RATIONALE AND THEMES

This is the third book in the highly acclaimed *Children of the Famine* trilogy. Through the eyes of Mary-Brigid, Eily’s child, we continue to follow the life stories of the survivors of the Great Famine. It is suitable for use in the senior classes of primary schools and the junior cycle of second-level schools. In addition to being a satisfying read in its own right, it lends itself to discussion and exploration of the following themes:

- Journeys
- Childhood
- Independence and leaving childhood behind
- Land ownership in Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century
- Inequity and exploitation
- Care of horses
- Conflict and its resolution
- Love and loyalty

SUMMARY

*Fields of Home* is set in the second half of the nineteenth century and traces the lives of the O’Driscoll children into adulthood. Eily is married to John Power and has two children. In common with many others, the possession of their farm is not secure, depending as it does on the whim of successive landlords and often corrupt agents. Finally, after much hardship and uncertainty, Eily’s brother, Michael, purchases their farm for them, giving them the security that land ownership confers. Michael’s promising career as stable boy comes to an abrupt end when Castletaggart House is burnt to the ground. With the resilience already displayed by his family, he confronts this setback with dignity and courage and we sense that he will survive and prosper. Peggy has emigrated to Boston and works as a maid to a wealthy family. On his second proposal, she agrees to marry James, the brother of her friend Sarah. Together they head west on yet another journey. But this is a journey she really wants to make.

So, with their future relatively secure, we leave the three young people whose eventful lives we have followed since their early childhood. Readers should find this a satisfactory and appropriate conclusion.

APPROACH

For the purpose of this class exploration the book is divided into five units, each of which contains suggested discussion points and language-based activities. Useful website and other addresses are listed where relevant.

UNIT 1

CASTLETAGGART

SUMMARY

We again meet the members of the O’Driscoll family who stayed behind in Ireland when Peggy went to America. Eily is married to John and they live in peace and relative plenty with their two children and great-aunt Nano. Michael is a stable boy at Castletaggart House. Here, under the tutelage of old-timer Toss, Michael is becoming skilled at handling horses. The tenant farmers are growing increasingly angry about high rents and the insecurity of their tenure.

Read pp.7–39.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- In retrospect, was Eily wise to have stayed in Ireland? She had had an opportunity to go to America after the famine. Should she have gone? Why was Mrs Hennessy so distressed?
- Certain issues dominated Irish politics during the second half of the nineteenth century. One was the fight for national independence. Given the Hennessy’s experience, can you suggest another issue of immediate concern to tenant farmers?
- ‘That was the grandest thing I ever saw,’ whispered Brendan. To what was he referring? Why did he find it so moving?
- Michael witnessed birth and death all in the one night. How might you have coped with this? Share your experiences so far (if any) of the moments of birth and death. Try to communicate how you felt and try to listen sympathetically to your classmates as they tell their stories.

ACTIVITIES

1. **LETTER TO AMERICA**

   Write the letter that Eily might have written to Peggy in America, describing her life now and her hopes and fears for the future.

2. **PERSONALITY PROFILE**

   Write a detailed description of Michael’s character as you know it to date. Comment on his personality and his ability with horses.
3. **Childhood Scenes**

Sketch three scenes from Mary-Brigid’s childhood which together create the impression of a happy, secure upbringing. Write a caption and short commentary for each one.

4. **We Protest**

Design a placard for a tenant farmers’ protest meeting. Research their grievances before you design the placard.

5. **The Land League**

The National Land League was an organisation set up to help tenant farmers. Michael Davitt was one of its founders. Using [www.encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com) or similar search engine, search for the Irish Land Question and find out the three main aims of the Land League.

