

FOUR KIDS, THREE CATS, TWO COWS, ONE WITCH (MAYBE)

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SIOBHÁN PARKINSON

Teaching Guide

By Gillian Perdue

RATIONALE AND THEMES This is a cleverly devised book which works on many levels: as a simple adventure story, as a collection of individual fables and as a psychological exploration of the dynamics of the inter-personal relationships between the four main characters. Various important themes are introduced and developed in a sensitive manner. This should lead to valuable exploration/discussion with senior classes in primary schools and with the junior classes in secondary schools:

- Development of the adolescent personality
- Friendship
- Rivalry and jealousy within friendship
- Bullying
- Fledgling feelings for the opposite sex
- Independence and responsibility
- The notion of the 'outcast' – a person who doesn't fit in
- Class consciousness and snobbery

SUMMARY

The story centres around four children who head off to explore Lady Island, bringing with them their personal concerns and neuroses along with rucksacks full of supplies. Beverley, the instigator of the trip, is stuck-up and obsessive. Elizabeth, though generally more easy-going, is prone to flights of fantasy. Poor Gerard trots along, sneezing and wheezing, lugging his cat, Fat, and trying not to annoy the girls. Kevin, local talent, is the eldest and the one most aware of the possible dangers. They set off across the water at low tide and soon find themselves on the island with the feeling that they're not alone. As the journey progresses, the children

each tell a story which seems to be 'given' to them and which somehow tells more about them. They meet the eccentric Dymphna and weather a frightening storm, both emotionally and in reality. On leaving the island, each child has changed subtly. They have undergone a rite of passage.

APPROACH For the purposes of this exploration, the novel has been divided into four main sections covering five or more chapters at a time. However, the pace at which the novel is read is entirely up to the teacher. It may suit to read one chapter per day or in larger blocks. Possible discussion points and activities are listed at the end of each section.

UNIT 1 THE FOUR GO OFF TOGETHER

SUMMARY

The author's note outlines the concept of a rite of passage. We meet the practical, analytical Beverley who plans the expedition to explore Lady Island. Her friend Elizabeth agrees to go although she has an uneasy feeling about the island. Gerard, Elizabeth's cousin, is allowed to go, so that he can carry all the bulky things. They set off and are joined by Kevin who feels that they might need his help. They reach the island and cook breakfast. Elizabeth tells her story. Sparks fly between Beverley and Kevin.

Read pp.7–51.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Beverley seems to have taken an instant dislike to Kevin. On what has she based this?
- Gerard has found that people respond differently to him because he is the child of a single mother (p.19). Discuss their reactions.
- Read the argument between Beverley and Kevin (pp.41–43). Does anyone win the argument? What issues are raised during the argument?
- Discuss Elizabeth's story. Are there any similarities between the story that we are reading and the one Elizabeth tells?

ACTIVITIES

1. SIMILES

A simile compares one thing with another, though they may not really be alike, eg. 'two bunches of bananas, like half-clenched yellow baseball mitts' (p.17).

Using 'fruit' as the theme, make up as many interesting similes as you can.

2. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Gerard's question: 'How can something be both burnt and raw at the same time?' is taken as a criticism by the cook.

Write a list of critical questions, eg. 'Did you take the washing in out of the pouring rain?'

3. IMAGINARY EXPEDITION

On p.13, read Beverley's list and Purpose of Expedition. Now imagine you and some friends are heading off on an expedition to explore the Moon, or an underwater world or another place and time.

Write a list of your requirements.

4. CLASS DEBATE

Is Gerard treated well by the girls? On p.17, we see that he is made carry all the bulky things, 'to punish him for being a boy'.

Organise a class debate to discuss the motion:

'Elizabeth and Beverley are sexist bullies.'

5. ILLUSTRATION

Elizabeth's story within the story describes an edible house.

Draw and label an edible house or another building made of your favourite foods.

