whether your paper is broadsheet or tabloid.

#### 4. INTERPRETATION

List reasons with close reference to the text

why Moore should or should not be trusted. Pool the class's ideas and display on a pro and anti chart.

## 5. DESIGN

Fill an A4 sheet with connecting cogs and wheels to make an intricate repeated pattern. Try to think of a title that would link your design to Sarah in the book.

## 6. MICHAEL COLLINS

Can you find three other titles for Michael Collins (p.90). Read the description of Michael Collins (p.94) and draw a full-length pencil sketch.

Draw an antique frame around your picture.

Check out the Website on Neil Jordan's film *Michael Collins* at <http://michaelcollins.warnerbros.com/>

This site includes a biography of Michael Collins as well as news, production notes and photos from the film.

## UNIT 4 BIG LIES

### SUMMARY

Sarah is sent home sick from school and on the way encounters Rory Moore. He takes her for a drive in his car and Sarah is thrilled with this novel experience. The thrill of the ride soon evaporates when Moore attempts to extract information about Detective Reed's killer. He says that his information will help save Sarah and her father from his colleague, Fowles. Sarah gives him no information. She goes home to a house in disarray – Mick has been taken in for questioning and is badly beaten up. Neighbours have been raided, Sarah feels confused and fearful.

Read pp.116–145.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Would you have got into Moore's car?
- Can you think of a similar situation nowadays where someone your age might take a big risk because the lure was so great, but the risk would put them in danger?
- 'That's Ireland: a spoiled child demanding what it can't have.' What

did Moore mean? Why did he use that image of the spoiled child?

- What do you think Moore thought of Sarah?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. BEGINNINGS

'These days it seemed trouble was a knock on the door.' Compose your own sentences beginning with: 'These days it seemed that trouble was ...'

Select one and use it to begin a short story of your own composition.

#### 2. DRAMA

Read pp.124–126.

Re-enact the scene of the Spoiled Child in Herbert Park. Allocate parts to four people: Nurse, child, Moore, Sarah. End with Sarah saying, 'I'd give her a good kick up the rear end, is what I'd do.'

#### 3. WRITING TECHNIQUE

Read the last paragraph of Chapter 17 (p.138).

Who are we led to expect at the door? Who, in fact, is there?

Can you think of examples from films when what you expect to happen next, doesn't happen? Do you like that in a film? How do you create that suspense in a story?

Write a paragraph starting with, 'Then she opened the door and looked out'. Try to end on a note of suspense. Get a friend to write the first paragraph of the next chapter.

#### 4. EXCUSES! EXCUSES!

Sarah had often tried to convince her teacher that she was ill in order to get off class. Ask the pupils to divide into groups of four or five and have a private chat about excuses they have found to be effective in getting out of doing something they didn't want to do!

Let them know that you won't be expecting a report back!

#### 5. ILLUSTRATION

Using a medium of your choice, illustrate Sarah's dream (pp.116–117).

## UNIT 5 ON THE SPOT

### SUMMARY

When Mick is picked up, the Conways, fearing a raid, hide in the Breens' basement flat. James and Jimmy stay upstairs. Sure enough, under cover of dark, the British agent Fowles arrives with a dozen Auxiliaries. After some commotion, the troops leave and a few minutes later a single shot rings out. Fearing the worst, the family rushes upstairs – only to find Fowles and James on friendly terms. Fowles leaves and Moore arrives. James tells Moore that he has given Fowles the information he wanted. Moore is excited at having James as an informer. Michael Collins arrives and the plot unfolds. Fowles, unknown to Moore, is one of Michael Collins's men. He was recruited by the British to work with their intelligence department! Now Fowles has set Moore up and led him to his death. James is devastated that a man whose life he saved could betray him so callously. Mick confesses that it was he who killed Ella's husband in the 1916 Rising – though there were mitigating circumstances. Life goes on. The British Intelligence operation in Dublin is wiped out. The Black and Tans open fire on a crowd in Croke Park – the rest is history.

