Once upon a Place

RESOURCE PACK
Laureate na nÓg is an exciting project recognising the role and importance of literature for children in Ireland. This unique honour was awarded for the first time in May 2010 to author Siobhán Parkinson. The position of Laureate na nÓg was held by Siobhán Parkinson for a period of two years. Illustrator Niamh Sharkey was the second laureate, and held the title until May 2014. Eoin Colfer held the role between 2014 and 2016. In 2016-2018 PJ Lynch held the honour. Sarah Crossan succeeded him as laureate for 2018 to 2020. The laureate participates in selected events and activities around Ireland during their term. The laureate is chosen as a result of their internationally recognised body of high quality children’s writing or illustration and the considerably positive impact they have had on readers as well as other writers and illustrators. Laureate na nÓg is an initiative of the Arts Council, managed on the Council’s behalf by Children’s Books Ireland, with the support of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Poetry Ireland. The honour has been established to engage young people with high quality literature and to underline the importance of children's literature in our cultural and imaginative life.

CHILDRENSLAUREATE.IE

Children’s Books Ireland’s vision is an Ireland in which books are central to every child’s life and where meaningful engagement with books is supported by passionate and informed adults in families, schools, libraries and communities all across the island. In all our work, we are focused on developing audiences for children’s books, advocating for access to reading and supporting artists who create work for young readers. Established some twenty-two years ago, Children’s Books Ireland’s projects include an annual conference for professionals working with children’s books; a magazine three times a year and an annual recommended reading guide; the KPMG Children’s Books Ireland Awards, which honour the best in Irish writing and illustration for children and young people; and a number of book-gifting schemes. Children’s Books Ireland administers the Laureate na nÓg project. Children’s Books Ireland is core funded by the Arts Council.

CHILDRENSBOOKSIRELAND.IE

Little Island Books is an award-winning independent Irish publishing company who publish great books for children and young adults. Little Island Books publishes eight to ten books a year for children and young adults. Most of our readers are between 4 and 16, but we don’t discriminate: anyone can read our books, and lots of adults do. We publish mostly novels for older readers (kids from about 9 to 12 and teenagers from 13 all the way up) as well as illustrated books for younger children. Our books are mostly by emerging Irish authors, but we also publish some books in translation – from languages as different as Brazilian Portuguese and Finnish. (Check out our International Books page on our website for more on our translated books for children and teenagers.) Little Island Books is a limited company with a voluntary board of six members and a small number of shareholders. Our publishing programme is generously supported by the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon and by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. We also get support for our books in translation from the countries of origin, and we are grateful to Culture Ireland for supporting our attendance at the Bologna International Children’s Book Fair.

LITTLEISLAND.IE
INTRODUCTION
‘Once upon a …’ For many of us, these three words conjure magical and wonderful images of story time and tales told, of bedtime and a parent, grandparent or carer reading aloud. Many need only close their eyes at the sound of those words to picture themselves sitting in a classroom or library, in a half-circle, listening to a teacher or librarian (or better still a poet, an author or a storyteller!) tell a story or read aloud a picturebook so familiar that it almost tells itself. But this is ‘once upon a place’, an anthology of stories and poems by seventeen of our finest authors and poets, each illustrated by internationally renowned Irish artist PJ Lynch. In this book there are stories within stories, stories within poems, stories within pictures – but ‘place’ is central to all.

What is ‘place’ – a spot on a map, a set of geographical coordinates or something more? It is at once here and now, yet also there and then, or yet to come – it is out of time, with its own unique accumulation of histories and memories. Place is as much subjective as objective. It (your childhood home, for example) is often evoked by sounds or smells. Can photographs or even film footage make someone truly understand the place you lived in as a child, or holidayed in with your family, or played in with your friends? That place may still exist in your head but you can’t show it to anyone who wasn’t present in that same place at that same time as you – or can you? Questions such as these explode in children’s imaginations and spark other ideas, setting them thinking about what place is and what it means to different people at the same and at different times. Reading these stories and poems with children, the teacher is encouraging them to relate a poet’s or an author’s actual (or imagined) experience of place to their own or to that of someone they know. For the purposes of the guide we have chosen to focus on nine of the stories and poems that form the Once upon a Place collection.

