



SAFE HARBOUR

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MARITA CONLON McKENNA

Teaching Guide

By Liz Morris

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This historical novel has been selected for use in the senior classes of primary school and in the junior cycle of second-level schools, as it portrays in a graphic yet sensitive manner the horrors and tragedies of the Second World War. It deals with the effects of the Blitz on the population of the United Kingdom and of London in particular. Other themes include:

- Family relationships
- Role of individual in society
- Local community
- Journeying
- Dealing with adversity
- Conflict and loss
- Growing up
- Importance of home

SUMMARY

When their home is destroyed and their mother critically injured during the Blitz, Sophie and Hugh are evacuated to their grandfather's house in County Wicklow. Hugh adapts quickly to his new surroundings, but Sophie misses her parents and finds it difficult to communicate with the grandfather who has refused for years to speak to his own son. When blamed for an accident in which Hugh almost drowns, her isolation and unhappiness increase, and it is not until she and Grandfather work together to save an injured German pilot that they resolve to set aside past differences.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the novel has been divided into five units, each of which contains suggested discussion points and language-based activities.

UNIT 1 THE BLITZ

SUMMARY

When they hear the warning sirens, Sophie and Hugh make a dash for the nearest air-raid shelter, from where they listen to the bombs falling overhead. When the All Clear sounds, they are unprepared for the devastation – their neighbourhood has suffered a direct hit and whole streets are now unsafe. Their mother lies unconscious in the garden. She is taken by ambulance to the nearest hospital, where it becomes clear that she has suffered a serious fracture to the skull. From her temporary accommodation in the old church hall, Sophie visits the hospital and is at first relieved to see Aunt Jessie sitting at her mother's bedside. But Jessie announces that she has contacted the children's grandfather in neutral Ireland and that he has agreed to accept them until their mother's condition improves.

Read pp.9–42

DISCUSSION POINTS

- In the air-raid shelter, Sophie sang, a cross-looking woman knitted, another slept (p.9). How you might have passed the time in the shelter?
- Flossie Abercorn chose to plant flowers on the roof of their shared shelter (p.18). What might explain her decision to have 'a fine show in the summer' instead of the more usual, and useful, vegetable patch?
- Sophie's heart sank when she realised that their house 'would be cordoned off until they decided if it had to be

demolished or not' (p.25). How might you feel in a similar situation? Consider the importance of the home in times of uncertainty and insecurity.

- Mum had begged her husband not to enlist, saying 'You're Irish ... It's not your fight' (p.41). Examine Neil's reply and say with whom you most agree. Can you see the justification for each point of view? What do you think Sophie and Hugh felt as they watched their dad leave 'like all the other dads'?
- 'Sophie hated being late, hated homework not done, subjects being changed, rules broken.' Dad said she was 'a creature of habit'. Do you agree that was just 'a nice way of saying she was dull, ordinary and boring' (p.42)? Do you think that people value rules more in wartime than at other times?

ACTIVITIES

1. SONGS OF COMFORT

The people in the shelter sang 'all the old nursery rhymes ... Songs of comfort' (p.11). List some of those well-known songs and television or cinema soundtracks which might provide comfort to a similar group of people in this century and say why you have chosen each piece of music.

2. CREATURE COMFORTS

Sophie thinks of the relative comfort of their own shelter where she has 'a blanket and pillow ... and a pen and pencils to do her homework' (p.13). A shelter installed in a backyard measured about ten feet by four feet and contained non-perishable foodstuffs and a container of water. List the items you would choose to keep in the shelter and give reasons for your choices.

3. SIGNIFICANT POSSESSIONS

The bag found on Sophie's mother contained objects, some of which, such as the handwritten recipe, were very ordinary. Others, like the embroidered ration-card holder and gold jewellery were more personal. Consider items which might be found on your person and write what each might mean to your friends and family.

4. WARTIME FAVOURITES

This book opens with two verses from a song regularly broadcast on children's programmes during the war. Read these verses and say why you think it was so popular. Using a search engine, key in 'London Blitz' and find a list of other wartime songs. Many originated in movies and were played by bands and orchestras in the dance halls. Write a paragraph on the importance or otherwise of music and songs in times of war.

5. RESEARCH

Find out more about the voluntary and other services which contributed to the safety of British citizens during the war years. Write a short paragraph on the work of each of the following: ARP Wardens; the Auxiliary Fire Service or AFS; the Home Guard (or 'Dad's Army'); the Coast Guard; the Women's Voluntary Service.

