

MISSING SISTERS

ISBN 978-0-86278-379-2 pb

GREGORY MAGUIRE

Teaching Guide

By Gillian Perdue

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This book has been chosen for use in the senior cycle of primary schools and in the junior cycle of second-level schools because of its sensitive treatment of important themes, such as:

- Development of the pre-adolescent personality
- Adoption
- Crisis of identity
- Loss
- Fledgling feelings for the opposite sex
- Racial equality
- Physical disability

It is a novel that encourages questioning: about affection and loss, about contrasting lifestyles, about faith in an unjust world. It is well-written in a style that maintains a high interest level – lending it the quality of a mystery adventure. It has many links across the revised curriculum, particularly in the area of Social and Personal Health Education.

SUMMARY

Alice Colossus has grown up in an orphanage in New York and, at twelve, has begun some serious questioning of who she is and what life holds for her. She is a bright girl but, due to a combination of shyness and a hearing/speech impairment, she feels increasingly as if she doesn't fit in. A trip to summer camp becomes a mystery story as Alice is mistaken for a girl called Miami. Alice at last has a chance to find out who she really is. Along the way we meet strong and believable characters, such as Sister Vincent de Paul, Sister John Bosco (Sister Boss), Miami, Naomi (Alice's main tormentor) and Alice

herself. Issues of racial equality are raised as the story is set in 1968 at the time of Martin Luther King's funeral. Miami's indulged, consumer-driven lifestyle is contrasted with the gritty reality of Alice's life in the orphanage. We also confront Alice's fears for Sister Vincent, who is seriously injured in a fire. We feel Alice's frustration and confusion as the adults try to protect her from the truth. The ending is satisfying and realistic, without being romanticised or cloying.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration the novel has been divided into five main sections, each of which contains suggested discussion points and language-based activities. Useful addresses are listed where relevant.

UNIT 1: ALICE AND AN EARLY DISASTER

SUMMARY

We meet Alice and learn of her communication difficulties. The kitchen burns down, and Sister Vincent is badly burned. The Harrigan family wishes to adopt Alice, but she postpones the decision. Alice makes her first foray into the outside world and meets a college boy. Naomi teases Alice and gloats when the Harrigans decide to adopt her instead of Alice.

Read pp.7–42

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Self-image – this describes both how you see yourself and how you feel about yourself. What is Alice's self-image like (see p.39)? Discuss the factors in a person's life that would contribute to a positive or negative self-image.
- What does Sister Vincent mean when she says to Alice, 'Don't mind the choices, Alice; mind the details!' (p.25) Discuss the choice that led Sister Vincent to her cookery job in the convent. Why is she talking to Alice in this way?
- What do you think is needed for effective communication between people? Discuss the difficulties that could arise if either the communicator or the listener had a speech or hearing impediment. What might happen in an emergency situation?
- We hear on p.40 that, according to Father Lavery, Jesus said, 'It ain't over 'til it's over.' Do you think this was said by Jesus? Why do you think Father Lavery would say so?
- What is your opinion of Naomi Matthews? Read the conversation between Naomi and Alice on p.41. Would you like to be Naomi's friend? Give reasons.

ACTIVITIES

1. SIMILES

The author uses many similes to add colour to his writing, e.g. 'Alice let her voice out like a fishing line in a pool, a little at a time ...' (p.36). Make a list of any similes that you find and discuss their effectiveness or otherwise. (Check pp.8, 15, 16, 18.)

2. MORE SIMILES

A simile compares two things which might not normally be considered alike. On p.10, the author compares Sister Vincent's singing voice to a kid on a bicycle for the first time. Using similes can make your written work more colourful and interesting.

Make a list of some well-known similes, e.g. 'the table was like a lump of lead to lift' or 'the footpath was like glass'. Can you make up any of your own?

3. ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

The girls' names are from the Bible and were chosen by the nuns. Where did you get your name? What does it mean? If you could make up your own name, what would you call yourself? Write it and a few sentences explaining why you chose it.

