



The Kidds of Summerhill

ISBN 978-1-78849-231-7
eBook ISBN 978-1-78849-259-1

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Teaching Guide

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RATIONALE & THEMES

It is 1945, and the tenements of Dublin are among the worst in Europe. Those who live there are forced to endure harsh living conditions and unsympathetic treatment from a state and church that seem to be punishing them for their poverty.

The Summerhill area of north Dublin city was once affluent and grand; now its tall Georgian buildings are tenements, with many families living in each one.

The sudden death of their mother leaves the Kidd children teetering on the edge of destitution. However, the support of their friends and neighbours help them to avoid being separated and assigned to the care of the state.

The themes explored are:

- Friendship
- Poverty / child labour
- Deference & privilege
- Equality
- Coping with loss
- Growing up
- Forgiveness
- Hope & determination
- Shame & prejudice
- Survival
- Ill treatment

SUMMARY

Although the sense of community in the tenements of Summerhill is strong, the environment is harsh. Everyone must do what they can to survive, and there is the threat of being sent to an industrial school for children who come to the attention of the Cruelty Men (NSPCC).

The Kidds rely on the income from their ma's dressmaking and their deceased dad's army pension. When their ma dies suddenly, the family is thrown into disarray. They struggle to gather enough money for rent and food, and must avoid the attention of the state

welfare services who are encouraged to step in by the Kidds' neighbour, who holds a mysterious grudge against the family.

Nancy, the eldest, leaves school and starts a job with a clothing manufacturer. An unexpected event forces her to reveal the identity of her friend's brother Charlie to the Gardaí, and he is sent to Artane Industrial School. She must keep this terrible secret as Charlie's family falls apart.

At work, Nancy befriends Karla, a Jewish emigrée searching for details about her family who were transported to Auschwitz concentration camp.

A visit to Charlie at Artane convinces Nancy that she must help him to escape, and as her plan takes shape, the secret behind her neighbour's grudge is revealed.

APPROACH

This is a compelling story of friendship, the grinding poverty of the Dublin tenements and the brutality of the industrial school system in the 1900s.

The story highlights aspects of social division and the impact of poverty.

The themes sit firmly within the remit of the SPHE and PDMU guidelines.

Development can be more effectively facilitated with small group discussion.

The guide has been divided into four sections to reflect the development of the story.

Section 1 Ma's gone (Read pp7-64)

SUMMARY

Nancy Kidd and her friend Lilly marvel at the extravagance of someone being able to afford flowers. It is in sharp contrast to their own circumstances. They live in the Dublin

tenements, where destitution and the threat of being sent to a state institution like Artane or Goldenbridge are constant companions.

On an errand for Nancy's ma, the girls are bothered by local bully Mickser Doyle. When Lilly's brother Charlie intervenes, a plain-clothed detective attempts to arrest him for selling newspapers without a licence. However, the new parish priest steps in and provides Charlie with a chance to escape, followed by Nancy and Lilly.

Later, while playing on the street, Nancy is summoned home. She finds her ma feverish and in bed. She asks Nancy to take temporary charge of the household duties. When her mother adds that she might not have the strength to take the family away from Dublin, as planned, to live in a more comfortable house with her aunt in Leeds, Nancy is bitterly disappointed.

Nancy makes a meagre supper for her younger siblings, Kate, Tom and little Patrick. While her ma sleeps, she tells them that she will be admitted to hospital in the morning. They will have to sell some of their possessions to offset the loss of their ma's wages.

After school the next day, Nancy is met by Maggie, her neighbour, who was to accompany her ma to the hospital. She reveals that there was an accident and her ma has died.

Swept up with the rituals of bereavement, Nancy and her siblings realise that they are orphaned in a hostile environment without the means to survive. Their only hope lies with their aunt in Leeds offering them refuge.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read p15:** Father Comiskey asks the garda to overlook the fact that Charlie has no license. Why did he do this? Should a rule like this be overlooked? How do you decide which rules you can ignore?

