



# Kate

Siobhán Parkinson

## Teaching Guide

by PETER HEANEY

### RATIONALE AND THEMES

*Kate* is an endearing story which will appeal to a wide audience. It captures the sense of how hope sustains the dreams of a young girl in the face of poverty and ridicule. It will be impossible not to identify with Kate and her circumstances or share her hopes, setbacks and finally her triumph. The themes are universally relevant and will engage the enthusiasm of an upper junior class.

- Bullying
- Jealousy
- Poverty
- Hopes and aspirations
- Responsibility
- Courage and generosity
- Family support

### SUMMARY

Set in the poverty of the Dublin Liberties of the 1930s, *Kate* tells the story of a young girl struggling to realise her ambition to dance at the Feis. This ambition is in constant danger of being thwarted through circumstances dictated by poverty, family illness and a harsh school environment. However, a simple determination and faith, supported by unexpected generosity and a little creative improvisation on the part of a favourite aunt, ensure that Kate not only achieves her ambition, but also does so with style, dignity and a realisation that poverty is not a badge of shame.

### APPROACH

The themes of this book are woven tightly together to create a well-paced story. The tone and focus of the activities should encourage the children to develop empathy with the character. They also

provide opportunities for developing thinking and communication skills.

The presentation of the novel can be managed into three sections. The theme of each section is cohesive, and teachers may choose to spend a little more time on some of the sections.

### Unit 1: The Nuns

#### SUMMARY

'Wake up Kate,' Kate Delaney's mother hisses at 4 o'clock one morning. Mrs Delaney is needed for an emergency maternity visit to a neighbour and leaves Kate with the responsibility of getting her sisters ready for the day. She has to make sure they are wakened, washed, dressed, fed and taken to school.

Amid the catastrophes of burnt porridge, wailing sisters, cut knees and being locked out of school, Kate finds herself in the Head Nun's office trying to explain why she is late and why she has forgotten to dress herself properly for school.

Mrs Delaney is sent for and arrives at the school ready to do battle; however, things take an unexpected turn when Mother Rosario offers a job in the convent garden to Mr Delaney and suggests Kate take Irish dancing lessons.

We are introduced to Mrs Delaney's younger sister Mary, who answers to the name Polly. She is like an older sister for Kate and together they plot and share secrets.

Read pp 9 – 61

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Why do you think it was Kate's responsibility to get everyone ready for

school and not her dad's?

- Mother Rosario was surprised that Kate's mum was well informed about politics. Why do you think she was surprised? Read pp 48-49.
- Why do you think their food had to be so carefully rationed? Do you think anyone in Ireland lives like this today?
- Kate's family lived in a tenement. How do you think this affected how Kate felt about herself?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. Breakfast

The Delaneys had porridge or tea and fried bread for breakfast. Do you think this would have been an appetising or healthy breakfast?

Can you create a healthy and inexpensive breakfast menu? How would this compare to Kate's?

#### 2. Start the Day

Kate's day is a series of calamities, right from the time she awakens (pp 15-26).

Can you write a 'time diary', describing what happens to you from the time you wake up until you arrive at school?

Can you make a list of any differences and similarities between your start to the day and Kate's?

#### 3. A Note for the Nun

If Kate's dad had written her a note to take to Mother Rosario, she may not have gotten into trouble.

Can you pretend that you are Kate's dad and write a note for her explaining what has happened, without giving too much information away?

## 4. The Unexpected

When Mother Rosario gave Kate a sweet, it was the last thing that Kate expected her to do (p 38).

Can you describe a time when something very unexpected happened to you and explain how **you** felt?

## 5. Mother Rosario

“Tuppence looking down at three-ha pence” is how Kate’s mother describes Mother Rosario before she meets her (pp 40-45). Do you think her impression was confirmed when she did meet her?

Could you pretend that you are Mrs Delaney and write a ‘before the meeting’ and an ‘after the meeting’ impression of Mother Rosario?

## 6. Proverbs / Punch-lines

*Beggars can't be choosers.*

*Tuppence looking down at three-ha pence.*

*Ah sure it could happen to a bishop.*

Proverbs are sayings that add colour to a description. They are used as an abbreviated way to explain things. They can also be used as the punch-line to illustrate the meaning of a story.

Can you choose your own favourite proverb and then write a short description to illustrate it so that your proverb can be used as the punch-line?

