



The Sound of Freedom

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Teaching Guide

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RATIONALE AND THEMES

This guide has been designed to complement a class reading of the text in a way that brings the text alive whilst also enriching the students' critical abilities. The activities aim to inspire young readers by encouraging them to question the characters' motivations and the overall themes. The guide aims to develop empathy skills, stimulate discussion and encourage readers to dissect literary techniques in fresh and engaging ways. There are also activities included that are designed to hone communication, presentation and literacy skills. This novel deals with some very interesting ideas about the Irish War of Independence. Its key themes include:

- Loyalty and trust
- Courage
- Prejudice and discrimination
- Family
- Equality
- History and legacy.

SUMMARY

Set in rural Westmeath during the War of Independence, the novel tells the story of 13-year-old Colm Conneely. Colm is desperate to join his father in the Irish Volunteers, and his life is dominated by the secretive goings-on of the local people determined to disrupt the British Forces. Their lives are full of danger and deceit as the RIC increase patrols in an attempt to clamp down on Irish Volunteer activity.

Colm is determined to show his worth as someone valuable to the cause, taking risks to show his bravery. However, he grows more and more frustrated when his father refuses to allow him to play a more active role – especially when his enemy, the local bully Terence McKay, is seen as the 'golden boy' of the local volunteers.

Like his friend Peter, Colm has ambitions that lie away from Ireland; he dreams of going to America. When an American film producer arrives in the area looking for talented musicians, Colm is determined to impress, but his efforts are spoiled by the local RIC as they take him in to the barracks when he finds himself in the wrong place with the wrong company.

Throughout the novel, a few new faces appear in the local area, with one of them bringing some stories that turn Colm's world upside down and force him to examine his entire life, bringing anger and bitterness into his home. Will things resolve themselves in time for Colm to follow his dream?

APPROACH

This is a very enjoyable and entertaining read. Although the plot refers to a number of difficult and challenging historical events, it is an engaging read with many opportunities for discussion. This guide has divided the story into four sections and the activities offer suggestions on developing the themes.

Section 1 Unwelcome Visitors pages 7–64

SUMMARY

The story begins with secrets as Colm's neighbours are keeping out of the way of an RIC patrol – he ignores them and goes home, where his Dad is being interrogated. As he hides outside his home listening to his father's rough treatment at the hands of the local police force, Colm shows bravery by stealing from the army. He is determined to follow his father's example and become a Volunteer but his Dad has other ideas. The

letter proves useful, but the RIC are closing in on his Dad. A female visitor from the North catches Colm's eye and an encounter in the post office shows the tensions within the local community, especially where the Irish language is concerned. Colm's main passion is the fiddle but his music lesson is disrupted by his enemy, Terence McKay, an unpleasant young man who lords it over Colm. Much to Colm's annoyance, none of the adults seem to notice this. Luckily his friend Peter shares his feelings about Terence; Peter also has ambitions far beyond Ireland. The cause gets in the way of Colm's growing friendship with Alice, the girl from Belfast, as he and his Nan make sacrifices to keep his Dad safe from the tightening net of the authorities.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- (read pages 8–13) What impression is created of the police in this episode? Why, do you think, do they destroy houses on their raids? Do you think Colm should have stayed with Mrs Friary? Why?
- (read pages 14–16) What do you think is going through Colm's head when he hears what is happening to his father? What would you think if you heard your parents being treated like that? Why are the police doing it? Are you surprised that the policeman is Irish? Why/why not?
- (read page 17) Colm decides to hide in the bushes to keep an eye on what is happening. Is this a good idea? Why, do you think, has he not just left? Would you hang around to watch or would you be gone?
- (read page 20) Colm's father says that 'English is good enough for dogs' and earlier he says, 'Bad cess to you' in Irish. Why, do you think, is he deliberately speaking Irish in this way? How is it an act of rebellion? Why is language so important to national identity?