- **Read pp28–29:** The Kidd household has lots of religious artifacts. This was common at the time. Why did families have these? How would they protect them from the poverty they faced?
- **Read p48:** At Mrs Kidd’s wake, the neighbours entertain themselves by playing games. Is this a respectful way to behave? Why is Nancy not upset? Why do all these people attend the wake?

ACTIVITIES

1. Luxuries (Read pp9 & 12)

Nancy and Lilly are amazed that anyone can afford to buy flowers.

What is the difference between a luxury and an essential?

Make a list of the things you use each day. Group them into luxuries and essentials. How many are essential? How would you justify everything in the luxury list?

What does your list tell you about life in modern Ireland?

trocaire.org/sites/default/files/resources/edu/world-food-crisis.pdf

2. Child’s Play (Read pp15–16)

Charlie has to work to help feed his family and intends to leave for England when he is sixteen. He won’t have the opportunity to complete his education.

Create a poster to raise awareness of the consequences of child labour.

artsineducation.ie/en/scoilnet/?q=child%20labour

3. Over the Rainbow (Read p17)

The Twenty-Seven Steps represent Nancy’s special place, and the arch seems to her like the entrance to a magical world.

Where is your special place, the place you look forward to returning to, the place that makes you feel special?

Create an illustrated description with lots of detail.

4. Life Span (Read pp25–26)

Nancy’s ma has consumption, a deadly lung disease that was common in Ireland. It shortened many lives and was made worse by poverty.

Today in Ireland we expect to live much longer.

Is this the case in other countries? Can you compare life expectancy in Ireland with countries in Europe and Africa and make a chart of what you discover?

Do other communities in Ireland enjoy the same life expectancy eg Travellers and Roma?

trocaire.org/sites/default/files/resources/edu/poverty-fact-sheet-post-primary.pdf

christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-03/poverty-workshop-notes.pdf

5. Sorry for your loss (Read pp56 & 57)

At school, Nancy notices that none of her friends mention her mother’s death. She remembers that she never said anything to her classmate Jacinta, either, when her mother died the year before.

It is difficult to know what to say to a friend when their parent dies.

In groups, compile a short list of appropriate things you could say.

What should not be said?

Create a help card with speech bubbles.

surgeryder.org/how-we-can-help/someone-close-to-me-has-died/advice-and-support/what-to-say-to-someone-who-has-been

6. Summerhill Tenements (Read pp63–64)

Conditions in Summerhill were grim in the mid-1900s. There was overcrowding, water and sewage facilities were shared and unsanitary, and there were pest infestations.

Today Summerhill would be condemned, or landlords would be forced to improve the basic conditions for their tenants.

Describe the basic amenities everyone should expect to have in their home.

Imagine you are health inspector for the Corporation and have been sent back in time to do an inspection in Summerhill.

Make a copy of the report you might submit.

Section 2 Charlie (Read pp65–138)

SUMMARY

When she is a few pennies short for the rent collector, Nancy realises that there will be no consideration given for their circumstances.

Forced to make practical decisions, she asks Charlie to help her brother Tom get work selling newspapers. She tells her school that she must leave and find employment. Everyone must earn if the family is to survive.

The Kidds’ neighbour, the Pig Farmer Mrs Knaggs, looms large in their lives. Tom reports seeing her point him out, and Nancy

fears she is making a case for the NSPCC to have the Kidds taken into care.

Armed with a reference and a contact, Nancy leaves school and makes her way to Mandel’s clothing factory.

There, she meets Karla and they become friends. Nancy learns that Karla is Jewish and from Czechoslovakia, and that her family have endured the horrors of the Holocaust.

On an errand together, Nancy introduces Karla to some of her neighbours. But when she sees homeless Sconsie in the soup line at the convent, she pretends not to know him.

