



# WAR CHILDREN

## *The King of Irishtown* ISBN 978-0-86278-776-9 pb

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### Teaching Guide

By Patricia England

#### RATIONALE AND THEMES

The six stories in *War Children* are set in the time of the Irish War of Independence and will be of particular interest to students in the senior classes in primary schools and in the junior cycle of second-level schools. This story deals with themes such as:

- Prejudice
- Friendships
- Loss of innocence
- Revenge

#### SUMMARY

Much to his mother's disapproval, only child Pat looks to the boys of Irishtown for company. Pat's father owns and runs a newspaper and has a more open mind about Pat's friends. Irishtown residents are in constant conflict with the police sergeant, known as *The King of Irishtown*. Pat realises that the criminal behaviour in Irishtown is sometimes justified by dreadful living conditions. When Tom Farrell is released from gaol, Phil Murphy and two other policemen beat him up on his way home. Pat is stunned by the sheer brutality of the man so respected by his mother and is even more shocked at the reactions of his parents to the event. When Tom runs as a Sinn Féin candidate, Pat witnesses an extraordinary scene in which Tom and two other Sinn Féiners pull a gun on the bullying sergeant, terrorising him. Pat is horrified both by the naked hatred on Tom's face, and by the sergeant's humiliation. He finds it hard to understand his mixed-up feelings at what he has witnessed. His father tells him that he may have seen the future.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Why might the author have chosen to have an eleven-year-old boy narrate this story? Select a passage and retell in the third person. Which voice do you think is the more effective, and why?
- 'Our home was anything but lively. We never laughed out loud as a family or even had a proper row' (pp66, 67). How does Pat feel about his family? In groups, discuss the advantages and disadvantages of being an only child.
- 'Irishtown always struck me as a funny name: we were all Irish in the town, after all – even the respectable folk' (p67). Pat is starting to ask questions about what it means to be Irish. Do his views, shaped by those of his parents, change as he comes into closer contact with the people of Irishtown?
- '... when it was time for me to go home for tea I left late, grudgingly, dragging myself away, hating the fact that I had to go at all' (p77). Why does Pat hate 'every step' as he walks home to his 'silent, respectable house'? What does Pat's opinion of the party and of Tom Farrell himself tell you about Pat's personality and character?
- 1918 is the year World War 1 ends and is also a time of great change in Pat's town. 'The future,' my father said, and his voice was every bit as sad and lonesome as I'd felt all afternoon. 'I think you saw the future' (p103). Do you think that many people in Irishtown would have felt as pessimistic as Tim Doherty did? In what way might his job in the media have contributed to his observations on the future?
- '... and when I looked at the eagerness of my friends I felt more alone than I'd ever done in my whole life' (p101). Why does Pat feel so confused and

alone? Is this reaction different to that of his friends? Why does he need to discuss the event with his father? What does this tell us about their relationship?

#### ACTIVITIES

##### 1. DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Compare and contrast Pat's upbringing and way of life to that of his friends. Write about a friendship, real or imagined, with someone from a background or culture utterly different to yours. Describe the difficulties you may have encountered and how the friendship changed your attitudes. Your writing might take the form of diary entries, noting the gradual changes that took place in your relationship.

##### 2. CREATIVE WRITING

Express your thoughts on respectability. Talk to an elderly person about behaviour that is accepted today that might have been regarded as utterly unacceptable years ago. What might Irish people two generations ago have felt about the songs listened to/clothes worn in the early twenty-first century? You might write a rap or other song, or you might write a lament for days gone by.

##### 3. DEBATE

'In these days of violent crime the Garda Síochána should be armed.' In teams, speak for and against this motion.

##### 4. NEWSPAPER REPORT

Pat's father allows him to write a report on the 'come-uppance' of sergeant Murphy for his newspaper. Write this report from Pat's point of view. You might also write a newspaper report on any incident, witnessed by you, that you feel was unfair or unfairly reported.