UNIT 2 EVACUATION

SUMMARY

When they narrowly escape injury or death, Aunt Jessie decides that the children must be moved. Their mother has regained consciousness and wants them to move to Ireland. Volunteers arrange for them to take the next train to Holyhead, and so they set off for a strange land and a grandfather they have never met. On the mailboat, they try to banish thoughts of home by imagining what life will be like in Ireland. Sophie's stomach churns, not with seasickness but with nerves. What if their grandfather doesn't like them, or they him?

Read pp.43–67

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Watching *Goodbye Mister Chips*, Sophie was soon lost in the world of the ageing schoolmaster (p.43). At the time, a seat in the front stalls cost around one shilling, the expensive back stalls one shilling and sixpence. Why were films such as *The Song of Bernadette*, *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* so popular in Britain during the war period?
- Some of the children 'seemed to think that being evacuated was like going on some sort of holiday' (p.50). Consider the mixed feelings and emotions experienced by these evacuees as they leave home and family and journey to unfamiliar places. How might you have felt in a similar situation?
- Sophie has little idea where she is travelling because of the government decision to remove all signposts and station names (p.53). Consider the likely impact of this on British citizens and on potential enemies and say if you think it was an effective strategy.
- Hugh is upset when Tom says they are cowards, 'running away to a country that won't help in the war' (p.57). Is Hugh convinced by Sophie's reply? Do you agree with her? What answer might you have given Hugh or Tom?

ACTIVITIES

1. TREASURED BELONGINGS

The children had 'some clothes, the photo of Dad in his uniform taken the day before he went away and an extra pair of shoes for Sophie' (p.47). Describe the personal items that you would bring with you if you were leaving home and family for an unknown period of time, and say why you might include each item in your suitcase.

2. ACROSS THE DECADES

From the train, Sophie sees 'privies, lean-tos, rows of houses ... some bombed out ... row upon row of allotments ...' (p.50). Describe the view from a train in the early years of the twenty-first century and compare the two accounts.

3. LETTER-WRITING

The website of Chernobyl Children's Project www.chernobyl-international.com has information on the holidays in Ireland organised for children still suffering from

the effects of the nuclear disaster. Write to one of the host families involved. Do you think these children, brought here for rest and recuperation, experience reactions similar to those of Sophie and Hugh?

4. LET'S PRETEND

Sophie and Hugh play a game when they are 'scared or sick or bored' (p.64). Write what you see when you close your eyes and pretend to be someplace else.

5. PREDICTION

Sophie wonders about the place her grandfather lives and worries that he may not like them (p.66). Write an account of their meeting as you imagine it will be.

UNIT 3 WELCOME TO IRELAND

SUMMARY

Grandfather's face reminds Sophie of her father, but she senses his disappointment as he gazes at the tired children. Housekeeper Nancy assures them that her employer is 'right excited' that they have come to stay, but Sophie is both surprised and upset when her grandfather asks no questions about her parents, nor about their lives in London. She feels that no one really minds what they do, that she is in a no-man's land where she and Hugh are the outsiders. Aunts Dolly and Maude ask about their parents only in Grandfather's absence and when, in an attempt to console Sophie, he speaks of his *duty* to care for them, her sense of isolation is complete.

Read pp.68–110

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Sophie realises that they could have 'made a better first impression' on their grandfather (pp.69-70). Do you think that an initial impression, either positive or negative, can have long-lasting consequences?
- Grandfather's gaze is 'cold and distant on meeting the children' (p.69). He doesn't seem interested in them or in their lives in London (p.75). Is Nancy mistaken that he is 'right excited' about the children coming to stay?
- Hugh says it is 'too quiet' to sleep (p.76). What other reasons can you

suggest for his inability to sleep? Why did Hugh drop off to sleep so soon after he joined Sophie in her bed?

- Sophie wants to be honest, yet loyal to her parents and her London home (pp.84–85). Have you experienced a similar conflict of loyalties?
- When Grandfather discovers the children in his room, he shouts and even raises his hand as if to hit Hugh (p.91). What causes this extreme reaction? Can it be justified? Have you ever done anything which makes you feel, as Sophie does, ‘utterly miserable ... ashamed of [her] behaviour’?
- When Nancy throws out Hugh’s old clothes, no-one is prepared for Sophie’s reaction (pp.108–110). Did she overreact or was her behaviour excusable? How might you have behaved in similar circumstances?