Section 2

All the Fun of the Fair

Pages 65–127

SUMMARY

The authorities are closing in and Colm's Dad has to go to a safe house, entrusting Colm with a very special mission. However, Alice is disappointed by the news Colm brings her. Colm and his family have unwelcome visitors in the night. Colm gets good news about an opportunity in the USA, but his family aren't pleased and something is not quite right about the stories he has been told about his aunt. The annual Collinstown Sports event comes around but Colm's enjoyment is hampered by having to share the boat duties with his enemy Terence McKay, especially since he had hoped to prove his worth by running the boat trips on his own. He cheers up when he's given a special mission, even though it's not as exciting as he would have hoped.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- (Read pages 69–70). Things get very tense when the young people are nearly caught. But are they naïve to trust the strange woman who tries to help them? What would you have done in this situation?
- (Read page 76) How, do you think, does Colm feel when he sees the news on the screen before the film starts? Why do we not have news broadcasts before films nowadays? Why, do you think, was it so important at the time?
- (Read pages 79–80) Why does Colm's Nan pretend that she can't speak English to the RIC? Who has the power here? Why do you think this?
- (Read page 89) Having told his father about the trip to America, Colm finds him crying. Why, do you think, is he upset? Does Colm do the right thing by not going in to comfort him? What would you have done in this situation? Why?
- (Read page 101) What should Colm say to his Dad about Terence?
- (Read page 118) When a black cat crosses, someone says, 'There's our good luck for today.' What other superstitions do you know? Why, do you think, do people believe in superstitions?
- (Read pages 124–127) Who is the man in the room? What is wrong with him? Do you feel sympathy for him? Why?

- (read page 24) 'It wasn't enough to speak Irish and play the fiddle anymore; now I wanted to learn fighting skills.' What do you think about this? Is it sensible for a 13-year-old boy? What advice would you give to Colm? Do you think that his father is right not to let him become more involved? Why?
- (read page 27) Colm's father calls him, saying, 'The tea is wet.' What does this mean? Can you think of any other sayings? Where have you learned them? Why do we have sayings specific to certain areas? Why do you think they are replaced with other sayings over time?
- (read page 30) Colm is a big fan of Irish traditional music and lists his favourite tunes. Why was Irish music so popular at the time? Have you any favourite Irish folk songs? Why do you like them? Why, do you think, are folk songs so popular in Ireland?
- (read page 46) Their music lesson is interrupted by an older boy. What are our first impressions of the newcomer? What are Colm's thoughts? How does he prejudice us against him? ('making sure we saw his fair hair slicked back with hair oil.')
- (read page 48) What do you think about the way they are using children to get their messages around? Is this sensible or putting young people's lives in danger?
- (Read page 61) When Colm meets Alice and talks to her, he says that he 'wanted her to enjoy the importance of her brother's name' – what does he mean by this? Why is this such an important lesson for conversation skills?
- (Read page 62) Alice is from the North and declares that 'they'll hardly be looking to speak Ulster Irish'. Why, do you think, would this be? Do people consider Ulster Irish as 'lesser'? Why should this be challenged?

ACTIVITIES

1. FILM OPENING

Chapter One is really dramatic and full of tension. Imagine it as the opening to a film and create either a storyboard or a piece of drama for the opening chapter. Write an accompanying short analysis of why it's so tense and therefore successful as an opening to the story.

2. GLOSSARY

In this first section, there are many references used, such as: de Valera, RIC, Sinn Féin. Who are they? Draw up a fact sheet that gives the name of the person or group and the explanation of who they are, leaving room for adding more as the story continues. Make sure that you include references to groups or individuals such as IRB, Gaelic League, etc.

3. SIMILES

Colm explains on page 26 that the sheet of paper 'drew me like a pickpocket to a purse'. Can you think of other similes to show how he was driven to go and investigate the paper? Write out three and decide on the best one. Why have you chosen this one? Write an explanation of what you are trying to say with your choice of comparison.

4. SONG-WRITING

Colm is a huge fan of Irish music and lists a number of famous and not-so-famous songs. In groups of three or four, write your own Irish folk song – one chorus and two verses. Think about the common themes, such as missing Ireland, people being separated, individuals trying to overcome suffering.

5. WHO'S THAT GIRL?

What are our impressions of Alice? How is she dressed? Why does she choose to write the address in Irish? What does this tell us about her? Choose four adjectives to describe her personality and select passages from the text that support your opinion. Write an analysis of Alice, using the adjectives and quotes you have selected to explain your thoughts.

6. LETTER-WRITING

Imagine you are Mrs Dobbs. Write a letter to your sister describing what went on in the post office with Alice first, then with Colm. What are you going to say about Sinn Féin and the use of the Irish language? What are your views on Mrs Friary?

7. SKY-GAZING

On page 50, the sky is described as being 'filled with mares' tails'. What does this mean? What is the narrator saying about the way the sky looks? In what other ways can you describe the sky? Watch the sky for a week or so at roughly the same time and make a note of what it looks like every night. Can you describe it using at least three different metaphors?

