

WILDFLOWER GIRL

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MARITA CONLON-McKENNA

Teaching Guide

By Irene Barber

RATIONALE AND THEMES

Wildflower Girl is the second book in Marita Conlon-McKenna's famine trilogy. It is a sequel to *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, which tells the story of the O'Driscoll children's journey through nineteenth-century famine-torn Ireland to find their great-aunts. *Wildflower Girl* traces the fortunes of Peggy O'Driscoll, now aged thirteen, as she leaves Ireland and makes her way to America. *Wildflower Girl* won the CBI/Bisto Book of the Year, 1992, in the Historical Novel Category. It is suitable for use with senior classes in primary schools and with junior classes in second-level schools. It facilitates exploration of the following themes:

- Emigration from Ireland to America
- Independence and responsibility
- Journey
- Conflict
- Exile and loneliness
- Exploitation and racial discrimination
- Courage and resilience
- Economic migrants

SUMMARY

Peggy O'Driscoll, aged thirteen, sees no future for herself in the impoverished post-famine Ireland of the nineteenth century. With her passage paid by the landlord, she leaves her sister and brother and her beloved great-aunt and sets out on a huge adventure to seek her fortune in America. After a distressing sea voyage from Queenstown to Boston she secures employment as a skivvy in a men's boarding house run by the disreputable Mrs Cavendish. In desperation Peggy runs away and with the help of fellow expatriates secures other more suitable employment. Life is

tough with poor wages, long hours, hard work and little respect. But Peggy is a survivor and her hard work, courage, loyalty and resilience impress those around her as she grows in confidence and wisdom. It is an optimistic and happy Peggy we leave on the final pages of the book.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the novel is divided into five units. Each unit is approximately thirty pages long. Possible discussion points and activities are listed at the end of each unit. Two useful addresses on emigration from Ireland are:

1. Cobh Heritage Centre, Cobh, Co. Cork, Tel: +353 (21) 813591 (www.cobhheritage.com)
2. Ulster American Folk Park, Castletown, Omagh, County Tyrone BT78 5QY. Tel: 048 82 240918 (www.folkpark.com)

UNIT 1 FAREWELL

SUMMARY

An offer of a passage to America arrives to the O'Driscoll house – a godsend in times of economic ruin. But how can the three young people go and leave their aging great-aunt Nano? Circumstances change when Eily, the eldest, accepts a proposal of marriage and Michael gets a suitable job offer. That leaves Peggy, the youngest, who despite opposition, is determined to go to America alone. Having said her goodbyes, she heads for Queenstown

(now Cobh) in the company of a neighbour's family, the Molloyes. Here she is issued with a ticket to travel steerage on the *Fortunata* to Boston.

Read pp.9–43.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Originally Eily decided that no one of the family was going to America. What changed her mind?
- From what you have read about Peggy so far do you think she will do well in America? What kind of a person is she? What kind of person is likely to succeed in a new and alien environment?
- In 1992, an American academic, Dr Marjorie Hancock, initiated a study of Irish and American children's responses to Marita Conlon-McKenna's *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *Wildflower Girl*. The Irish pupils' response to Peggy leaving Ireland was very intense – many expressed deep commitment to their homeland and feelings of guilt and real sadness at the thought of leaving. However most American pupils expressed no doubt about leaving starvation and death behind (*Children's Books in Ireland*, 1995)! How do you explain the differing responses from the different nationalities?
- What might be the significance of the gifts Peggy received from her family: the Bible, the horsehair bracelet, the purse of money, the shawl?

ACTIVITIES

1. ANGER

What provoked Eily's anger to the extent that she slapped Peggy across the face?

What was Peggy's response? What happened next? Write about an occasion when you were so angry that you hit out (or really felt like hitting out) at someone. How did they respond? Was the situation resolved? What would have happened if you had chosen to hide your anger? Looking back, was it a good or bad thing to show your anger?

2. REFUGE

Peggy had a favourite place to where she ran when she was troubled – the bridge. Write about where you go when you want peace and quiet to work things out.

3. BRIDGES

Marita Conlon-McKenna uses the bridge as a device to link:

- (1) the old with the new
- (2) the town with the country

Read pp.11–12 and try to explain how she uses this device.

