



THE GOOD LIAR

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GREGORY MAGUIRE

Teaching Guide

By Gillian Perdue

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This is a deceptively simple book, written in the form of a letter from an elderly French artist to some American schoolchildren who are doing a project on the Second World War. It should be of particular interest to pupils in the senior cycle in primary school and in the junior cycle of second-level schools because of its treatment of such issues as:

- War and conflict
- Judaism and racial or religious hatred
- Heroism and bravery
- Lying and exaggeration
- Sibling relationships and rivalries
- Friendship and loyalty
- Difficult decisions

SUMMARY

This story is set in motion by three American children whose class is studying World War II in Europe. By chance, they see a TV programme about Mr Delarue, an artist who grew up in Occupied France. They write to him and he responds with a story which he calls 'The Good Liar', not because it is untrue, but because memory of long ago can go 'in and out of focus'. The story then unfolds: three high-spirited and unruly brothers – Pierre, René and the author, Fat Marcel, live with their strict Maman in the French countryside. Their father is away and the boys find it impossible to be as perfect as Maman demands. They are the best liars in Mont-Saint-Martin.

It is 1940 and Paris has fallen to the Germans. Uncle Anton comes to stay, bringing with him a Jewish woman and

her daughter who are seeking refuge. The boys must keep important secrets if their guests are to remain safe. They learn that there are some friendships which are too dangerous to talk about, perhaps too dangerous even to have. So they tell no one about their friend, the German soldier. But there is an accident, and the friendship is exposed. However, other people can lie too ... even Maman will lie to save a life. The boys learn about Truth: when you must tell it, and when it may be hidden.

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.

UNIT 1 SECRETS AND LIES

SUMMARY

Three American schoolgirls write to Marcel Delarue to ask him what he remembers of his childhood during the war. He replies quickly and his story begins with a letter. He and his brothers, Pierre and René, are growing up near the Loire Valley. Their father is far away, working. Maman receives a letter from her brother, Anton, saying that German soldiers are heading towards Paris, having already invaded Belgium and Holland. Anton may be coming to stay with them and will bring some friends: a mother and a little girl. Maman tries to explain to the boys the gravity of the

situation and that the visitors must remain secret. But the boys are full of high spirits and compete daily to see who can tell the best lie. They meet a real German soldier and talk to him without their mother's knowledge. More soldiers arrive in Mont-Saint-Martin and take up residence in a château outside the town.

Read pp.13–49

DISCUSSION POINTS

- The letter the girls wrote to Mr Delarue was not very tactful. Read the letter once more and pick out any tactless remarks. How might these be rephrased?
- On p.16 we read that Mr Delarue thinks childhood should be 'like heaven'. What do you think?
- Maman has high expectations of the boys, but they have decided it is impossible to be perfect. What did they do that was not perfect? Was this a good idea?
- What is the threat that overshadows this early part of the story? Have the brothers realised the importance of this (see p.27)?
- Marcel notices the soldier's 'grey eyes and golden hair'. Why might a small boy notice this in particular?

ACTIVITIES

1. FORMAL LETTER-WRITING

We have discussed the flaws in the letter to Mr Delarue. Imagine you have the chance to interview a favourite TV personality or personal hero. Write a letter requesting the interview and mention some of the questions you will be asking.

2. LINES OF COMMUNICATION

At that time, letter-writing was the way people kept in touch. List the many ways that people can keep in touch nowadays. Look at p.19 and rewrite the information contained in the letter as a telephone conversation between Anton and Maman.

3. DEBATE

Maman believes in strict discipline. Why do you think she is so strict? What is corporal punishment? On two pages, write the headings: FOR and AGAINST. List ten points under each heading. Now, what is your opinion of this form of punishment?

4. RESEARCH

Research the events that led to the outbreak of the war. Write a paragraph based on the information you collect.

5. A SENSE OF PLACE

Using an atlas, see if you can find the Loire Valley and some of the other places mentioned: Tours, Le Mans, Paris.