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**UNIT 2**

**Boston and Back**

**Summary**

We renew acquaintance with Peggy, who emigrated to Boston after the Famine. She is still working as a maid in Rushton House. The vain and aggravating Roxanne is getting married and there is a mad flurry of activity. Peggy makes her peace with Roxanne, but is devastated to learn that her friend Kitty will be leaving Rushton House to be Roxanne’s housekeeper in her new home. Meanwhile, back in Ireland, a neighbour of Eily’s, a destitute widow, is evicted for not paying rent. Mary-Brigid feels a powerful sense of outrage that an old woman can be thrown out of her home like this. Michael competes in a horse race and comes second on Nero. He is appalled at the cruelty which horrifies him. When Mrs O’Connor said ‘the fish took the bait’ (p.42), what did she mean? Why was the fish? Who was the bait? Was it a good start to the marriage? Why?

**Activities**

1. **Personality Profile**

Kitty and Peggy stitched two samplers with the motto: BE GOOD SWEET MAID and FRIENDSHIP IS A GIFT. Which one do you think Peggy stitched? Write a short personality profile of each girl.

2. **Society Wedding**

Write an account of Roxanne’s wedding for Hello/VIP/OK magazine. Remember to mention any famous guests.

3. **Just Doing His Job**

Write the conversation which might have occurred between the older constable and his wife when he went home the evening of the eviction. Try to bring out his personal conflict between doing his job and his sympathy for the Widow O’Brien.

4. **The Race**

Read the account of Michael’s race (pp.69–70). Write a sense poem which communicates the excitement of the race. In the first draft begin each line as follows:

- I see
- I hear
- I touch
- I taste
- I smell
- I feel/sense

Improve on this draft and rewrite, omitting I see, I hear, etc. at the beginning of each line. Read aloud to the class/group.

**Discussion Points**

- Do you think Peggy should have gone west with Sarah’s family? Why didn’t she? What might you have done?
- ‘Go back to England.’ Why did Felicia react so strongly to this taunt?
- If the fire hadn’t happened how do you think Michael’s life would have worked out?
- Felicia said that her father was a good man and he had done his best for the tenants. Do you agree? She also said that her father predicted that the Irish would all fight among themselves and kill each other one by one. To what extent did his prediction come true?
ACTIVITIES

1. DECISIONS
Draw a line down the centre of a page. On one side list reasons why Peggy should go with Sarah. On the other side list reasons why she shouldn’t.

2. WORKERS UNITE!
Pretend you are a journalist. Write an article for a Trade Union journal highlighting the awful working conditions in Goldman’s shirt factory. List demands that the union might make and decide how it might achieve those demands. (The article’s ‘audience’ is fellow workers whose support you need to enlist.) Be persuasive!

3. DIARY-WRITING
Write Felicia’s diary entry describing:
(1) the fire
(2) the reaction of the workers, as she left
(3) her emotions on going to England.

4. FAVOURITE CHARACTERS
Compare the relationship between Michael and Mercy to the relationship between Peggy and James. Write a paragraph saying which of the four characters you find most likeable and why.

5. HEART-TO-HEART
Write the conversation which might have occurred between Mercy and her best friend when she returned to Athlone.

UNIT 4
THE GIFT

SUMMARY

John, Eily’s husband, is beaten up in a brawl between the agent Hussey and some tenants after a tenants’ meeting. News is out that the new landlord plans to compulsorily merge small holdings into bigger units and to increase rents. John is determined to hold on to the land which his family has farmed for generations. Meanwhile Toss passes on his wealth and experience of horses, passes on the gift of horse whispering. Later, Michael comes to visit Eily. His visit serves to lighten the atmosphere of dread in the house and his presence brings new energy and hope. Eventually Hussey’s representative does come and announces that their rent is to be doubled. Eily is distraught. The pig and hens are sold in an effort to raise the necessary money.

Read pp.127–154

DISCUSSION POINTS

☐ Discuss the issue of land ownership in Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century. What were the problems faced by John and Eily in relation to their farm?

☐ What is a horse whisperer? Have you ever heard of this before? Where? What effect does it have on a horse?