## 7. Letter to the Landlord

The sanitary conditions in the tenement are very poor (pp 25-26). Kate has decided to write to their landlord to complain and ask him to renovate the toilets. Could you help her to compose a suitable letter?

# Unit 2: Aon dó trí

## SUMMARY

Kate reluctantly accompanies the class bully, Tess O’Hara, and her friends to Mrs Maguire’s Irish dancing classes after school. Tess tells Kate that the lessons are free, but Kate doesn’t realise that she is the victim of a spiteful joke. Her first lesson captures her interest and she knows that she is a dancer.

Kate returns to earth with a bump when Mrs Maguire asks for a fee. She realises from her giggling classmates that she has been tricked by them. She returns home to tell her mother about the fee and lies

that she didn’t really like dancing anyway.

Her humiliation is made public the next day as Tess tells everyone. Kate’s friends Angela and Nell are very sympathetic and comfort her.

That day, Kate receives a letter from Mrs Maguire offering her free lessons for the term. Kate accepts. She learns quickly because she enjoys dancing so much and is selected for the Feis.

But Kate needs a costume. This seems impossible so she undertakes a novena to St Bernadette. Sr. Eucharia takes a very dim view of the triviality of Kate’s petition.

Her mum devises a plan to secure the material to make the costume and Kate mounts a daily watch on a bolt of cloth in Frawley’s drapery shop, waiting for it to become a remnant and reduce in price.

However, it is sold off with no remnant. Meanwhile, Kate’s mum falls seriously ill with TB. Kate begins to buckle. It seems that God has abandoned her altogether.

Read pp 62 – 106

## DISCUSSION POINTS

- Kate discovers that she has a talent for dancing and it transforms her (p 77). Do you think it is important for everyone to be good at something? Where do you think that your own talent lies?
- It seems to Kate that God might have answered her prayers in a way that she never anticipated (pp 94 – 95). Do you think it is appropriate to interpret everyday events as miracles, or are they simply coincidence? What makes the difference in these two views?
- Kate copes with her disappointment by pretending not to care (pp 69 – 71). Do you think this is a healthy or effective strategy? Why do you think her dad gives her money to buy sweets? What are good strategies for coping with either disappointment or elation?
- Kate is the victim of a cruel joke designed to humiliate her by underlining her family’s poverty (pp 62, 67 & 72). Do you think this is acceptable humour? What effect might it have on the victim?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. Playground Games

Kate and her friends use a skipping game to distract themselves (p 73). Can you choose a playground game that is unique to your area and create an instruction manual, complete with illustrations, that will allow anyone to play your game in their playground?

### 2. Talents

Kate is told that she has a talent for dancing (p 75). Can you make a list of your own talents? Choose one from your list and explain how you use the talent and how it makes you feel when you use it.

### 3. DOs and DON'Ts

Kate uses indifference and anger to help her cope with her disappointment at not being able to continue dancing (pp 69-71). If you were in a similar situation what would you do? Can you make a list of DOs and DON'Ts to advise people how to cope with disappointment in a healthy and appropriate way?

### 4. Onóra na hÉireann

“Chun glóire Dé agus onóra na hÉireann” is the phrase that Mrs Maguire uses to exhort her pupils to do their best. She also has Maguire School of Dancing brooches to inspire them. Could you design a suitable emblem / flag and motto for your class which would encourage you all to do your very best? (For ideas, see *Celtic Decorative Art* by Deborah O’Brien, ISBN 978-0-86278-598-7.)

### 5. Fiscal Prudence

Mrs Delaney has to manage their money very carefully in order to be able to pay their rent (pp 70-71). Can you find out how much 3/6 might be worth in today’s currency?

Pretend that your pocket money has been reduced to 50c per week. Write out a balance sheet to show how you could most effectively use what you have. How would your budget influence your choices?

### 6. A Special Intention

If Kate had replied to Sr. Eucharia that she was praying for a ‘special intention’, how might the exchange between them have been different (pp 87-90)?

Can you rewrite a short dialogue to show

Sr. Eucharía's determination to discover the 'intention' and Kate's equal determination not to reveal it?

## 7. End of Term Report

Kate's end of term report has three sections on it for comments. Mother Rosario, Sr. Eucharía and Mrs Maguire use these to record their impressions of Kate.

Can you pretend that you are each of them in turn and complete the sections? Do you think each of the sections will be the same? What can we learn from this about people's opinions?