UNIT 2 VISITORS

SUMMARY

Uncle Anton finally arrives with Madame Cauverian and her daughter, Miriam. The boys do not like either of them. Madame Cauverian is depressed, neurotic and highly-strung, while Miriam is serious and sensitive. Even Mirabelle, the dog, growls and whines every time Madame comes near. Miriam becomes ill and takes many weeks to recover. A small celebration is planned on her recovery, but it is ruined when someone steals a pie. Marcel confesses, although he isn't the culprit. The threat of the German army looms ever closer, but Miriam is not well enough to travel. Pierre breaks his leg. Mirabelle disappears; Marcel suspects Madame Cauverian of foul play.

Read pp.50–71

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read the first description of Madame Cauverian on p.51. What is the strongest characteristic Marcel notices about her?

- All food now has to be divided into seven portions instead of four. How do the boys feel about this (p.55)?
- On p.70, René is unkind to Pierre and says hurtful things. What is Pierre's response? Does he get his own back? Discuss what he does next to Marcel.
- Are the visitors still a secret in the village of Mont-Saint-Martin? Who knows about them (see p.61)?
- Why did Marcel confess to something he didn't do? Have you ever done this? If so, what were your reasons?
- During the French Revolution (1789), a popular cry was 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity', quoted on p.56. Discuss the meaning of this phrase. Why might people be prepared to lose their lives for this ideal? What might Marcel mean when he says that, for every tale of 'lionhearted courage and honour', there is another tale of 'helping the enemy, of blaming the weak'?

ACTIVITIES

1. DEBATE

Remember that this is an elderly man's story. On p.57 he describes a time before television when people were less well-informed. What do you think is the effect of 'the whole world' rushing and gushing 'into your living room every night.' Organise a class debate on the motion: 'TV tells us everything we need to know.'

2. SIMILES

A simile compares one thing with another, though they may not be really alike. Marcel uses an ironic simile on p.53, when he says Miriam was 'as delicate as a boulder'. Choose some well-known similes (e.g. as pretty as a picture, as quiet as a mouse) and rewrite in a humorous or sarcastic format.

3. MANNERISMS

Authors sometimes give details of unique personal mannerisms in order to bring a character to life. On p.51, what mannerism do the boys find irritating in Madame Cauverian? Make a list of your friends, teachers and relatives. Can you find a mannerism or idiosyncrasy for each?

4. FEARING DIFFERENCES

'People fear what they do not understand.' Debate the truth of this statement with reference to the terrible treatment of

Jewish people during the Second World War. Contact the Jewish Communal Office, Dublin 6 at +353 1 492 3751 or The Holocaust Educational Trust, London at +44 207 222 6822 or www.het.org.uk for information.

5. RESEARCH

Judaism is one of the world's great religions. Using an encyclopaedia or a search engine, find out about the history and culture of the Jewish people. Perhaps you could arrange a class outing to a synagogue.

6. CHARACTERISATION

The three visitors are described vividly on pp.50–51. Read the descriptions again and illustrate, using a medium of your choice.

UNIT 3 THE ROUNDUP

SUMMARY

René and Marcel are sent to Monsieur Nicodeme's farm to get some honey. They spend the whole day there, while Pierre remains at home because of his broken leg. When they return, they find they have missed the central event of the war in Mont-Saint-Martin: the Germans have rounded up all Jews and all foreigners suspected of being Jewish. They have been herded into trucks and taken away. In the pharmacy, Maman berates some soldiers for this and spits on the floor in front of them. René and Marcel are appalled and petrified. Marcel meets Monsieur Soldier again and speaks with him. Pierre has changed; he has stopped lying.

Read pp.72–90

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Why do you think the boys had begun to feel a fondness for 'their' soldier?
- The round-up is described as 'swift, efficient, silent, and terrible'. Imagine you were a child in a Jewish family. What might your feelings have been on that terrible day?
- 'It is hard to believe in God during the war' (p. 87). Discuss.
- Why is Maman's outburst in the pharmacy dangerous for herself and for the boys? Do you think she was

brave to say what she did? Would you have said anything?