UNIT 2 INTO THE INTERIOR & TWO MORE TALES

SUMMARY

The children split up into two groups of two. Elizabeth and Gerard follow the trail while Beverley and Kevin cross the island through unknown terrain. Elizabeth injures her ankle and can go no further. Meanwhile Beverley is forced to review her opinion of Kevin, who helps her through an attack of vertigo before telling his tale. Beverley and Kevin finally meet up with the other two. By now their provisions have all gone and tension is beginning to mount. Gerard tells his strange story of the princess who had a baby before she was married.

Read pp.52–106.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- On p.55, we read that Beverley is here to record and tame the unknown, to prove it holds no mystery. Why do you think she does this? Are you comfortable with mysteries or do you like explanations for everything? Are there explanations for everything?
- There have been hints for some time that 'they were not alone' (p.59). Read through the unit again and discuss the signs that would support this theory.
- On pp.72–75, we read of Beverley's attack of vertigo. This is a very frightening condition and can be difficult to deal with. What is your opinion of Kevin's handling of the situation? Has it changed their relationship?

- To Kevin, it still seems that the others are treating this as a game (see p.52). Do you agree with his opinion? Why would Kevin be a bit more serious about the whole outing?
- Why do you think Beverley wants the island to be wild?

ACTIVITIES

1. DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Writing about nature in a vivid and observant style can add interest and colour to a story.

Read through the unit again and pick out paragraphs of descriptive writing (eg. pp.55, 60).

Write a short paragraph describing an outdoor scene of your choice.

2. ADOPTED WORDS

Some words from other languages make their way into everyday English. On p.53, see if you can locate a French word meaning 'shiver'.

Make a list of as many examples of adopted words as you can think of. Don't forget the Irish words!

3. NEWS REPORT

Imagine you are a reporter at the scene of Beverley's vertigo attack. Write the report you would deliver, live to camera.

Write interview questions for Beverley and Kevin afterwards. Act it out in class.

4. PARALLELS

Elizabeth is terribly concerned about the 'parallels' between the story she told and the reality they are experiencing (p.93).

Read Kevin's story (pp.82–89), looking for parallels. Write them down.

Repeat this activity with Gerard's story (pp.101–106).

5. THINGUMMYBOBS

On p.54, Kevin uses the word 'yokes' to describe the garden candles. People sometimes use 'thingummybob' to name an unfamiliar object, or when they can't think of the actual word.

Make a list of all unusual words we use in those circumstances.

6. SUMMING UP

On p.61, Kevin accuses Beverley of having

him summed up as being 'all rock music and motorbikes'.

Choose two interests that might sum you up. Can you do the same for five of your friends or family?

7. CREATIVE

On p.52, Beverley feels a wave of irritation crash over her at her friend's behaviour.

Make a list of ten habits you find irritating. Then invent the most irritating character you can imagine, with as many annoying habits as possible. Write a piece about him/her.

8. EUPHEMISMS

A euphemism is when you use a mild or pleasant phrase to disguise a blunt fact or piece of information, e.g. 'the patient passed away'.

On p.59, find the euphemism Kevin uses to describe the recluse who lives on the island. Make a list of some common euphemisms you may have heard.

9. RESEARCH

Find out who wrote *The Canterbury Tales* and when it was written. Why did pilgrims travel to Canterbury Cathedral?

Write about a modern site of pilgrimage.

10. FAMOUS EXPLORERS

Beverley wanted them to be the first people ever to have set foot on the island (p.56). Why do you think this is?

Use an encyclopaedia or search on the Internet to discover the names of some famous explorers who were the first Europeans to set foot on far-flung soil. Write a short paragraph about each.

11. MAP-MAKING

Draw a map of how Lady Island might look, marking features on it such as the beach, the path, the flat rocks, the cliffs and Dymphna's house.

UNIT 3 SHORTBREAD DIPPED IN HONEY AND A STORM APPROACHING

SUMMARY

Gerard finishes his story. The children decide to make their way to the house (which Gerard has spotted) to try to get help with Elizabeth's injury. It is deserted and they go inside. Dymphna appears and doesn't seem surprised to see them in her house. Beverley tells her story of an independent and logical princess. Dymphna goes upstairs to get lotion for Elizabeth's foot and hangs out a window, wailing and howling. The girls decide she is mad or weird, but Gerard defends her staunchly. The wind is getting up as a storm approaches.