ACTIVITIES

1. CODED MESSAGE

Many people are taking a lot of risks to move weapons around the country, as we can see on pages 65–66. Create a secret code and write a coded message for the finding of the handguns. Can your partner crack the code to find out the message?

2. QUESTIONING DRAMA

What is going on between Kilcoyne and Colm's Nan on page 81? In small groups, write a script of this scene, making sure to pay special attention to the stage directions. Remember how stubborn Colm's Nan is. Practise your script to perform in front of the class.

3. ADVERTISING THE FAIR

The Collinstown Sports Day is one of the highlights of the year. Create either a poster or a short radio advert for the event, using persuasive language to make visitors attend.

4. DIARY ENTRY

On page 98, Colm's Nan gets the news that Colm is keen to go to America. How do you think she feels about this? Imagine you are his Nan. Write a diary entry exploring your thoughts and feelings about your grandson and your hopes and fears for his future.

5. HANNA SHEEHY-SKEFFINGTON

There is great excitement at the prospect of such a figure coming to give a speech. What do you know about this woman? Research her background and either create a fact sheet with details about her life, her politics and her achievements or write the speech she might have given, promoting an independent Ireland.

6. IMAGERY

On page 114, Colm complains that 'running through the crowd was like trying to sieve flour with a saucepan.' What is meant by this simile? What exactly is the writer trying to say? Can you say the same thing using a different simile? Create a simile and illustrate it. Can your partner understand why you've chosen this comparison?

7. POLICE REPORT

Imagine that you are Miss Fernsby. What happened in your house? Write a statement to the police on what happened. Try to be as factual as possible.

Section 3 Failed Ambitions Pages 128–180

SUMMARY

Colm has to go to Kells for his audition for the job in America, but the RIC have other ideas. They force him to accompany them to the station. Having missed his audition, Colm is devastated – but life goes on and there are more stirrings in the local community with some big speakers lined up to talk. A public meeting goes badly and Colm finds himself under suspicion, thanks to his arch enemy, Terence McKay. Luckily Colm gets another opportunity to shine for the American film producer. There's adventure in the air in a secret meeting in the area with a very special guest, but things are ruined for Colm once he has a bitter argument with his father.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- (Read pages 129–130) Why did Colm not tell the truth about the soldier? What would you have done? Do you think he did the right thing?
- (Read page 139) When Colm misses his big chance, he is very disappointed. Do you think that the sympathy of Joe Kennedy, Tom Cooke and Colm's Dad is enough? What would you have done or said if you were Colm? Why, do you think, did he behave as he did?
- (Read page 147) Why were the police so determined not to let people speak to the crowds?
- (Read pages 149–150) Do you think that Colm did the right thing in giving the soldier his whistle and playing along with his delusions? What would you have done in his situation? What do you know about 'shell-shock'?
- (Read page 161) When Tom says, 'Isn't the "cause" in our blood?' what does he mean? Do you agree with him? Do you think that this puts unnecessary pressure on them to join up too young? Why/why not?
- (Read page 167) Colm tries to tell his father the truth about the soldier and the whistle but as usual his Dad is needed elsewhere. Is this fair on Colm? Should Colm insist on having his Dad's time and attention? Why do you think this?
- (Read pages 173–176) Colm's Dad confronts him about the episode with the

soldier. Do you think that Terence was trying to make Colm look bad? Why, do you think, does Colm's Dad trust Terence McKay? If you were Colm, what would you say to get your father to listen?

- (Read page 179) Alice is keen to join Colm in America, but he's not sure. What should he do? Do you think that he should tell the Americans about Alice? Is he right to be worried or is he being cruel-hearted? What would you do? Why?

ACTIVITIES

1. SPEECH

On page 134, Colm is frustrated by being trapped in the RIC station. Imagine that you are Colm. Write a persuasive speech on why the police should let you go to the audition. Remember your audience – keep it polite and avoid too much emphasis on Irish traditions. Use as many persuasive techniques as you can.

2. 'TROUBLE AT LOCAL RALLY'

Re-read pages 142–148 Write a newspaper report of the event and include soundbites from locals who attended it. Challenge: Choose to write from a specific bias – in support of or against the participants. How will this change the way in which the story is written?

3. ACTION, ACTION!

On pages 155–157, there is talk of how to get the message out to people about the arrangements for the new rally. Create an action report of how they are going to get the word out. Think about all the ways in which things are kept secret – will you use decoys, secret messages, or something else?

