



***SNOBS, DOGS AND SCOBIES* BY ELIZABETH O'HARA**

ABOUT THE BOOK AND ITS AUTHOR

- Set in an imaginary suburb in south County Dublin
- Boy and girl characters, age 18
- Alert: contains some 'bad language'

The author is well known and much acclaimed as an adult writer under her real name of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne. She has also written several books for children and teenagers under the name of Elizabeth O'Hara. One reason she uses a pen-name when she is writing for young people is to make a distinction between the different kinds of books she writes.

This book is aimed chiefly at young Irish readers, but although it has three main teenage characters and deals very much with growing up in Ireland, it has quite an adult feeling to it too, which makes it suitable also for older teenagers.

It is about three young people from different social and family backgrounds, who are just facing into the Leaving Certificate, but who also have lots going on in their families.



1: BEFORE YOU READ...

What do you make of the title? What kind of expectations does it bring up for you?

The words in the title – ‘snobs’, ‘dogs’, ‘scobies’ – re all rather unpleasant words to describe categories of people. So what does that suggest to you?

Words like that tend to categorise people into groups that they may not sit comfortably in. So maybe the author is planning not so much to look at those three groups of people as to examine what those categories mean, the kinds of prejudices words like this reveal. Keep this in mind as you read.

Take a flick through the book and look at the chapter titles.

What do you notice about them?

Do you think this might have any relation to the three categories of people mentioned in the title? (You’ll find this out as you go along, but for now, just think what the significance of this might be.)

This book was originally written in Irish, and came out about ten years before this English version of it appeared. You’ll notice some things in this book that link it back to its original Irish version.

You might also want to watch out for things that indicate that this book is set some years ago. Watch out for the things that mark this is a book set back in ‘Celtic Tiger’ times, but also keep a watch out for things that haven’t changed at all.

This book is very clearly set in a suburb of Dublin. You’ll notice many things that mark this as a book written by an Irish writer for Irish readers. Imagine you are going to lend the book to, say, an English friend. Make a note, as you go along, of the things you might feel you should explain to your friend so that he or she could understand it.

As you read, see if you can pick out a few paragraphs in the novel that particularly pinpoint something that is very recognisable (to you, as an Irish reader) about life in contemporary Ireland.

Do you think a non-Irish person would ‘get’ these things? And how would that affect their enjoyment of the novel?



2: BEGINNINGS (CHAPTERS 1–4)

The first few pages of a novel are crucial. The author has to draw the reader into the story, so the beginning has to be interesting or intriguing in some way. For example, it could be that some extraordinary event happens right at the start that makes the reader want to read on, or it could be a bit subtler than that: it might be that the reader gets interested in the characters very early on and wants to find out more about them.

What do you think is the main thing in the early pages of this book that makes a reader want to go on reading it?

Here's a quote from the very first page of the novel:

Lísín was happy. She knew the day would be wonderful, the celebration fantastic, the party amazing, just as it should be. Her life was a triumph, a complete and utter success.

Do you suspect there is an element of irony here? (When the narrator of the story and the reader both agree on something about a character that the character himself or herself is not aware of, that's irony at work.)

Now, here's the interesting question: how do you know the narrator is being ironic? (Think: whose assessment of Lísín's character are we really getting here – the narrator's or Lísín's own?)

Having given some thought to this, what are your expectations of Lísín as a character in the story?

How do you think her sons regard her?

What about her husband?

And what about the way you see her yourself?

Write down a brief note about how you expect this character to turn out as the book develops. (It should be interesting to check back on this later.)



Also on this first page we get a sharp insight into the family dynamic:

‘It’ll be awesome,’ said Cú, the younger son. His name was Cúán, but they called him Cú for short. He was thirteen.

‘Yeah, it’s going to be cool,’ said Ruán, the older son, who was eighteen. He didn’t believe the party would be cool; he knew it would be crap.

Which of the two boys do you think is going to be more important in the novel?
What makes you think that?

Read to the end of the chapter.
Are your first thoughts about the characters confirmed?

At one point, Ruán wonders why his mother irritates him so much, even though she is so supportive of him.
Could you explain this to him?

Has the author maintained the ironic tone as the second chapter develops?
Has it got even sharper, maybe?
Does it work as a way of engaging the reader’s interest? Why or why not?
Irony is often thought of as having a comic effect. Do you agree?

The story is being told in the third person. (That means the main character is not talking directly to us, as in a first-person, diary-style novel.) And yet we get a strong sense of what the main character is feeling. How does the author achieve this?

How do you feel about Ruán by the end of the second chapter?
Do you think he has the same kind of problems that you have in your own life – at least to some extent?
Do you feel sorry for him?
Do you like him?
Do you despise him?

Can you say why you feel like that about him?
Can you identify what the author has done to make you feel like that about the character?

By chapter 3, the narrator of the story is starting to make ironic little jibes at Ruán too. Does this make you want to laugh at Ruán or does it make you feel defensive about him?



What do you think of Ruán's dad?
How do you think Ruán feels about him?

What are your thoughts on what happens about Ruán's party in chapter 4. Does he deserve that?
Why or why not?

Where do you think the relationship with Emma might be going?



3: CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE (CHAPTERS 5–10)

The name at the top of chapter 5 changes from Ruán to Colm. What does this signal?