4. KEEPING UP APPEARANCES!

Why was it so important to Nano that she should be seen at her best when Billy Kelly, the landlord, called? What did she do in order to impress him? Write an account of the meeting from the landlord's point of view (see pp.17–20). Try to convey the fact that he is sympathetic and sensitive to Nano's problem but that his own economic circumstances are dictating his actions.

5. WILDFLOWER GIRL

With the help of an appropriate source, sketch a cowslip, buttercup, bluebell, ragged robin and cow parsley. Redesign the book cover using some or all of your flower sketches.

6. COBH HERITAGE CENTRE

Peggy left Ireland from Queenstown (now Cobh). Look up the website of Cobh Heritage Centre (www.cobhheritage.com) and answer these questions:

- (a) Two and half million people left Ireland from Cobh between 1848–1950. What conditions caused so many to leave?
- (b) What is the e-wall at Cobh Heritage Centre?
- (c) Find out five facts about Annie Moore.

UNIT 2 THE LONG VOYAGE

SUMMARY

Peggy sets sail for America on board the *Fortunata* in the company of the Molloy family. After 'five stinking rotten smelly disgusting weeks' they arrived at Boston. Officials from the Boston Port Authority dispatch the Molloy family to a hospital on Deer Island. Peggy is deemed healthy enough to land in America. Peggy disembarks, hoping that she will never have to endure such a journey ever again.

Read pp.44–71.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Describe the conditions that made the journey so miserable for passengers. Why did they not complain?
- Why were the women so bitter about the major clean-up of steerage which was organised before entering Boston harbour?
- Should Peggy have said she was with the Molloy family and accompanied them to Deer Island to help out with the children?
- 'The wooden deck was polished and shone but the under-side of the ship was covered with gray barnacles and slimy green seaweed!' (p.45). Here we get a hint that things may not be as they seem on first impressions. How is this theme of false impressions, being created by the captain, developed as this unit progresses?

ACTIVITIES

1. LETTER WRITING

Have Peggy write to Eily, her older sister, describing honestly the terrible conditions on board the *Fortunata*. Describe in detail what might have caused the most discomfort to Peggy: the seasickness, the storm, the lack of privacy, the attitude of the captain, the suffering of the Molloy family, the apprehension about what would happen when they reached America, and so on.

2. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The captain ordered a major clean up of steerage and then 'disappeared up on deck before a hundred questions could be asked'.

List at least five questions which might have been asked. (A volunteer could role play the captain in the 'hot seat' attempting to answer a selection of these questions).

3. PREDICTION

Pretend Peggy was deemed too ill to travel on to Boston and was sent to Deer Island. Describe her journey to the island and her first impressions of the hospital

4. WORD STUDY

Put these words in alphabetical order and write their dictionary meanings:

provisions, steerage, ship-shape, slops, mast, barnacles, pulleys, gangplank. Which word is not a noun?

Try to write a coherent paragraph that includes all the words!

UNIT 3 SKIVVY

SUMMARY

Peggy meets Mr Molloy and gives him news of his family. Then she and her friend Sarah make contact with Mrs Halligan, landlady and proprietor of the Shamrock Agency for the Employment of Young Ladies. Mrs Halligan gives the girls food, rest and a chance to clean up before finding employment for them. Peggy gets a job with Mags Cavendish who runs a boarding house for men. Conditions are squalid and the drunken bullying behaviour of the landlady is too much for Peggy. She runs away back to Margaret Halligan who surprisingly shows her great kindness and understanding. Peggy's next employment is with the Rowan family, in a fine house outside the city. Things are looking up for Peggy.

Read pp.72–103.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Do you think Mags Halligan was a good person? How did she make a living?
- Why was Mona Cavendish so angry with Peggy? Was Peggy right to leave in such a hurry?
- When Mrs O'Connor, the cook of Rushton, said 'Got to look after my own!' what did she mean?

ACTIVITIES

1. SKIVVY

Write a sense poem entitled 'Skivvy' about Peggy's stay with Mrs Cavendish. Begin each line like this:

I see

I hear.....

I smell.....

I feel.....

I taste.....

I think.....

Now re-write, omitting I see, I hear etc. from the beginning of each line. Improve on your choice of words. Consider rhyme, alliteration, line length, shape on the page and produce final draft.