ACTIVITIES

1. HOUSEHOLD RULES

Over breakfast, Grandfather announces the rules he expects the children to obey and later insists they should wear lifejackets, saying that this is ‘an absolute unbreakable rule’ (p.146). Read the rules on pp.77–78 and then write a set of your own which you might impose on visitors. You might also write the list of household rules which apply in your own home.

2. TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED

The children discover ‘a collection of legs – some flesh-coloured, one white and gleaming, looking almost like bare bone...’ (p.89). Imagine you discover something similarly unexpected in an old cupboard. Are you horrified or fascinated? Write a paragraph describing your reaction.

3. CREATIVE WRITING

Grandfather has never told the children what happened to his leg and Sophie now wonders if he lost it fighting in some war (p.92). Invent your own reason for his injury and write an account of the circumstances in which he lost his leg.

4. KEEPING IN TOUCH

Noticing the wireless in Grandfather’s study, Sophie realises just how ‘far removed’ she feels ‘from England and the war effort. From everything that was going on at home’. (pp.95–96). Find out all you

can about the early battery operated radios of the period. Write a piece, fictional or other, on the importance of the radio to the British public during the war years.

5. LETTER-WRITING

The children’s health has improved and they are now wearing new clothes (p.107). Write the letter Sophie might send to a friend in London, describing the availability of food, petrol and clothing in the Ireland of the Emergency.

UNIT 4 DARK WATERS

SUMMARY

Hugh appears to be settling in much better than Sophie, who finds school dull and spends much of her time on her own. Only the radio broadcasts, particularly that special programme for child evacuees, makes her forget the loneliness and provides her with a link to children just like her all over the world. Her relationship with Grandfather deteriorates when he blames her for an accident in which Hugh is nearly drowned. Nancy takes personal leave when she receives a telegram informing her that her brother has been lost at sea. Sophie and Grandfather take over the household chores, although they speak to one another only when necessary. But when Hugh is disturbed by dreadful nightmares, they declare a truce.

Read pp.111–141

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Sophie’s letters home are full of ‘good news and cheerful things’ (p.115). Why do people sometimes decide to keep the truth from loved ones who are far away? Should she have told Aunt Jessie how she really felt?
- Grandfather’s ‘rage and anger’ seem totally directed at Sophie (p.119). Do you agree that he was right to slap Sophie across the face? Can corporal punishment ever be justified, even in extreme circumstances?
- Consider Nancy’s advice (p.122). Did Grandfather deserve Sophie’s respect? In a similar situation, what advice might you give Sophie? Why?
- When Nancy received the telegram,

Grandfather behaved in a way Sophie would not have thought possible. ‘He seemed so kind and caring. Compassionate.’ (p.127). What might this tell us about Grandfather’s personality? (See also pp.118 and 128)

ACTIVITIES

1. DEBATE

Organise a debate on the motion ‘Learning is the very cornerstone of society’ (p.111).

2. LISTEN TO LEARN

Sophie finds it difficult to relate to talk about ‘the Emergency’ – she knew it was definitely ‘the war’, having lived through the Blitz (p.112). Write the dialogue that might take place as she and the other girls discuss their different experiences.

3. FARAWAY HOME

Sophie and Hugh listen to programmes for evacuated children (p.113). Imagine you were forced to live in a strange place. Write a paragraph recording your reactions to a similar broadcast. You might contact the broadcasting networks in your area for information on any programmes they may currently transmit which are of special interest to economic or political refugees.

4. CHARACTER PROFILE

Sophie and Grandfather agree to ‘declare a truce and call off the hostilities’ (p.141). Write a list of adjectives to portray aspects of these or any other characters, then write a short piece saying why you have chosen to describe these particular characters.

5. FURTHER READING

In her book about Jewish refugees in Northern Ireland, Marilyn Taylor describes the night of the Belfast blitz, 16 April 1941 (See *Faraway Home*, ISBN 978-0-86278-643-4). Compare the accounts of the two bombing raids and detail your reaction to each.

