



The Clubhouse Mystery

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Teaching Guide

By Peter Heaney

RATIONALE & THEMES

Secrets are a speciality for Cass Okara and the other members of the Bubble Street Gang, her best friends Lex and Nicholas.

Embarking on a construction project, they build a secret clubhouse that would be the envy of the whole county, even the whole world were it not for the fact that it is a secret clubhouse and therefore no one except for the gang members must ever know of its existence never mind see or admire it.

However, when telltale crumbs reveal that their secret has been compromised, they are forced to become detectives to uncover the intruders.

Essentially a charming comic story, the themes are pertinent and include

- Friendship
- Peer pressure & control
- Insecurity
- Inter-generational relationships
- Rivalry & jealousy
- Conflict resolution
- Secrets
- Secret keeping
- Fairness
- Taking responsibility
- Loyalty

SUMMARY

Frustrated and at the mercy of unwanted attention from her younger siblings, Cass, unable to find any peace at home, has the brilliant idea of building a secret clubhouse.

Enlisting the co-operation of Lex and Nicholas, the other members of the Bubble Street Gang, and with the encouragement of Lex's granny, they identify a suitable site, source the materials and begin the construction.

Overcoming every challenge, the secret clubhouse takes shape; Cass's enthusiasm directing the efforts of Lex and Nicholas towards completion.

After the secret official opening of the clubhouse the gang barely have time to enjoy the comfort of their retreat before a suspicious trail of crumbs alerts them to the certainty that their secrecy has been breached.

Forced to deploy their detective skills, the gang search for clues that will identify the 'cuckoo' that has been sharing their secret nest.

Several leads are identified and followed unsuccessfully before the truth is revealed and the culprits uncovered in a daring undercover operation.

APPROACH

This is a very enjoyable and entertaining read. Although the plot is comic, it is an engaging read with many opportunities for discussion.

This guide has divided the story into three sections and the activities offer suggestions on developing the themes.

Section 1: The Secret Clubhouse Pages 9-48

SUMMARY

Driven by desperation to find a peaceful place removed from her younger brother and sister, Cass determines to build a secret clubhouse for the Bubble Street Gang, enlisting the help of Lex and Nicholas, the other members of the gang.

Buoyed by Lex's enthusiasm and exasperated with Nicholas's persistent questions, Cass adopts Lex's grandmother's suggestion for their secret location and they set off to conduct a survey.

When an un-co-operative bull bars access to their preferred site, forcing them to find an alternative access across an improvised plank bridge spanning a stream, Cass suggests this will help to deter curious strangers.

White lies and invention are required as the gang tries to assemble the materials they will need for construction.

Cass manages to deflect her mother's curiosity and convince her that the wooden panels she needs are really to build a rabbit hutch for a rabbit that Lex has recently acquired.

When Nicholas suggests that the clubhouse might need a floor, Cass coaxes his reluctant participation in a school musical in order to procure a roll of green foam large enough to cover the clubhouse floor and provide him with a costume for the role of a grassy knoll in the play, leaving him incandescent with humiliation.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- (**Read p 9**): Cass reveals that she has a secret and then proceeds to share it, so how can it still be a secret? What do you think a secret should be and how does it change as you reveal it to others? Are secrets always innocent or safe to keep? When do you think you should not keep a secret?
- (**Read pp 17 & 18**): Cass and her friends are eager for adventure

and want to build a secret clubhouse. Lex's granny suggests a site that is isolated and may even be dangerous. Is she being sensible by encouraging them to play in a place that might be dangerous? What should she have said to them?

- **(Read p19):** The children are afraid of the empty house, believing it to be haunted. Could the house be haunted or are they simply afraid of the dark? Is there always a sensible explanation for weird events if you look carefully for them?
- **(Read p46):** Cass tells Mrs Bulger, the drama teacher a deliberate lie. Is it right for her to fool the teacher in this way? Should you ever lie to someone in order to get your own way? How would you feel if you discovered that someone had been lying to you?