Read pp.107–152.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Tension is mounting and Kevin is getting worried. Read p.108 and discuss the factors giving rise to his concern.
- Before meeting Dymphna, the children hear that she's a bit 'odd'. She is later described as 'mad' and 'weird'. Can your class work out a definition for the word 'odd'?
- Gerard is surprised by 'unexpected tenderness from Beverley' on p.115. What could have brought about this change of character?
- Discuss the use of this metaphor on p.109: 'Kevin looked up at the sky and saw a storm written across its face.' Is this effective?
- Kevin describes kidnapping as 'nice and predictable'. Do you think he would really like to be kidnapped? Why would it seem preferable to his fear of the unknown?

ACTIVITIES

1. ADJECTIVES

Brainstorm adjectives to describe each of the four children and Dymphna.

2. SCRIPT WRITING

One of the scary things about Dymphna is that she is unpredictable. When we know

people well, we can predict how they will behave, think or even what they will say.

Imagine you appear in school with no homework. Write a passage predicting your teacher's response and the dialogue between you.

3. PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

Find out as much as you can about what a pilgrimage is. Do people still go on pilgrimages nowadays?

Write an answer to the question: Are the children actually on a pilgrimage?

4. ANALYSIS

Which child is the least frightened by Dymphna?

Write a few lines giving reasons for this answer (see pp.149, 150).

5. MORE PARALLELS

As before, list any parallels you notice between Beverley's character and Beverley's story (pp.133–142).

6. DRAMATIC TENSION

On pp.125–127 there are many examples of dramatic tension as we await the entrance of the strange woman.

Make a list of the noises and clues that precede her entrance, eg. footsteps.

9. PATHETIC FALLACY

Pathetic fallacy is when an author credits nature with human emotions.

Read p.109 and find an example of this.

10. CREATIVE

Beverley and Gerard argue over how the story should end (p.107). Choose a well-known story or fairy tale and rewrite the ending. Read aloud in class. Vote to see who prefers the original or re-written version.

11. CLOUD TYPES

Look up the various types of cloud that are common in the skies above Ireland.

What type is mentioned on p.109? Draw the different formations.

12. TASTY TREATS

What is Dymphna's favourite snack? Bring in a jar of honey, some paper plates and some packets of shortbread. Try it! Better still, try making shortbread at home.

13. DRAW A PICTURE

When Dymphna finally appears, she is described in some detail on p.127.

In pairs, draw a picture of Dymphna with one person reading out the description and the other drawing. Swap over. Then compare your pictures.

UNIT 4 A STORM AND SOME MIRACLES

SUMMARY

The storm finally breaks and rages all around the little house. Gerard is distraught because Fat has gone missing. Dymphna applies lotion to Elizabeth's injured foot. Kevin, though petrified of storms, goes out into the worst of it to find Gerard's cat. Elizabeth's foot is cured. Fat is found. The storm ends and they have an outdoor picnic using the flares and the supplies which Dymphna had found. Dymphna tells her story of the duckling that didn't like rain. She asks for their help and she shows them the way home. The pilgrimage is over.

Read pp.153–192.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Kevin did something very courageous by going out into the storm to find Fat. Why was it such a brave thing to do? (see p.157).
- When Elizabeth's foot is suddenly better, she declares it a 'miracle'. Dymphna calls it a 'cure' and Beverley calls it something else. Read p.168 to see what Beverley calls it. Why do they differ in their opinions?
- Beverley, so logical and grown-up, exclaims, 'I want my mother!' on p.171. What has brought her to this? Have you ever felt that way, even though you feel you should be old enough to cope? What circumstances could bring even grown adults to call for their mothers?
- Can you remember the names of Dymphna's pets? What is the logic behind calling her cow after herself?
- 'Society demands conformity'. Discuss this statement after reading p.188.