Later, while out shopping, she overhears Mrs Knaggs in conversation with the shopkeeper and spots Charlie’s cap.

Suspecting something unusual, she tries to hide the cap but is caught.

A garda is investigating a theft from the shop and the cap is evidence. He demands to know whose cap it is, and Nancy is forced to give him Charlie’s name. She is immediately overwhelmed by guilt.

Charlie is arrested, convicted and sent to Artane. Lilly’s family is distraught and they reveal a prior tragic family event at a state-run institution.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read p67:** The conditions in the Summerhill houses are dire, but their landlords sit on the Corporation that creates the housing laws. Is it fair for landlords to have such control? What safeguards should there be to protect the tenants?
- **Read p91–92:** Mr Niblock tells his female co-workers that union membership will cost them their jobs. Why was the firm opposed to the union? What benefit would the employees have in a union? Is it right for a firm to decide whether its workers can join a union? Find out about the Irish Women Workers’ Union. How did this union help the Laundry workers in 1945?
- **Read p117:** Charlie’s crime was to steal a few potatoes to feed his family. Was this really a crime? If food is available, does everyone have the right to take what they need? What affect does stealing have on other people?

ACTIVITIES

1. The Parrot (Read pp73–76)

Father Comiskey is forced to abandon his sermon because of a chattering parrot.

Although his congregation was entertained,

Father Comiskey is uncomfortable about cancelling the sermon and writes to the Archbishop explaining what happened.

Mrs Knaggs is upset at missing the sermon too, and she writes her own letter of complaint to the Archbishop.

Make a copy of both their letters.

2. A Head of Bacon (Read p78)

As the pig's head bubbles in the pot, Nancy pulls a tattered recipe sheet from her ma's notebook.

It has instructions on how to cook different meals using a pig's head.

Create an illustrated copy of the recipe that would appeal to you and your mum and dad.

culinaryireland.wordpress.com/2016/04/12/the-pig-in-irish-cuisine-culture/
scoilnet.ie/uploads/resources/21523/21246.ppt

3. I'm Good at That (Read p82)

Nancy knows that she is good at sewing and that this skill will help her find a job.

What subject or hobby are you best at? Why do you like it, and how does it makes you feel to have this skill?

What type of employment do you think it might help you to find?

Write a description for the school prospectus to encourage others to take up your subject or hobby.

4. The Union (Read pp91–92)

In the staff kitchen in Mandel's, Mr Niblock has pinned a notice forbidding anyone from joining a union.

The next morning, everyone is surprised to discover that someone has pinned a union poster beside it, inviting people to join and explaining the benefits.

Make a copy of both posters. What type of language would each use?

5. Trocaire (Read pp120–127)

Each year, Trocaire organise a Lenten campaign to highlight poverty in a different part of the world.

If they organised a campaign to draw attention to the poverty and injustice in 1940s Dublin, what might they say?

Design and illustrate a collection box and leaflet for their Dublin campaign.

trocaire.org/our-work/working-in-ireland/campaigns/

6. Sconsie (Read pp131–132)

Sconsie is homeless and survives on the charity of the residents of Summerhill. We never find out who he is or how he came to live like this. If you could interview him, what would his story reveal?

In small groups, prepare a list of five questions to ask him to find out more about his past. Swap your list with another group, and try to provide the answers as Sconsie might give them. Now, individually, use this information to write a short biography for him.

Section 3 Patrick (Read pp139–203)

SUMMARY

Karla is anxious about the fate of her family. She tells Nancy about the harassment faced by Jews in Czechoslovakia before the German invasion, and the death camp at Auschwitz. She escaped on the Kindertransport and now lives with a Jewish family in Dublin.

Aunt Gretta's letter finally arrives, and Nancy is stunned to learn that she is disowning them. The letter reveals that Nancy's ma was adopted from a Magdalen laundry; her mother, Nancy's maternal granny, died shortly after the adoption. Since there is no kinship tie with Gretta, she refuses to take responsibility for the children.