ACTIVITIES

1. Our Sister Cass (Read p12)

Cass thinks that her younger brother and sister are very annoying. Do Pippi and Ade feel the same way about her?

If they were able to describe their feelings about Cass, what might they say?

Imagine they are having a secret conversation about her. What do you think they will say? Create the conversation you think they might have.

2. Beware of the Bull (Read pp24-28)

Cass is desperate to stop Nicholas from asking so many questions so she sets him the task of creating a poster to warn everyone about the bull to make sure no one discovers the clubhouse.

Help him to create the poster and make it as frightening as possible.

3. The Clubhouse (Read p32)

The gang decides that it would be a good idea to draw a map to show the location of their clubhouse.

Since it is a secret clubhouse, they will have to disguise its position on the map and use secret symbols to show the path to find it.

Can you help them to draw the map?

4. Mum's Face Says (Read p36)

Cass has learned to read her mum's facial expression and can tell from it whether or not her mum will believe what she is saying.

Think about the facial expression that your parents use when they are cross or pleased with you, or not really believing what you are telling them.

Describe the expressions in the same way that Cass does. You can add illustrations to your descriptions.

5. The Clubhouse (Read p40)

Cass has created a poster to advertise the clubhouse.

Unfortunately, some of the claims she makes in her description are not completely accurate and give a false impression.

Nicholas thinks this is misleading and decides to write his own description using only the facts and avoiding exaggerated claims.

Can you help him to write his description?

6. The Invention (Read pp42-43)

Cass admires Nicholas's skill as an inventor.

Most useful inventions need to be registered at the patent office that check no one has thought of this idea before and prevent others from stealing it.

If you had the opportunity to invent something useful what would it be?

Create a description of your idea for the patent office with illustrations and examples of how the invention will be useful and who might want to use it.

Section 2: The Snots Pages 49-13

SUMMARY

The inaugural clubhouse meeting of the Bubble Street Gang discusses the supply of emergency rations for midnight feasts, while Nicholas, cross at the humiliation of starring as grass in his acting role, fumes silently in a corner.

Lex's granny is a willing accomplice, leading the raid on Lex's mum's treat cupboard to provision the clubhouse rations. However when both Lex's and Cass's mums return unexpectedly the treats are hidden quickly in the washing machine and her granny casually forces them to improvise evidence to support a 'white lie' that Cass has already spun to her mum about a rabbit they are supposed to be taking care of.

In class her teacher Mr Freebs has noticed that Cass and Nathan Wall are not getting on and decides to seat them together in the hope that they will develop a friendship.

Cass knows that they are incompatible and Nathan's needling unfortunately irritates her to the point where she reveals the existence of their clubhouse just to annoy him.

Her revelation to Nathan has contravened Rule 2 of their gang code and at the next meeting she finds herself sitting in the naughty corner watching while Lex and Nicholas scoff the biscuits.

When her detention finishes, Cass discovers an unexplained disappearance from the biscuit tin.

Misgivings are confirmed as they arrive for the next meeting, finding the clubhouse door ajar and crumbs scattered on the table. They realize that intruders have discovered their secret clubhouse.

Suspicious fall on Nathan and his gang, The Snots. Confrontation! When accusation reveals nothing, the Bubble Street Gang resorts to covert surveillance to catch the culprits.

With Nathan distracted, Cass searches his schoolbag, where she finds a torn map fragment. Convinced the map will reveal the location of their clubhouse they stalk the other Snots, Sasha and Jim, until they retrieve the rest of the fragments to complete the map.

The map complete, they learn that the Snots have their own secret, a 'club box' rather than a clubhouse and realize that they are still no closer to finding the culprits.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **(Read pp49-52):** Nicholas resents having to play the part of grass in the musical, however he is still prepared to do as Cass asks him. Is this a healthy attitude? Is it OK to allow someone to force you to do something you really don't want to do? Is Cass being a friend to Nicholas? How can he learn to say **NO** to her?
- **(Read pp64-65):** Their teacher believes that everyone should like each other. Is he being realistic? Is it OK to dislike some people?