UNIT 5 SAFE HARBOUR

SUMMARY

Nancy returns and the children hear that their mother is now in rehabilitation. Grandfather presents the children with a

boat which he has named in their honour. The stress and trauma of recent months take their toll on Sophie and she breaks down, expressing all of her previously hidden fears and loneliness. When a German aircraft crash-lands, Sophie helps Grandfather to rescue the lone survivor. The sight of the dead and injured German fighters reminds Grandfather of his son who is fighting in the same war and persuades him to try and end the years of family bitterness.

Read pp.142–173

DISCUSSION POINTS

- When she returns, Nancy works ‘like a whirlwind’, as if she wants ‘to block out the events of the past eight days’ (p.142). Does work take your mind off personal worries or troubles? Is this a good way to deal with such problems? Suggest other ways in which Nancy might have dealt with her brother’s death.
- ‘Men can manage if they have to’ (p.142). Would this opinion have been more or less common during the early 1940s than it is nowadays?
- A weight lifts off Sophie’s shoulders when she sees the boat (p.144). How significant was the name Grandfather chose for the boat and how much did it contribute to Sophie’s feeling of relief?
- When his leg is amputated, Grandfather

gives up his dream of surgery (p.156). Discuss the effects such a disappointment might have had.

- Aunt Dolly is exasperated that the children don’t know about the earlier accident (p.157). Why might their parents have chosen not to tell them? Did the children have a right to know?
- Learning of the Dublin bombing, Sophie becomes ‘hysterical ... laughing and crying at the same time’ (p. 162). This is a delayed reaction to her mother’s critical illness, separation from her family and the near-drowning of her brother. Nowadays, counselling is available to those who have witnessed or been involved in tragedies and disasters. Might you avail of such a service, or would you prefer to deal with the situation in your own way?
- Grandfather explains that the pilot will be sent to an internment camp for the rest of the war. Do you agree that this is ‘probably the best thing that could happen to him’ (p.171)? Can you suggest alternatives to internment which might better serve both the local community and the potential prisoner?

ACTIVITIES

1. REST AND RECREATION

Dolly plays the piano to ‘forget all the bad things’. Sophie agrees that the same thing

happens when she sings (p.154). What do you do to take your mind off things? Write a paragraph describing your favourite ways of relaxing after a stressful day or week.

2. COPING WITH LOSS


Grandfather had tried to deal with the death of one son by trying to ‘block out and forget the other one’ (p.158). Write the advice that you might give to someone who has suffered the loss of a loved one.

3. NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

‘Some people jeered and booed when the German pilot stepped off the boat onto the beach’ (p.171). Write a paragraph from the viewpoint of those locals who reacted with hostility to the injured German, explaining their reaction **or** describe the reactions of the pilot to those who taunted him.

4. PREDICTION

Grandfather realises that it’s ‘never too late’ to ‘... end those long years of family bitterness’ (p.172). Write an Epilogue for the book, detailing the family’s reaction to the letter he intends to write.

 Denotes activities that are suitable for both senior cycle primary school use and junior cycle secondary school use.

Reviews for *Safe Harbour*

‘Marita Conlon-McKenna is probably the most successful children’s author currently writing in Ireland and her *Safe Harbour* shows why.’ Vincent Banville, *The Irish Times*

‘Seeing World War II through the eyes of a 12-year-old is not easy but Marita Conlon-McKenna has written an extremely touching book which will strike a chord with today’s children, even 50 years removed from the momentous events of those years.’ *Tallaght Echo*

‘Two children move from war-torn London to live in Ireland ... the loneliness of their new environment, their real fears for themselves and their parents, the lack of understanding by their grandfather, are all well written in a style that makes for page turning.’ Jeanne Quigley, *Shell Magazine*

ALSO BY MARITA CONLON-MCKENNA:

No Goodbye (ISBN 9780-86278-362-4, pb). When their mother suddenly leaves, four children and their father must find a way to cope. Each of them misses her in their own way, and each of them desperately wants her to come back.



The Blue Horse (ISBN 978-0-86278-305-1, pb). Traveller Katie and her family become destitute when their caravan is destroyed in a fire. She must learn to adapt to a completely new lifestyle, but will she and her family be accepted by the settled community?



Winner Children’s Books Ireland/Bisto Book of the Year Award 1992-93.

In Deep Dark Wood (ISBN 978-0-86278-615-1, pb). A strange new neighbour spirits Mia to a land of legend, and her brother Rory faces dragons and danger to rescue her, in this story of wonder and magic.