4. TELLING TALES

As Colm lies listening, Terence tells Colm's Dad what he saw, but is it a truthful telling? Write an account from Colm's point of view, describing what he did and why. Make sure that you try to defend your reasoning.

5. NEWS REPORT

Imagine that you are Miss Malone presenting a news report of the events on page 167–171. Is she sympathetic to the people attending? Write a short script and present it to the rest of the class, including re-enactments and interviews with local people.

6. CHARACTER STUDY

What sort of person is Terence McKay? Write an analysis of his personality, using extracts from the book so far. Bear in mind what we learn about him from conversations between Peter and Colm, how he behaves with Colm and how he behaves with adults.

Section 4 Uncovered Secrets Pages 181 to end

SUMMARY

Despite her best efforts, Alice gets disappointing news. At home, Colm has a surprise visitor, and some family secrets are revealed that send his life spinning, leaving him questioning whether he can ever trust his family again. His mind full of questions, he makes some rash decisions, but friendships and family ties help to level him out as he prepares for a great adventure.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- (Read page 183) Why, do you think, does Colm not tell Peter about the whistle and where it really went? What, do you think, would Peter say?
- (Read page 190) How is there tension between Sheila and Colm's Nan? What do you think is going on? How does the writer create this tension?
- (Read page 193) Why, do you think, does Colm keep looking in people's pockets and reading things that are not meant for him? Is this a good idea? What would his family say? What advice would you give him?
- (Read page 204) Through his Aunt Sheila, Colm finds out the truth about his mother. What do you think of Nan's reaction? Has this changed your view of her? Why?
- (Read page 205) Do you believe Colm's 'Dad' that he did it because he 'meant well'? Does the fact that he is Colm's uncle really change anything? What would you say to Colm at this point?
- (Read page 209) What do you think about Colm's reaction to the fact that his father was an English soldier? Do you think it's

fair that this is his main concern? How do you think the others in the village would react if they knew? Was his family right to keep it secret?

- (Read page 210) Colm's Nan is very upset and his Dad asks him to help: 'Could you say something to comfort her?' Do you think that Colm is being cruel? What should he say?
- (Read page 217) Colm's mind is full of questions. What do you think he should do? Should he stay with his family and sort things out or follow his dream? Why do you think this?
- (Read page 229) By going to the police station, Seán is likely to be imprisoned – does it change your view of him that he sacrificed himself for Colm? What sort of man do you think he is?

ACTIVITIES

1. FAMILY SURPRISE

What are your impressions of Colm's Aunt Sheila? Is she typical of women at the time? Using quotes from the text, write a character study to explain your thoughts and opinions of her.

2. LETTER TO MOTHER

Write a letter from Colm to his mother, explaining your thoughts and feelings about what you've just heard. Do you forgive her for leaving you behind? Do you want to see her in America? What do you want to tell her about yourself?

3. ALICE

Colm says goodbye to Alice, a girl who has made a big impression on him in a short space of time. What do we know about her? What questions would we like to ask her? Work in small groups, with one person playing the role of Alice to answer these questions.

4. SAYING GOODBYE

Colm prepares to leave without saying goodbye. Imagine that you were Colm and able to leave them a voice message. What would you say? Write a speech explaining your decision to leave.

5. IMPRISONED

What do you think is going to happen to Colm's uncle Seán? Do you think that he is going to be charged? Imagine that you are a lawyer defending him in court against the charge of treason – what would you say? As a class, debate whether or not Seán should be imprisoned for his actions.

6. DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

A dramatic monologue is when one character gives a long speech that explores their thoughts. Imagine that you are Colm and you are about to arrive in America. How has the journey been? What are you excited about? Have you any worries? Write this speech in groups and prepare a dramatic presentation for the rest of the class.

OVERALL Discussion Points

Freedom can mean different things to different people. What does it mean to you? What might freedom mean to a group of people? What might it mean to a country? Why is the book called *The Sound of Freedom*? What, do you think, does freedom sound like?

Discuss the concept of identity. What does the word mean? How do we form our identities? How is identity shaped by relationships (home/school) and experiences? How was Colm's identity affected by the following:

- Irish spoken at home
- Father in the Volunteers
- Playing the fiddle
- Mother died
- Hadn't a gift for hurling
- Enjoyed acting
- Bullied by Terence.

Idioms: 'Cat got your tongue?' is an example of an idiom. What does it mean? Why do people use idioms? What do the following idioms mean?

- A change of heart
- I'm all ears
- Fingers crossed!
- To have butterflies in your stomach
- A piece of cake.