- Miriam is a Jew, forced to hide from the Germans in a cramped attic for a lengthy period. Discuss the similarities of Miriam's experience with that of Anne Frank. Has anyone read *The Diary of Anne Frank*? Give your opinion.

ACTIVITIES

1. WRITING

Poor Monsieur Nicodeme has the task of keeping René and Marcel on his farm all day. He tells them an 'unconvincing ghost story'. Write a ghost story that would keep your friends listening for some time.

2. INTERPRETATION

Read again the scene in the pharmacy. Why did the soldiers ignore Maman? Imagine you are Marcel, Maman or Uncle Anton. Write a short paragraph describing your emotions during the scene.

3. SMALL TALK

On p.79, Maman has a long conversation 'of the sort that bores children'. Write a list of ten topics of conversation that bore you.

4. DRAMA

Act out the funeral service the boys held for Mirabelle. Try to come up with some more brave deeds Mirabelle might have done if she had had the chance.

5. MISSING NOTICE

The boys are devastated by the loss of their dog, Mirabelle. Though eventually she is presumed dead, the children leave no stone unturned in the search for their beloved pet. Write a Lost Dog notice for Mirabelle, which would be displayed in shops and in the village. Describe the dog and give instructions on what to do if she is found. Consider the question of a reward.

6. SIN LIST

On p.90, Marcel doubts that Madame Sevremont has committed any serious or interesting sins. Why is this? Write a list of sins for the following characters: a witch, an angel, a teacher, a toddler, the devil, a mother, a father, a guard dog.

7. ILLUSTRATION

Earlier in the story, Marcel describes his home (p.30). Based on this description,

illustrate using a medium of your choice. Alternatively, try drawing a magnificent **château**. You might like to look up 'château' in an encyclopaedia or on the Internet before you start.

UNIT 4 RESISTANCE

SUMMARY

Time has passed and Pierre has become grown-up and serious. Marcel has nightmares and misses his father. A small resistance movement has emerged in Mont-Saint-Martin. People are still living in fear of the Germans, not knowing who is informing on whom. Marcel is not even allowed to speak of the Cauverians now. A Panzer tank is driven right into the village church, smashing the stonework and the huge wooden doors. In a supreme effort, all the village men shoulder it out. The local *gendarmes* shoot dead a British pilot who has been making his way out of France. In the midst of this, René and Marcel meet Monsieur Soldier again at a secret place, and spend the summer fishing with him and becoming his friends. When Marcel is injured in an accident, Monsieur Soldier carries him home to Maman. The lie is exposed and Maman is shocked. She asks Monsieur Soldier not to see the boys again.

Read pp.91–114.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Pierre says: 'It is harder to tell the truth than to lie.' What do you think?
- On p.98 we read of the priest who was arrested and the British pilot who was shot dead by the local police. Is Mont-Saint-Martin still untouched by the war?
- Why do you think Marcel now grieves for the Cauverians? Why is he not even allowed to mention them?
- How did the boys become friendly with Monsieur Soldier?
- On p.106, we read that Pierre becomes 'gloomier, less fun and more grown-up with every passing week'. Discuss the idea that to be grown up is to be serious.

ACTIVITIES

1. YELLOW STAR

Jewish people were required to wear a yellow star. Try this experiment: find out how many in the class have blue eyes, brown eyes or green eyes. Make armbands or stickers for one group. This group has to wear the armband for a day. Swop over so that everyone has a turn being in the labelled group. Discuss your findings. What did it feel like to be segregated? Write a short account.

2. WRITING

Imagine you are a newspaper reporter. Write your account of the tank smashing into the church and then being hauled and pushed out by the village men.

3. LETTER-WRITING

Monsieur Soldier is far from home and misses his family. Can you find proof for this statement? Imagine you are the soldier. Write a letter to your brother, Karl.

