



***TAKING FLIGHT* BY SHEENA WILKINSON**

About the book

Taking Flight is the story of Declan, a ‘wee hard man’ from West Belfast whose life becomes a lot more complicated when he finds himself drawn into the world of horses and show-jumping. He’s got the talent to succeed, but nobody thinks he will – least of all himself.

About the author

Sheena Wilkinson, a secondary school English teacher, has won many awards for short fiction, and has an MA (distinction) in Creative Writing as well as a PhD in the crossover between adult and children’s fiction. *Taking Flight*, her first novel, was Editor’s Choice for 14+ in CBI’s Recommended Reads, 2010 and one of the Irish Times Children’s Books of the Year. It has been shortlisted for the Bisto Awards and was a White Ravens choice for 2011.

Sheena developed many of the ideas for the novel when riding her own pony in the forest near her County Down home.

BEFORE READING

- What does the title *Taking Flight* make you think of?
- Look at the book’s front cover. Hold a sheet of paper over the bottom half of the image and ask pupils what they imagine the story will be about. Do the same, covering the top half. (This could work well with the class divided in half, each seeing only one part of the cover.) Compare their ideas – they should hit on the fact that the book will be about the clash of two cultures.)
- The novel is set in present-day Belfast. Before reading – what are your expectations of a Belfast novel? (After reading – is this a specifically ‘Belfast’ book or could it have been set anywhere?)



DURING/AFTER READING

- The author has chosen to tell us this story from two narrative points of view. Why do you think she has done this? Is it Vicky's story as much as Declan's? What do you think are the advantages and difficulties of telling a story this way? What are the differences in the ways the two narrators express themselves? Vicky's narrative is in the past tense, while Declan's is in the present tense. What effect does this choice have? Any ideas why Wilkinson has done this? Choose a scene from the novel and rewrite it from the point of view of the other character. What changes do you have to make?
- There are a lot of contrasts in the book, between different locations, ways of life, different families, etc. How many contrasts can you find?
- Lots of readers feel sympathy for Declan and none for Vicky. But what would it be like to have someone like Declan come to stay in your home? How do you think you would treat him? What areas of conflict might there be? What might have happened if Vicky had had to go and stay with Declan instead?
- Is Theresa simply a bad mother and Colette a good one, or is it more complicated than that?
- Is Mr Dermott interfering and nosey, as some readers have found him, or kind and concerned? What might have happened to Declan if he hadn't told anyone about what happened to Flight?
- Novels usually chart developments and changes in the main characters. How do both Declan and Vicky develop in the course of the novel?
- Wilkinson is working on a sequel to *Taking Flight*. It's two years later... What do you think the characters will be doing in 2012? Try to find evidence for your speculation in the text. For example, I think Declan will get to college because...