4. DOING WRONG

On p.37, Alice contemplates Eve taking a bite of the apple. Read the scene and discuss with reference to Alice's 'sin'. Write a short piece about a time when you did something you knew or felt to be wrong. How did it happen? What steps could you have taken to prevent it?

5. VOCABULARY EXTENSION

The following words appear in this unit: docile, rivulets, vigil, arabesqued, pinnacle, ciborium, desolate, breviary. Arrange in alphabetical order and write a definition for each word, consulting a dictionary if necessary.

6. RESEARCH

The painter, Giotto, is mentioned on p.14. In an art history book, look up this famous artist. Can you find any painting where tongues of flame are shown? Write a paragraph detailing your reactions to any painting by Giotto.

7. FIND OUT

Why are there fewer orphanages now than in the past? Can you find the name of any orphanage in your locality?

What do you know of **fosterage**, which used to be prevalent in seventeenth-century Ireland? Consult the Museum of Irish Education, CICE, for more information. Tel: +353 1 4970033 for information.

UNIT 2: MEET MIAMI

SUMMARY

We meet Miami, a typical American pre-teen, living with her adoptive parents, Mr and Mrs Shaw. She's planning her birthday party and hoping to be allowed to wear rhinestone earrings on that day. Her five-year-old brother, Garth, is also adopted and is begging to come to the party. Martin Luther King, the preacher and political activist, dies and Miami learns that his funeral is to be on the same day as the party. Much to her disgust, the party is cancelled and the family attends King's funeral instead.

Read pp.43–60

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Miami's concerns are very different from Alice's. Discuss the pre-occupations of the two girls. With whom would you most empathise?
- Miami's little brother Garth is black. At the time in which the novel is set, do you think the colour of his skin would have posed any difficulties for him? Are people now treated equally regardless of the colour of their skin?
- Discuss Miami's feelings after her party is cancelled. Can you empathise with her disappointment and outrage? Have you ever been disappointed in a similar way? Do you think she should have been allowed to have her party?
- On p.52, Miami decides that there will definitely be no Garth at her party. Do you think this is fair? Discuss the problems of younger brothers and sisters always wanting to do what you are doing.

ACTIVITIES

1. SPECIAL PLACES

Miami has a special place in which to think or hide. If you could design a room or hideout, what would it look like? How would you furnish it? What would you put in it? Read also *The Moon King* by Siobhán Parkinson (ISBN 978-0-86278-573-4), the story of Ricky who uses an attic as his special hideout. Write an account entitled 'My Own Special Place'.

2. DRAMATIC INTERVIEW

Miami imagines falling from her 'tower' and being interviewed during her last moments! Write a short dialogue between the reporter and Miami. Act out in class.

3. RESPONSES TO SARCASM

Miami uses sarcasm in her dealings with Garth and her adoptive mother. Pick out four or five instances of this in this unit. Write a response that Garth might make if he were older and better able to cope. (See pp.55, 56, 58.)

4. CONTRASTING PERSONALITIES

Already we have seen some sharp contrasts between Alice and Miami. Make a list of five main differences you have observed.

5. WORDS FROM THE WISE?

On p.45, Miami hopes she's not in for 'lecture number one hundred and fourteen'. Choose a figure of authority (parent/guardian or teacher) and list their ten favourite lecture titles!

6. FURTHER RESEARCH

Find out all you can about the human rights activist Martin Luther King. Write an essay on his life and achievements. (Use a search engine or encyclopaedia to help you.)

UNIT 3: THE PLOT THICKENS

SUMMARY

Alice goes to camp, where she swims and plays basketball. She blends in well, to the extent that some people haven't even noticed her speech problems. Naomi turns up at the camp and the two girls enter a talent contest with a song from *My Fair Lady*. Alice has a great voice and they win. People cheer for Alice, but they call her Miami. It transpires that Alice looks exactly like a girl called Miami who had been at camp the previous year. Alice gets Miami's address and later uses her prize money to get a cab to her house. Chaos ensues as the two girls meet for the first time and realise that they are twins. But the storybook ending is not an option and Alice goes back to the convent in tears.