2. A PREVIOUS LIFE

'If you don't cry, it will break your heart' (p.93). What did Mags Halligan mean by this? Do you agree? She said: 'We all miss our homes and the ones we love'. Where, do you think, was her home? Who were the ones she loved? Why is she not with them?

Invent a life for her before Peggy met her. Discuss it with a friend. Write Mags Halligan's life story so far.

3. PREDICTION

So far we have met the following people in the Rowan household:

Mrs Madden, the housekeeper

Mrs Elizabeth Rowan, the mistress of the house

Mrs O'Connor, the cook

Kitty, the maid

Predict what will happen next. Will Peggy be happy? Who will be her friends? Who will make life difficult for her? How? Will she stay? Write a summary of your ideas.

4. WANTED: CAPABLE GIRL

Write the advertisement for a kitchen maid that Mrs Elizabeth Rowan might have placed in the *Greenbay Times*.

Write the letter of application that Peggy might have written in response to the advertisement.

UNIT 4 WILDFLOWER GIRL

SUMMARY

Peggy settles in to domestic service with the Rowan family. Life is hard but she makes friends with Kitty, another maid, and undertakes to teach her to read and write. With her first pay packet she visits Boston and makes contact with her friend Sarah. She gets on the wrong side of Roxanne, the spoiled teenage daughter of the house. Roxanne falsely accuses Peggy of stealing a ring. While Peggy is under suspicion, the rest of the staff treat her with coolness.

Read pp.104–138.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- The Trade Union Movement was well established in America by the end of the nineteenth century. Workers banded together to fight for improvements in their working conditions and in their pay. They used strikes to force employers to agree to their demands. What aspects of Peggy's conditions of employment at the Rowans have been improved on by trade union negotiations over the years? Visit the American Irish Historical Society website (www.aihs.org) to find out how Irish emigrants contributed to the Labour movement in America.
- When Roxanne said 'Those Irish!' what insult did she intend? What is so unfair about a comment such as 'Those refugees' or 'Those Travellers!' What stereotypes might the speakers be implying?
- The image of Peggy as the Wildflower Girl is first introduced on pp.34–35 in the first unit. It is repeated here in this unit in Chapter 6. What does this image tell us about Peggy? What does its repetition here add to the novel?
- The Irish who emigrated to America in such large numbers after the Famine started at the bottom economically and worked their way up. Typically they began as labourers and domestics and the men worked their way up to skilled and semi-skilled craftsmen, policemen and firemen. The women were less upwardly mobile. By 1880 more than half of the Irish born in Boston were in

categories above the lowest occupational category. As time went by, Irish immigrants moved west, so that by 1910 there were more Irish immigrants in Chicago than in Boston. In *Wildflower Girl* can you find evidence of:

- (i) upward mobility among the Irish immigrants
- (ii) a move from the east coast to the west

ACTIVITIES

1. EXPECTATIONS

Why was Peggy so depressed to hear Mrs O'Connor say that work in the kitchen was the highest she and her likes could aspire to? Do you think Peggy's generation had higher expectations than Mrs O'Connor had? Why? Write about how your expectations of life might differ from those of your parents or guardians when they were your age – discuss it with them.

2. FIRST IMPRESSIONS LAST

When Peggy flicked water at Kitty, her natural friendly fun-loving character showed through despite the hardship, and Kitty warmed to her immediately. Try to remember your first impressions of someone with whom you have since become friendly and write them down. What did you deduce about them from that first contact? Were your deductions accurate?

3. GOING WEST

Many European emigrants left the east coast of America and headed west to places like California. Norah Owens, Peggy's predecessor, was one of these. Write a page of Norah Owens' diary as she journeyed west from Boston.

4. WHO IS IT?

Name the person described in each of these extracts:

- (i) 'a right little minx' (R)
- (ii) 'some kind of banker' (Mr R)
- (iii) 'her skin was clear without blemish or freckle' (Mrs R)
- (iv) 'her face was pale with deep purple shadows under her eyes' (S)
- (v) 'She had almost silver-blond hair which she wore... around her face' (R)
- (vi) 'years of standing over saucepans and

pots seemed to have boiled her skin to a lusty pink' (Mrs O'C)

(vii) 'his skin had a healthy glow and his usually neat fair hair was all askew' (S)

What conclusions can be drawn from these descriptions? How did a person's lifestyle affect their appearance?