Read pp.146–199.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Who's who and who knew? Make sure everyone understands the plot.
- Why was James Conway so upset at Moore's behaviour?
- Is the story a satisfactory one? What if Fowles was a double agent whose real sympathy lay with the British?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. BOOK REVIEW

Write a review of the novel. Include the following details:

- Title
- Author
- Publishing details, including year and year of reprints
- ISBN
- Summary
- Your opinion of the book – do you feel that you can learn more about a period in history from a novel than you can from a textbook?
- To whom would you recommend it
- Your opinion on the new cover
- Marks out of ten

Read the following reviews and compare and contrast them with your own.

'The picture of a city and a period characterised by duplicity and deception is excellently portrayed, as is Sarah herself, a remarkably feisty creation.'

*The Irish Times*

'This book is brilliant – you can never know what is happening and nothing is what it seems.'

*Child reviewer*

'An exciting adventure story with a spirited heroine. Sarah Conway see participation in the War of Independence as 'glorious'. When she is confronted on Sackville Street with the reality of death, she begins to question the purpose of evil from which good may come and her part in the clockwork of war. A story which will linger in the mind.'

*Children's Books in Ireland*

### 2. ALPHABETICAL ORDER

'They'd no truck with books.'

'Two more police tenders went by.'

'That's Tans or Tommies,' Jimmy said.

'They wore tam-o-shanters.'

Discuss the meaning of the underlined words. Ask the pupils to arrange them alphabetically with the meanings beside them.

Ask the pupils to compose a sentence that contains all the underlined words!

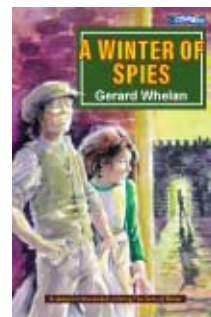
### 3. BOOK COVERS


Compare the covers of the old and the new editions, shown below or at <http://www.obrien.ie>.

In what ways are the covers similar? In what ways are they different?

Which do you prefer and why?

Why do you think the publisher changed the covers?



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

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR, GERARD WHELAN



GERARD WHELAN was born in Enniscorthy, County Wexford. He worked as a library assistant and bookseller in Dublin, and lived and worked in London, Crete and Amsterdam before returning to Dublin to write full-time. *A Winter Of Spies* is the second book, in a series of two, dealing with the Conway family and their struggles during Ireland's fight for independence.

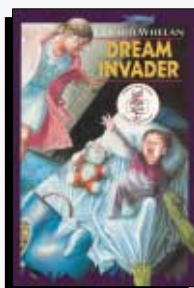
Other books by Gerard Whelan:

*Dream Invader* is the thrilling tale of how plucky Saskia has to fight a malign supernatural force – the Pooshipaw – to save the life of her young cousin, Simon. *Dream*



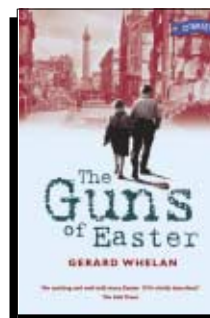
*Invader* was the winner of the 1998 Bisto Book of the Year Award.

*Out of Nowhere* is the gripping story of Stephen and Kirsten, and their terrifying journey into a mysterious parallel universe.



### Another story about Jimmy and Sarah Conway.

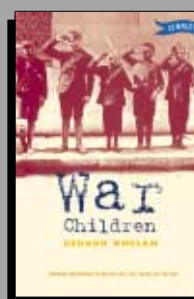
*The Guns of Easter* is the first book about Jimmy and Sarah Conway. His father is fighting the Great



War with the British Army, and his uncle is fighting for Irish independence against the British. Jimmy struggles with the conflict, and with life in a war-torn city.

**Winner: Bisto Merit Award 1997.**

**Winner: Eilís Dillon Memorial Award 1997.**



### Also by Gerard Whelan:

*War Children* contains six stories--one set in Dublin, the others in the countryside--about children who get caught up in the War of Independence and suffer dire consequences.