ACTIVITIES

1. DYMPHNA'S STORY

Dymphna says that when you tell a story, you're really telling people something about yourself. What does Dymphna's story about the duckling tell us about her?

Write a short paragraph explaining why she lives alone on an island.

2. DYMPHNA'S DIARY

Even though Dymphna is eccentric, her howling and wailing are strange by any standards! Write a diary entry for Dymphna on the day the children appeared in her house. Try to explain why she was so frightened (see p.184).

3. LETTER WRITING

Imagine you are either Beverley or Kevin.

Write a letter to a good friend telling them about the boy/girl you met on holiday whom you initially misjudged.

4. VOCABULARY EXTENSION

The following words appear in Units 2 and 3: gravely, antagonistic, valiant, jerkin, inconsequentially, conviction, sheepishly, foliage.

Using a dictionary, write definitions for each and make up sentences using them.

5. CLASS DEBATE

Organise a class debate to discuss the motion:

'All four children were changed by their expedition.'

6. BAD MOODS

On p. 182, Gerard realises that a feed puts Elizabeth in a good mood. Imagine you have had a terrible day. Write a sequence of events that would put you in a good mood. Now do the same for (a) a parent, (b) your teacher and (c) a friend. Discuss how small acts can influence a person's mood.

7. MISSING PERSONS

Imagine how the children's parents would have reacted when they found the children were missing all day.

Write a list of things that can be done to help locate missing people – putting up notices, ringing the coastguard, etc.

8. WITCH HUNTS

So-called 'witches' have been harassed and even killed for hundreds of years.

Do some research about the ill-treatment of 'witches' and women with healing powers throughout history.

9. THE MAGIC FLUTE

Pappageno is a character from the opera *The Magic Flute* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. He is a bird-catcher.

Find out about Mozart (1756 –1791) in an encyclopaedia or on the Internet. Perhaps you could listen to some of this opera or any other music by this composer.

10. STORM SYMPHONY

Some home-made musical instruments would be very effective for capturing the sound of the storm (see pp.157–161). You need cans for a metallic clang, drumming sounds and perhaps rice or pasta in boxes for the sound of rain falling.

11. CLASS PAINTING

On a very large sheet of paper, do a class painting of either the raging storm (p.157) or the celebratory banquet in the garden (pp.175, 176). Compose your class's storm symphony.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, SIOBHÁN PARKINSON

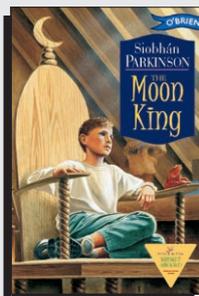


SIOBHÁN PARKINSON, who lives in Dublin, was recently appointed as the Dublin Corporation Irish Writers' Centre Writer-in-Residence. Her primary interests are reading and writing. Winner of a Bisto Merit Award 1998, *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows and One Witch (maybe)* was praised as 'one of the best Irish children's books we've ever had' (Robert Dunbar, *The Gay Byrne Show*, Radio 1).



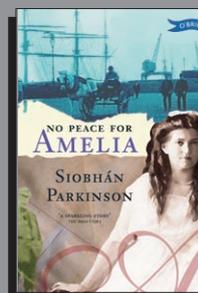
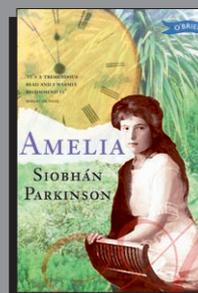
Winner of the Bisto Book of the Year Award 1997

Siobhán Parkinson has now written many books to great acclaim, including the best-selling novels, *Sisters... No Way!* and *The Moon King*, both of which won Bisto awards.



Winner of a Bisto Merit Award 1999

Also by Siobhán Parkinson:
two works of historical fiction for
children, *Amelia* and *No Peace
for Amelia*.



Amelia, set in 1916, is the story of well-to-do Dublin girl Amelia Pim and how she copes with suddenly becoming poor.

Its sequel *No Peace for Amelia* deals with the issues of war and loyalty in the turbulent Ireland of the 1920s.