Should you try to like everyone? How should you behave towards people that you don't really like?

- **(Read pp69):** Nathan has been boasting to Cass about his holiday plans. Why do you think that some people need to boast about things that they have? How do you feel when someone is annoying you by boasting? What can you do to deal with someone whose boasting is annoying you?
- **(Read pp89, 97&98):** Cass is determined to find evidence that the Snots have discovered their clubhouse so she searches Nathan's bag and persuades Lex and Nicholas to do the same with Sasha's and Jim's bags. Is it acceptable to search someone else's bag secretly? How would you feel if someone searched your belongings? Do people have the right to always keep their belongings private?

ACTIVITIES

1. Not Quite Right (Read pp59-61)

When she leaves, Lex's granny takes the evidence of the 'wombat / rabbit' with her. Lex's mum has a nagging doubt about the episode and rings Cass's mum to ask if she noticed anything suspicious.

During their conversation, they spot 3 things that they thought were very suspicious.

In small groups can you identify what these were and explain why they thought they were suspicious?

2. Cass (Read p64)

Mr. Freebs, their teacher has asked Cass and Nathan to each make a list of 5 things that they like about each other.

Cass's list is not very complimentary and when Nathan reads it he decides to create a similar list for her.

Can you help him to create his list?

3. Observation & Deduction (Read pp86-87)

Cass believes that she has the skills to make an excellent detective.

She is able to observe everyday details that other people might not notice.

Now it's your turn to try your own detective skills.

Make a list of 5 details you observed today that you think no one else has noticed and explain what you learned from your observations.

4. The Treasure Chest (Read p106)

Jim's secret treasure store has been discovered and the contents revealed.

If you had a secret treasure store, describe 5 items that you would definitely have in it and explain why they are important to you.

You can include illustrations as well.

5. Jealousy (Read p70)

When Cass reveals the existence of the Bubble Street Gang's secret clubhouse, Nathan is jealous and his feelings are shown on his face.

Create an illustration that could be added to the story at this point showing his expressions.

6. Seating Plans (Read pp65-66)

Much to Cass's annoyance, her teacher Mr. Freebs has insisted that she must sit beside Nathan for the whole term.

Desperate, she must invent a cunning plan to persuade him to separate them immediately.

Can you help her to create an ingenious trick that will persuade him to separate them?

7. The Terrible Flaw (Read p63)

Their teacher Mr. Freebs is almost the 'Perfect Teacher'. He gives gold stars and uses fun cartoons, however he does have one terrible flaw.

He insists that everyone must be sociable. And uses some annoying ploys to make sure that they are.

In small groups use your imagination to create a profile of your own 'almost perfect' teacher and explain how the effect of their one flaw can be incredibly annoying.

Section 3: The Culprits Pages 114-156

SUMMARY

The mystery of the clubhouse intruders remains unsolved. Cass finds what she believes are cat hairs and suspicion falls on Mr Dixon's cat, Bless.

Obtaining a specimen of the cat's fur to check turns into a scratching and screaming pantomime before Lex secures the sample that proves Bless innocent.

Cass, undeterred, is convinced the hairs must be canine and now is certain the culprit must be Bianca.

Explaining to Nicholas that Bianca's dog-walking job made her the obvious person who would cast stray dog hairs, they set off to gather the incriminating evidence they need to accuse her.

Distracted by Nicholas, Bianca's dog-walking poise is shattered when Cass's clumsy attempt to gather dog hairs from her coat causes her to yelp in surprise, disturbing the delicate control she has on the dogs, who become agitated and dance around her until she collapses in a tangle of leads.

The 'evidence' from her coat clears Bianca and the Bubble Street Gang have no other alternative but to 'stake out' the clubhouse themselves in the hope of catching the culprits red-handed.

Arriving at the clubhouse early, voices confirm that the intruders are already there. Nicholas's shout disturbs them and a pandemonium of grannies and granddads spill from the clubhouse fleeing across the field.