Read pp.61–92

DISCUSSION POINTS

- 'Underwater, Alice is no deafer than anyone else' (p.61). Water is described as Alice's 'element'. Why do you think this might be so? Is there anywhere in particular where you might be said to be 'in your element'?
- Alice does not want to leave the Shaws. Has she discovered the perfect family?
- On p.65, Naomi acts like Alice's 'long-lost best friend'. Discuss possible reasons for Naomi's behaviour. Would you have accepted her friendship?
- Alice finally meets her long-lost sister on p.85. Read their first conversation and discuss. Is this how you would have expected the conversation to develop?
- We read that Alice finds it strange that she cannot remember when she and Miami lay looking at one another in 'next-door cribs' (p.90). Discuss her question, 'What else so important had happened to her in her life?'

ACTIVITIES

1. PROBLEM PAGES

On p.74, Naomi says, 'Alice can't speak regular. She's got a defect.' Is this a kind way to describe Alice's problem? Write a letter to a problem page as if you were Alice. Then write the reply she might receive from the agony aunt or uncle.

2. USING ADJECTIVES

On p.61 there is a paragraph describing an underwater world. Can you list ten adjectives to describe water in all its forms? Use your list of adjectives to either write a short poem or make an illustration of this world.

3. DEBATE

Alice finds her twin sister and discovers the reality of having a close relative. Organise a class debate on the motion: 'There is no such thing as the perfect family'.

4. MAKE A FORGERY

Alice used a permission form signed under false pretences to get out of going swimming. Write a forged note from a parent to get out of some dreaded school activity. Be creative!

5. CREATIVE WRITING

When Alice appears for the first time at Miami's house, both Garth and the neighbour respond to her as if she actually is Miami. Imagine you wake up in the morning and find yourself in someone else's body. Would you like to live their life? Write an imaginative essay beginning: 'When I awoke, I felt completely different. I looked in the mirror and saw the face of ... (e.g. Ronan Keating, Britney Spears, George W Bush) looking back at me.'

6. ALLITERATION

Tongue twisters are poems or phrases that rely on alliteration and are therefore difficult to say quickly. Write some tongue twisters and say aloud in class.

UNIT 4: MIAMI SCHEMES, ALICE DREAMS

SUMMARY

Alice has had to return to the orphanage. Garth and Miami both want the Shaws to adopt her, but it seems that there's a new baby on the way. The family discusses the possibility of adoption and Mr and Mrs Shaw explain the financial and emotional burden that would be involved. Miami is not impressed and schemes with Alice by phone. Alice hears that Sister Vincent is alive. She then receives two letters – one from Sister Vincent and one from the college boy, Larry.

Read pp.93–124.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Discuss the issues involved in adoption. In your opinion, are the Shaws in a position to adopt Alice?
- Miami is capable of both extreme kindness and unkindness. Is this true?
- Alice goes into the chapel where she has a long conversation with Jesus and Mary. She even offers to help pay. What does this tell us about her character?
- Miami calls her adoptive parents hypocrites on p.98. Look up this word in the dictionary. Do you think they are being hypocritical by not adopting Alice?

ACTIVITIES

1. DIARY ENTRY

On p.97, Miami wonders which one of them has to 'go back'. She suggests that Garth should go, because 'he's the only really different one'. Can you think of some reasons why she is being so cruel? Write Miami's diary entry for that evening, describing her fears and emotions.

2. WRITE AN ACCOUNT

Look up 'telepathy' in your dictionaries. Can you find an instance of telepathy in this section? Have you ever experienced it yourself? Write a short account, real or fictional.

3. SHOPPING LIST

Why do you think Sister John Bosco crossed 'cookies' off the convent shopping list and replaced it with 'fresh fruit'? (p.115). Write a shopping list for the orphanage.

Choose a favourite character (factual or fictional) and write their weekly shopping list.

4. COLOURFUL EXPRESSIONS

Miami realises that 'there wasn't a snowball's chance on a pancake griddle' that they could adopt Alice. See how many similar expressions you can list, e.g. 'a mouse's chance in a cat basket' or 'a biscuit's chance in a lunch box'.

5. NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

Imagine you are the reporter assigned to this story. Write an article beginning with the caption from p.120.