Distraught, Nancy explains to her siblings that they must remain in Dublin.

Nancy needs to secure a permanent job with Mandel's and decides to alter some of her ma's dresses to improve her appearance. She is unable to adjust the sewing machine and asks Karla for help.

With the rooms as clean as possible, Nancy welcomes Karla to Summerhill. Karla is shocked to witness a Garda raid on the neighbours' rooms, looking for a boy who has absconded from Artane.

Nancy accompanies Lilly to visit Charlie and is distressed by his appearance and his description of Artane. He is determined to escape and asks the girls to help.

When Nancy learns that Mrs Knaggs is going to tell Lilly's ma that it was she who revealed Charlie's name to the garda, she decides to confess instead.

But events overtake her when her younger brother Patrick is admitted to hospital after a serious road accident.

His condition deteriorates and Nancy is tormented by fresh memories of her ma.

However, in the morning he rallies, opens his eyes and smiles faintly.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read p 143–145:** Find out about Nicholas Winton and the Kindertransport. If you were interviewing him today, what questions would you ask?
- **Read pp171–173:** Karla sees the living conditions in Summerhill and the power of the Cruelty Men. She wonders if it is a crime to be poor in Ireland. Why did the church and state tolerate people living like this? Was it a state responsibility to help?
- **Read p194:** At the hospital, there are religious icons everywhere. How do you think patients who are not christians would feel about this? Should public spaces like hospitals be more inclusive?
- **Read p200:** Patrick is critically ill. When the nun remarks that God may be calling him home, Tom reacts angrily. Was her observation helpful? Is there a better way to comfort the family?

ACTIVITIES

1. The Treasure (Read p144)

At the German border, the guards searched everyone's bags and took Karla's most treasured possession.

Later, she decides to draw a picture and write a detailed description of it, explaining what it means to her. Whenever she feels upset, she reads her description and is reassured.

Make a copy of her drawing and description.

2. The Truth (Read p164)

Nancy must tell her younger siblings about Aunt Gretta's letter and explain to them why they will not be going to live with her in Leeds.

What should she say and how should she say it? In groups, order her story into ten short sentences, with the most important sentences first.

3. Grandparents (Read p166)

Nancy looks at the photo of Honora and Joe Murphy and realises that they were not actually her grandparents. She wonders who her real grandparents were and what they were like.

Ask at home about your grandparents and create a short biography of interesting facts about them, with photos if you can.

4. The Book (Read p169)

Karla gives Kate a well-worn copy of *Anne*

of *Green Gables*, one of her favourite books. Which of your favourite books would you share with Kate? What could you say to encourage her to read it without revealing too much of the story?

Write a short description of the story, explaining why she might enjoy it.

5. Patrick (Read pp193–195)

Nancy is distraught by Patrick's accident and memories of her ma's death.

On a large sheet of paper, write **PATRICK** in the middle and draw up to five winding lines radiating out. Now add two or three thought bubbles to each line.

Write Nancy's disconnected thoughts into each of the bubbles.

Add as many connecting lines, bubbles and thoughts as you need to create the sense of confusion and despair she is experiencing.

6. God's Call (Read pp200–203)

Sister Olivia is a kindly nun who has been praying for Patrick's recovery. She is delighted when he opens his eyes.

She decides to share her thoughts and concerns about Patrick and his family with God during her nightly prayers.

Write down some of her concerns.

Section 4 Freedom Pages 204–287

SUMMARY

Karla is relieved to discover that her mother and sister are safe and well.

Nancy divulges her secret to Karla, who encourages her to help Charlie escape. She offers to move in with the Kidds and assume the role of guardian to prevent the Cruelty Men from splitting up the family.

Karla enlists the help of her friend Levi, and Charlie's escape plan begins to take shape.