Clearing up the untidy mess they left behind, Cass notices that one of the grannies is still hiding in the clubhouse and pulls back a curtain to reveal Lex's granny who apologises, explaining that she and some friends had been using it as a social club.

Initially very cross at the intrusion, Cass and the gang relent and offer to build the grandparents a suitable clubhouse where they can all be neighbours.

The new clubhouse has been built and the excitement has subsided when the Bubble Street Gang find a mysterious envelope pushed under their door announcing their next adventure. Immediately they set off to chase the clues they will need to solve it.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **(Read p115):** Cass finds it impossible in front of Lex or Nicholas to admit that she is wrong. She is certain that everything she says is true and pretends to know everything. Is this a flaw in her character? What does this tell you about her? If you were her friend, would you trust her? Why do Lex and Nicholas accept what she says without question?
- **(Read pp122-123):** Cass is trying to manipulate Lex to collect the hair sample and is so obvious that even Nicholas realizes what she is doing. Why does Cass behave this way towards Lex? Why does Lex allow herself to be controlled? How should friends behave towards each other?
- **(Read p131):** Both Nicholas and Cass watch Bianca. Nicholas thinks she looks like a film star while Cass sees her as an idiot. Why do they have different opinions of her and whose is the more accurate? Which image do you think Bianca wants people to see?
- **(Read pp143-144):** When Lex's granny suggests that they share the clubhouse Cass becomes cross and refuses. Is she right to refuse? What would they have in common to make this a suitable arrangement? What differences and difficulties would they discover if they were to share?

ACTIVITIES

1. Cat's Eyes (Read pp119-120)

As Lex and Nicholas approach, Bless watches them carefully. He doesn't like children at all and particularly dislikes children who approach him too closely.

As he watches, he tries to understand what their purpose is and talks to himself describing what he sees. His description of the children is not very complimentary.

Create the conversation you think Bless might have had with himself.

2. Horrible Children (Read p125)

Mr. Dixon is in a rage because he thought Nicholas and Lex were annoying his cat.



CASS AND THE BUBBLE STREET GANG

Cass and her best friends, Lex and Nicholas, are the Bubble Street Gang! They investigate crimes, solve mysteries and have brilliant adventures. They've even got their own secret clubhouse.

When Cass and the gang flee he marches into his house and rings the Gardaí on the phone.

He rants to them for exactly 30 seconds, pacing his kitchen and still waving his golf club.

Recreate and perform the conversation he had with the Gardaí.

3. Small Talk (Read p132)

Lex is worried because she thinks that she is not very good at starting conversations with people.

Can you help her? Work in small groups to make a list of 5 'cool' things to say that would begin an interesting conversation with someone.

4. Dogalogue (Read p134)

When Bianca screamed, the larger dogs joined in with the uproar of the smaller dogs creating a chaos of yelping, knocking her over in a tangle of leads.

Of course, the only sound Bianca heard was the excited barking of the dogs, however for the dogs, each bark was either a shrill question or an excited reply in the cacophony of shouting and arguing.

Translate what the dogs were saying into English and how they interrupted and talked over each other. Could you perform it?

5. My Space (Read p142)

The gang is upset that Lex's granny and her friends have invaded their clubhouse because it was their own space.

Describe and illustrate what your special space is like and explain how you feel when you spend time there.

6. Awesome (Read p155)

The Bubble Street Gang is about to take on their next adventure.

Can you offer suggestions to the author for a really interesting but unusual adventure for the gang?

Write your suggestions in less than 50 words and send them to the author via the O'Brien Press.



ERIKA MCGANN is from Drogheda and lives in Dublin in her own secret clubhouse (which is actually an apartment). She spends her time solving mysteries and having brilliant adventures (well, she writes about them anyway). She likes cold weather (because it's an excuse to drink hot chocolate by the gallon) and cheesy jokes (because cheesy jokes are always funny, even when they're not funny).

Erika regularly attends festivals, as well as visiting bookshops and schools, to talk about her books.

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