6. ILLUSTRATION

On p.103 there is a description of the Sacred Heart Home for Girls. Make a model or draw a picture of the home based on this description.

UNIT 5: MINI-MIRACLES

SUMMARY

Various women ring the convent claiming to be Alice's mother. Sister John Bosco fields calls deftly. Miami and Alice are at Miami's house for a Saturday visit. They've arranged an

outing, using Larry as driver, to visit Sister Vincent. It's top secret. To buy silence, Garth is at last allowed into Miami's tower room. Suspense builds as Garth almost falls and the girls go missing. Alice is reunited with her beloved Sister Vincent and is courageous enough to call the convent and confess. Alice's birth mother remains a mystery but a new family emerges to adopt her. She is to keep close contact with Miami. Her adoptive parents arrive, bearing red roses for Alice and Sister John Bosco. They leave in the first snowfall of winter.

Read pp.125–156

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Alice's speech problem seems to be improving. Can you think of reasons for this?
- As the older sisters, Alice and Miami have responsibility for Garth. Are you expected to be responsible for anyone in your family? How do they respond to this?
- 'If you try to live someone else's life you'll never be happy. You have to live your own,' says Sister Vincent (p.148). Discuss how this applies to Alice.

ACTIVITIES

1. AGEING

Sister Vincent de Paul does not behave like a sick old lady. Compare her attitude with that of some elderly person you know.

Contact your local Health Authority. Some elderly people live alone, not always successfully. Contact Alone (www.alone.ie or Tel: +353 1 679 1032) for video and workpack. Also available from Alone: *Getting Along in the 21st Century*.

2. TV INTERVIEW

Imagine that you are a TV show host and you are about to interview Alice and Miami about their recent adventures. Write lists of questions you would put to them. Act out in class.

3. REWRITING

On p.146 we read that Sister Vincent sees miracles in everyday life, whereas Alice is still waiting for a bigger sign. Rewrite an alternative final page of the story, giving Alice the miracle she is waiting for. Which do you think is the better ending and why?

4. WRITING IN CHARACTER

On p.151, Mr Shaw drives the girls home, giving them a 'nonstop harangue' all the

way. Listening, Alice hardly minds a bit, and thinks 'This is family life ... soak it up while you can.' Write a piece that begins in the same way. Write some things that Mr Shaw might have said to the girls or write a piece detailing your own thoughts on family life.

5. THE POWER OF IMAGERY

The final image is of the nuns waving goodbye, their black veils slowly turning white with the drifting snowflakes. How many words or phrases can you find to describe snow? Write a poem using the images and words you have found. You might also use black paper and either white paint or chalk to create this scene which might be done as a large class mural, with the convent in the background.

Reviews for *Missing Sisters*

'Stunningly original variation on the quest theme ... witty and wise in turn.' *Irish Times*

'[A] gentle, beautifully written novel about growing up.' *RTÉ Guide*

'Sharp and funny ... poignant and genuinely suspenseful.' *Publishers' Weekly*

'It was very touching and I enjoyed it a lot.'
Louise (14), *Books Ireland*

ALSO AVAILABLE FROM THE O'BRIEN PRESS:

Lockie and Dadge by Frank Murphy (ISBN 978-0-86278-424-9, pb). Lockie keeps running away from his foster homes – until eventually he meets some odd-bods who treat him like *real* family. Winner of the Eilís Dillon Memorial Award and Bisto Merit Award (1996-1997).

The Moon King by Siobhán Parkinson (ISBN 978-0-86278-573-4, pb). A young boy creates his own world in order to cope with his traumatic past. Winner of a Bisto Merit Award (1998-1999).

Cherokee by Creina Mansfield (ISBN 978-0-86278-368-6, pb). Gene travels the world with his grandfather, a famous jazz musician. Aunt Joan calls a halt – he *must* have a normal life! But this isn't quite what Gene dreams of ...

Dark Secret by Frank Murphy (ISBN 978-0-86278-678-6, pb). When his mum dies, Davy's dad leaves him in the care of his eccentric grandfather. But what is the dark secret in Davy's family?