Nancy finally reveals to Lilly that it was she who named Charlie. Lilly's reaction is angry and bitter; however, reason and friendship prevail and she agrees to let Nancy help her brother escape.

Charlie has a scheduled home visit and they arrange for him to meet Hairy Bacon, the docker who will secure his passage to Liverpool.

Karla moves in with the Kidds before a visit by the Cruelty Men, and she confidently deflects their concerns. To Nancy's relief

they find no reason to recommend moving the children into care.

While in Dublin city centre meeting a moneylender, who will give them money for Charlie to settle in Liverpool, Nancy and Karla find Mrs Knaggs disorientated and collapsed in the street. As the doctor tends to her, in her confusion she reveals the secret that has poisoned her attitude towards the Kidds.

Levi and Nancy manage to smuggle Charlie into Levi's delivery van and drop him off at Amiens Street Station.

News reaches them later that Charlie has safely sailed. Patrick is scheduled for discharge, Karla discovers her mama's location and Nancy begins to adjust to the secret that Mrs Knaggs revealed.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read p218:** Nancy realises that Mrs Knaggs is becoming forgetful – she may even forget about Charlie's cap. Should Nancy remain silent? It would avoid a quarrel with Lilly. Should some secrets be kept forever? How would you advise her?
- **Read p267:** Levi tells Nancy that the Brothers are treated in a private hospital, not the public one that Patrick is in. Is a two-tier health service fair? Should the same care be available to everyone, regardless of status or ability to pay?

ACTIVITIES

1. Vote for Me (Read p213)

During a general election, candidates canvass your vote. Some will point to their record, others will coax you with promises of what they intend to do, while others will appeal to your loyalty for a particular party.

How will you decide who gets your vote?

In groups, decide on the priorities that would lead you to your vote in an upcoming general election.

Sketch the decision-making process as a **YES / NO** flow diagram.

2. NSPCC (Read pp237–243)

When they return to their office, the NSPCC team write their report on the Kidd family and come up with recommendations.

It will include all that they have seen and heard, including a copy of Mrs Knaggs' letter.

Make a copy of their report.

3. The Conversation (Read p249)

The American soldier Chuck managed to catch up with Mickser and Bulldog and did

have a 'conversation' with them after all.

The author thought she might include a paragraph to describe what happened.

Make a copy of the paragraph.

4. First Aid (Read pp263–264)

Levi has medical training and knows what to do to help Brother Adams.

Do you know what to do to improve the survival chances of someone who has collapsed in the street or at home?

In groups, create a simple illustrated poster showing the four most important things that someone with **NO** medical experience could do to help a person who has collapsed.

bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/4hMR0pkkDnSkLnnSFzflJFc/what-to-do-if-someone-collapses-in-front-of-you

5. Summerhill (Read p283)

In the years after this story, some of the Summerhill tenement houses were demolished. Dublin Corporation ran a competition to design a memorial plaque to be placed at the site, reminding people what living conditions were like.

Submit a group design entry.

census.nationalarchives.ie/exhibition/dublin/poverty_health.html
[youtube.com/watch?v=yx8IPN7BJg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yx8IPN7BJg)
[youtube.com/watch?v=RmyQDZq1sUY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmyQDZq1sUY)

6. Magdalen (Read p285)

Magdalen Laundries, where many women were sent because they were pregnant and not married, existed in Ireland until very recently.

As shocking details emerge about these institutions, there is a growing demand for a permanent memorial sculpture to acknowledge the cruelty, abuse and discrimination experienced by the women and children who spent time there.

Design a memorial and suggest where it might be erected.

In groups, decide how you could launch a campaign to have the memorial built to ensure that their story is never forgotten.

artsineducation.ie/en/scoilnet/?q=magdalen
bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hampshire-49393418

14 Henrietta Street

This story was inspired by a visit the author made to Dublin's 14 Henrietta Street museum.
14henriettastreet.ie/school-resources/primary-schools-resources/