The tone is very different here. What do you make of that?

How does the change in tone affect how you feel about the character of Colm?

Do you think the more serious tone here is related to Colm's social situation (by contrast with Ruán's)?

What do you make of the short riff in this chapter about the different kinds of school in the area?

Is the author being funny here, or is she making a serious social point?

Is this social point in keeping with the novel as a whole?

There is a strong contrast between Ruán's and Colm's social situations. Do you think there is a similar contrast between their characters?

Or would you think the differences between the boys are mostly determined by their different social circumstances?

The row between Colm and his father that results in the guards being called shows Colm's mother in a poor light. Can you understand why she behaves as she does?

If you were Colm, how would you react, what would you do?

Do you think Colm will react in the same way you would?

Do you think the author is using irony in this scene (the fight between Colm and his dad in chapter 6) at all?

It's not funny, but can irony be used to a different purpose?

The perspective from which the story is told changes again in chapter 7. But there is a major difference in the way the story is told when it's from Emma's point of view. What is that difference?

How does this change in narrative style affect the way the story is told?

And how does it affect the way the reader feels about the character?



Do you think Ruán, Colm and Emma are caricatures, representing the categories of people named in the title of the book, or do you think they are well rounded characters?
Can you explain your opinion?

Just at the halfway point in the novel (chapters 8, 9, 10), everything changes – first for Colm and even more so for Ruán. Did you see these changes coming?
Do you think the author has handled these important plot points well?
Can you elaborate?

The three characters' lives are starting to get more entangled at this point. Do you find this credible?
Why or why not?

Notice that it is from Emma's perspective that we hear the big news about what has happened to Ruán's parents. Why do you think the author has chosen this method of dealing with what is, after all, Ruán's life-changing event?
Do you think this strategy works?

At this point in the story, have you changed your opinion about the characters?
Do you feel more sympathetic towards them or some of them? Why?



4: ADULTHOOD (CHAPTERS 11–17)

The three characters at the centre of the story are presented in the early part of the novel in the context of their families, and they are all living in the shadow of the Leaving Certificate. In the case of the two boys at least, other events in their families outstrip the Leaving Certificate in importance and propel them into independence and adulthood. What kind of comment do you think this is on the Leaving Certificate?

Look especially at what Colm says about the Leaving Certificate in chapter 14. Do you agree with him?

When the perspective changes back to Ruán, the narrative style has changed. Why do you think that is?

The novel takes an unexpected turn in the second half of chapter 13. What do you think of this change?

Do you think all this reappearance of Lísín is ‘really’ happening, or is it all just in Ruán’s imagination?

What makes you come to that conclusion? (It might be helpful to check chapter 15 before you decide.)

Would you say the relationship between Ruán and his mother has improved since her death? Why would you say that is?

Colm is getting along a lot better since he has taken control of his own life. Why do you think this is?

What does it mean?

Did you notice that Colm, too, has started to tell his own story in the first person?

Why do you think the author has made this change as the book progresses?

Colm and Ruán become friends towards the end of the book. Do you think it is significant that this happens outside of Ireland?

Can you explain what this might mean?

What do you make of the last chapter?

Would you say this is a happy ending?



5: OVERVIEW

Now that you have read the whole book, what do you think of it?

Did you enjoy it?

Which parts of it did you enjoy best?

Did the story turn out differently from what you expected at the beginning?

Look back at what you wrote about Lísín when you'd read the early chapters. How does your expectation then compare with how she turned out as the story developed?

Remember you were supposed to note the things that you think you might have to explain to an English friend if you lent them the book. Do you think these 'markers of Irishness' would make the book difficult to follow for someone who is not living in Ireland – or do you think maybe these things just make the book more interesting for an outsider?

This book has various themes (ideas that run through it and come up again and again). Write a list of four or five that occur to you. Now choose the one you think is most important.

The tone of the story varies, too, as the novel progresses, but would you say it has an overall tone?

And how would you identify that tone?

Imagine you were describing the book to a friend. What one word would you use about the tone, for example, funny, sad, thoughtful, savage, ironic, wistful, light-hearted – or something else?

This book is sold as a novel for 'young adults' or teenagers. Apart from the fact that it has three teenage characters, what else do you think makes this a book for teenage readers? What's different about a book specifically intended for your own age-group?

Imagine you were asked to write a blurb for this book. (Don't look at the actual blurb for the moment.) Have a go at writing it. It should be no longer than 150 words, and it should entice a reader to want to read the book. It should not give away what happens, so it is different from a review or a summary. Remember, the main purpose of the blurb is to sell the book!

Now compare your own blurb with the blurb on the actual book. Are they quite similar or very different?

Which do you think does a better job – yours or the publishers'? Why?



Choose the one of the three main characters that you find most interesting. Now imagine you are this character, and try to answer these questions as if you were him or her:

- (a) Who am I?
- (b) Whom can I trust?
- (c) Where do I belong?
- (d) Who loves me?
- (e) Where can I feel safe?
- (f) Who will I turn to when I am in trouble?
- (g) How brave am I?
- (h) What will I do with my life?
- (i) Who is in control of my life?

Finally, imagine you'd like to make a film of this book. How would you pitch it to a producer? Have a go at writing such a pitch. (It should be quite different from the blurb you wrote earlier, as it has a very different purpose.)