5. THIEF?

In this unit Roxanne made two accusations against Peggy. What were they? Why, do you think, did Roxanne take such a dislike to Peggy? Do you think Roxanne had previously picked on Kitty Murphy or on Norah Owens? Give reasons.

UNIT 5 MUTINY

SUMMARY

The atmosphere continues to be frosty towards Peggy as suspicion hangs over her in relation to the disappearance of Roxanne's ring. Kitty's serious illness presents a distraction and Peggy's care for Kitty reinstates her in the esteem of the housekeeper. It transpires that Roxanne had attempted to set Peggy up. Later the ring is found and Peggy's name is cleared but Roxanne continues to insult and demean Peggy. Peggy begins to develop ploys to defend herself. Mrs Madden moves on to better

things and is replaced by the mean-spirited officious Miss Lewis. Her high-handed ways cause mutiny among the staff and Peggy is instrumental in getting rid of her. A period of harmony follows where Peggy begins to feel more in charge of her destiny and where she looks to the future with optimism and renewed energy.

Read pp.139–173.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- In this unit Peggy begins to assert herself, firstly in the face of Roxanne's racist comments about 'two stupid Bridgets from the bogs' and secondly in the face of Miss Lewis' high-handed treatment of the staff. This assertiveness is not apparent in Kitty's behaviour. Can you think of reasons why Peggy is assertive while Kitty is not?
- We get the sense of a mutual respect growing between Mrs Madden and Peggy. What was it about Peggy that impressed Mrs Madden? What was it about Mrs Madden that impressed Peggy? Try to give actual examples from the unit to support your ideas.
- For the first time in the book, we get the impression that Peggy, sitting in the Rowan's kitchen (p 172) is content. Discuss all the factors that contributed to that feeling of contentment.

ACTIVITIES

1. PERSONALITY PROFILE

In this unit two significant people comment favourably on Peggy: Mrs Madden (p.146) and Mrs O'Connor (p.171). Check out these references and list adjectives that these two women might have ascribed to her. In the centre of a page, draw a picture of Peggy. Around it, write the adjectives that describe her. Add more of your own.

2. GETTING EVEN


Peggy managed to get even with two people who bullied her: Roxanne and Miss Lewis. Describe how she did so, without putting her job in jeopardy.

3. PREDICTION

Bearing in mind the way in which Peggy is maturing, write three possible futures for her. Share them with the class and decide on the most probable.

4. DEDICATION

The dedication at the beginning of the book is 'for all those who have sailed across stormy seas to find a new life'. Do you think this dedication is only for those who have made a physical journey across the sea? Who else might it include? Would it include you or anyone you know?

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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, MARITA CONLON-MCKENNA



MARITA CONLON-MCKENNA is the author of the best-selling CHILDREN OF THE FAMINE trilogy, which includes *Under The Hawthorn Tree*, *Wildflower Girl* and *Fields of Home*. Other titles by Marita are: *The Blue Horse*, *Safe Harbour* and *No Goodbye*. Her books have been translated into Irish, French, German, Dutch, Danish, Swedish and Japanese.

ALSO IN THE CHILDREN OF THE FAMINE SERIES:

In *Under The Hawthorn Tree* (ISBN 978-0-86278-206-1), three children, left to fend for themselves and close to starvation, make a

perilous journey to relatives that might just be able to save them.

In *Fields of Home* (ISBN 978-0-86278-509-3), we catch up with the fortunes of all three children twenty years after the end of the Famine.



Reviews for *Wildflower Girl*:

'The description of the forty-day boat journey, travelling steerage, is likely to burn itself into the mind of the readers, a timely reminder in these days of flight, of the road travelled by our emigrating ancestors in search of work.' *Books Ireland*

'Marita Conlon-McKenna ... is not afraid of challenging her readers with tales of hardship. Adversity is to be faced down is the message.' *Andersonstown News*

'... by focusing on the heroic determination and unquenchable resilience of Peggy... during her enforced emigration to Boston... [it] depicts in the most vivid terms the personal tragedies ensuing from the abstraction called 'the Famine'.' *Irish Times*