## Unit 3: God's ways are not our ways

### SUMMARY

Everything seems lost when Polly announces that she has the best idea in the world. She has been reading *Gone with the Wind* and remembers how Scarlett O'Hara made a dress from a pair of curtains. She has just the pair and they are in a lovely shade of green. Polly sweeps Kate's protests aside and the dressmaking begins. All the while, under the care of Polly and her neighbours, Kate's mum is making a steady recovery.

The night before the Feis, Polly finishes the costume and Mrs Delaney is well enough to embroider a Celtic Knot on Kate's dress. The Knot glows with colour and brings the dress to life.

The next day at the Feis, Mrs Maguire is fussing over last minute details. When Kate sees Tess O'Hara in her blue costume, she realises where the material from Frawley's went. Tess has also discovered the origins of Kate's dress and she makes loud, spiteful comments. Kate dismisses the comments with silence and when her name is called Mrs Maguire prods her out onto the stage. At the end of Kate's dance, thunderous applause erupts in the hall and she beams until her cheeks ache. She takes first place and returns home. Polly has arranged a celebration and has bought a Jacob's cake. However, it is a dual celebration as Polly announces that she had gotten married that very morning and she is to emigrate to the USA within weeks. Kate is

deflated. Not only has Polly got married, but her new husband is Shamy Macnamara and not Bill. Polly confesses that Bill was "no good", hinting at another reason for choosing to marry Shamy in secret at short notice. Kate realises that things have changed forever. She is no longer the poor girl from the tenement but is now the champion Irish dancer and anything really can be possible.

Read pp 107 – 158

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Polly has a secret, which is hinted at but never revealed (pp 99-100, 118-119 & 146-152). ***This is a sensitive subject which you may decide to investigate.***
- Do you think there was another reason behind Polly's decision to get married quickly and then emigrate immediately? Why was the attitude towards unmarried mothers so unfair then and how does it compare to attitudes today?
- Mrs Delaney has contracted tuberculosis (TB). This deadly disease, along with high infant mortality, characterised Ireland in the 1950s and was a direct result of poverty. What health issues are important in Ireland today? Is Ireland a healthier place to live today? Does everyone benefit? How do societies in the Developing World cope?
- Kate is able to dance at the Feis because she and Polly chose not to be intimidated by the circumstances they found themselves in. Why is choice important? What choices will you have to make today and how might they affect you?
- Poverty exists today, both in Ireland and worldwide. Our attitudes towards it can range from condemnation and criticism to understanding and support. From where do you think Kate found support or attracted criticism? Why do you think this is so? Do you think Ireland today generally criticises or understands poverty? What evidence do you have to convince you?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

Kate and her friends have to do a lot of improvising to create the things they cannot afford to buy new (pp 116, 117,

128). This still happens today throughout the world. Choose some of the things you own and use your imagination to describe how they could be reused rather than discarded.

#### 2. Keeping in Contact

Time has moved on and it is now a year since Polly and Shamy emigrated. Kate and Polly have exchanged letters describing how life has changed for them both. Can you pretend that you are either Kate or Polly and write their letter to the other?

#### 3. Daily Herald

You are a reporter and you have been sent to write a short piece on the Feis (100 words only) that will inspire and inform your readers. You have seen Kate's performance, heard her speech and experienced the audience's reaction (pp 138-140). What kind of report will you write?

#### 4. The Late Late Show

*(You will need to work in small groups for this activity.)*

Kate's performance and speech has attracted media attention and she is invited to appear on the Late Late Show. You are a small team of researchers working for Pat Kenny and he has asked you to compile a list of ten questions that he can ask Kate that will allow her to tell her story. Can you create a list of questions for him to ask her?

#### 5. The Interview

*(You will need to work in small groups for this activity.)*

Pat Kenny's researchers have sent a list of questions that he would like to ask Kate on the show. *(You can rotate the lists you created in Activity 4 among the groups in the class.)*

Can your group help Kate to compile suitable replies, which will give a colourful sense of her story?

#### 6. The Celtic Knot

Kate's mum found a design of interlocking loops. When she embroidered it onto Kate's dress, it transformed it with a vibrant Celtic magic (p 125). Can you design and produce your impression of what the Celtic Knot might have looked like? You can include a short description of the symbolism of the shapes and the colours.

## 7. The X-Factor

An adjudicator is always looking for something special in a medal winner and Kate has won first prize (pp 133-134). Could you write the adjudicator's report and the comments she made as she watched Kate dance? Keep your report very short, no more than 40 words.