☐ Ever since the night her father had come home all bruised and cut, it was as if ‘a dark shadow like a big black crow had spread its wings and settled itself over them all’ (p.143). In what way, do you think, had the atmosphere of the house changed since that night? Try to identify what it was exactly that was worrying each member of the household. Should Mary-Brigid’s family have explained to her what was going on?

☐ “‘Twill be a lie,” she said softly. “Twill be a fib,” said her mother.’ (p.136)
Explain the difference. Was it fair of Eily to put Mary-Brigid in this position? If you were Eily what might you have done?

UNIT 5
A SOD OF EARTH

SUMMARY

Even with the proceeds raised from the sale of fruit pies, jams, jellies and chutneys, John and Eily have insufficient money to pay the increased rent. Under threat of eviction and in a state of siege, the family wait. In the nick of time Michael arrives with the news that he has sold one of his horses and bought the land from the landlord, Dennis Ormonde, and the eviction order has been cancelled. Meanwhile James calls on Peggy to say goodbye, to reiterate his love for her and to explain his earlier awkward proposal. This time Peggy has
no second thoughts. She packs her bags, arranges for her wages to be sent to Eily in Ireland, and says goodbye to all at Rushton. James and she marry and head west with James’s family.

Read pp.155–189.

**DISCUSSION POINTS**

- Eily and Peggy’s idea of security and happiness was to own land. Why is this? For you and your generation what would be seen to guarantee security and happiness for your future?

- Can you identify at least three marketing strategies which enhanced sales of Eily’s produce on market day? (See pp.161–163)

- Robert Dunbar, speaking in Waterstones at the launch of this book in 1996, says that for him all the author’s work to date ‘has had at its centre an urge to find a harbour, a haven, where her various protagonists, usually after harrowing journeys, earn their ease and experience their self-fulfilment.’ Do you agree?

- Do you find the ending of this story satisfactory? Why? What do you think Michael will do next? Will Peggy ever meet up with her family again?

**ACTIVITIES**

1. **PEGGY’S STORY**

   Five chapters in this book tell Peggy’s story. Can you identify them? Summarise her story from the time of Roxanne’s wedding to her own wedding and her journey out west.

2. **JOURNEYS**

   Peggy has made three very important journeys in her life so far. Can you briefly describe each journey and link it to the book from the *Children of the Famine* trilogy which tells that part of her story. (If you haven’t read these books there are clues at the back of *Fields of Home.*) Which journey do you think was the most memorable for Peggy? Why?

3. **ADJECTIVES**

   Examine agent Hussey’s part in the lead-up to the attempted eviction (pp.175–180). Make a list of adjectives which accurately describe his personality. Make sure you have evidence for each adjective from the text.

4. **FURTHER READING**

   Peggy reflects that all of the important parts of her life have involved journeys. As a class, brainstorm all the stories you can think of where the plot centres around a journey. Display your findings.

5. **BOOK COVERS**

   Compare the covers of the three editions of *Fields of Home*, either here or at www.obrien.ie.

   In what ways are the covers similar? In what ways are they different? Which do you prefer and why? Why do you think the publisher might have changed the cover?

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR, MARITA CONLON-MCKENNA**

**MARITA CONLON-MCKENNA** was brought up in Dublin. She is married with four children, and lives in the Stillorgan area. She decided to write *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, the first of the *Children of the Famine* trilogy, when she heard a radio report of an unmarked children’s grave from the Famine period being found under a hawthorn tree. It was Marita’s first book, and was an immediate success on its publication in May 1990.

Two other award-winning books in the *CHILDREN OF THE FAMINE* series by Marita Conlon-McKenna:

*Under the Hawthorn Tree* (ISBN 978-0-86278-206-1) deals with the tragedy of the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s seen through the eyes of three young survivors, Eily, Michael and Peggy.

*Wildflower Girl* (ISBN 978-0-86278-283-2) is the story of Peggy after the Famine, as she sets off alone to a new life in America.

**ALSO AVAILABLE:**

* A Study Guide to both the novel and the film, by Irene Barber is available for free download at www.obrien.ie.