4. RESEARCH

Marcel dreams that Miriam reads to him from **Victor Hugo**. This famous nineteenth-century French author wrote novels, essays, plays and poetry. Look him up, either on the internet or in an encyclopaedia, and try to find two of his most famous works.

5. ILLUSTRATION

Look up the French royal emblem, the **Fleur de Lis**. Make a border or other repeat pattern using this emblem.

6. FIND OUT

What can you find out from your history books about the French resistance movement?

UNIT 5 THE GREATEST LIE

SUMMARY

Maman is so angry with the boys that she cannot speak to them. Eventually, after dark, she reveals the great lie; Madame Cauverian and Miriam come down the ladder from the tiny, cramped attic where they have been hiding for the past six months. Everything

becomes clear to Marcel: why they were sent to the farm for the day, why the dog disappeared, why Pierre became serious and grown-up, why he had strange nightmares, and why he might not have a German soldier for a friend. Now he and René have to join Maman and Pierre in the great lie and keep the Cauverians' secret. Monsieur Soldier sees him once more and tries to say goodbye. Marcel can say nothing to him. He cannot tell the truth and he cannot lie. The Cauverians avoid capture. The war ends. Papa returns and the family emigrate to the US without him. Later, Marcel marries Miriam. He believes that he was the good liar in the end, painting pictures of idyllic French scenes. The story ends with a thank-you letter from Meg, who has learned that history happens to ordinary people.

Read pp.115–141

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Do you think Pierre had found it hard to keep this great secret?
- Many things have now become clear to Marcel. Can you list them? What was Maman doing when she made a scene in Madame Sevremont's shop?

- During his final meeting with Monsieur Soldier, Marcel suddenly realises that they are not very different from each other (p.128). In what ways are they alike?
- 'History is even happening to me, right now, even if I don't know it,' says Meg Mueller. Do you feel that this is true for you? Why?

ACTIVITIES

1. PERSONAL ACCOUNT

Earlier in the story, Marcel relates the family myth of the pie that was knocked over into the sink. They never did discover who the culprit was. Have you any family legends like this one, or other family stories that get told over and over? Write a short account.

2. THE GREATEST LIAR

List all the characters in the story and write beside them the lie or lies they told. Then write the reason for the lie. Who, in your opinion, was the greatest liar?

3. REWRITING

Read again the painful final scene between Marcel and Monsieur Soldier. Marcel could say nothing. Why was this? Write the

words he might have wanted to say.

4. HUMAN COMPLEXITIES

Marcel later feels that his paintings had also told lies. Why is this? On p.138 he lists some people and some emotions he should have tried to paint. Can you find these?

Collect newspapers and magazines, both fashion ones and realistic ones like *National Geographic*. Do a class collage in two halves – showing on one side the glamorous pictures of people, and on the other side those pictures or paintings that show what people really look like, or emotions they really feel. Discuss the differences between the two halves of the collage.

5. ILLUSTRATION

The Cauverians' appearance had greatly changed during their time spent in the tiny attic. Draw Miriam or Madame as they appeared on emerging from hiding.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, GREGORY MAGUIRE



GREGORY MAGUIRE is an award-winning American author who has lived and studied in Dublin. He writes fantasies, science fiction, picture books and historical novels, composes music, and is an artist. He is a founder member of Children's Literature New England, which organises an annual Summer School on children's literature.

Reviews for *The Good Liar*:

'A novel which raises fascinating, teasing questions about the ... nature of fiction and its relationship with lies.' Robert Dunbar, *Children's Books in Ireland*

'[Gregory's] style is engaging and humourous, well conveying the feeling of the time and place.' *Books Ireland*

'An unforgettable story.' *Tallaght Echo*

'It is amusing and gripping, and told in an engaging manner.' Bank Street College Library, New York, *School Library Journal*

THE GOOD LIAR was selected as one of the **BEST 100 Books for Young Readers** by the Book Trust, UK.

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