Liz Morris and Audrey Devereux

CONTENTS

GREN’S GHOST by MARIE-LOUISE FITZPATRICK  5
THE PUMPING STATION by RODDY DOYLE  9
THE CABIN IN THE WOODS by ENDA WYLEY  12
THE BEAR by JOHN CONNOLLY  15
THE RAM KING by EOIN COLFER  17
SNAIL PALS by GERALDINE MILLS  20
NUMBER 13 by JIM SHERIDAN  22
THE DIRTY RIVER, STILLORGAN by MARK GRANIER  25
STREAM TIME by OISÍN MCGANN  28
THE GUIDE

Once upon a Place presents children and their teachers with new, original and diverse short pieces of literature (eleven stories and six poems). It is neither intended nor expected that the book should be used in the classroom for a purpose other than for enjoyment and to expose the children to the magic of words, beautifully told and illustrated, in the familiar and comforting context of a story or poem being read to them. Before reading the first story or poem the teacher might ask the children to think about a place, maybe their favourite place, and to think about how best they might describe it to someone who has never seen it. A favourite place doesn’t have to be a building – it could be a special place where no one can find you (in the space between sofa and wall, for example, or somewhere like Jane Eyre’s window seat where she could read her book undisturbed).

The children could also work in pairs, each of them describing the same place – for example, the playground or classroom. They might imagine they were describing it to someone from a different planet or a different continent. Could they use sound – like a recording of bird song or of traffic passing or of water trickling to help the person gain a better picture of the place? They might work separately on their descriptions for a few minutes and then read and/or listen to their partner’s description of the same place and think about how the two descriptions differ/agree.

The authors and poets put words together and let their stories and poems go. The illustrator offers a pictorial interpretation of their words through his imagination. We, the readers and listeners, interpret the words and pictures in our own imaginations, bringing our own ideas and experiences to them. The guides in this pack are the interpretations of teachers – readers and lovers of literature – who have read the stories with their classes.

The guides are intended to give busy teachers an easy reference from which to choose opportunities for development of children’s critical thinking through suggestions for exploration, learning, reflection and discussion. Reflections on the stories are accompanied by a selection of easy-to-follow activities – from art, drama and writing activities to exercises in mindfulness and scientific investigation. The teacher or children might choose one story or poem to explore a month. They might dip in and out of the book with the seasons. They may just read those poems and stories that appeal specifically to the interests of the class on a given day.

In each guide, there are many open-ended questions – these are prompts, included to support the busy teacher and ensure that the children have the richest possible experience of the story. For example:

• What did you think after hearing/reading this story/poem?
• How did it make you feel?
• What is the author/poet saying to you?
• Did anything in particular strike a chord with you?
• Does this story/poem remind you of anything/make you think of anything?

This type of question encourages children to express authentic, personal responses to the poems and stories and thus develop their own critical and analytical skills i ngan fisíos doíbh féin. And while, obviously, the children don’t always have to answer, sometimes a teacher just posing the question is enough to spark their imagination.
GRENS GHOST BY MARIE-LOUISE FITZPATRICK

BEFORE READING

This story is set in Co. Kilkenny. Gren rents his robes in Pascal’s Party Shop in Kilkenny city, the boys meet in the Seven Castles car park and the ‘haunting’ takes place in the ruins of Kells Priory, not at the family home a mile outside Kells (it’d never do to damage his dad’s prize-winning gladioli!) and not at school.

Information about – and a lot of photographs of – the priory are available online. There is even an online tour of the priory, highlighting the functions of the various rooms and chapels in the time of the monks, that might help set the physical scene for young readers: http://www.monastic.ie/tour/kells-augustinian-priory

WHILE READING

A good way to emphasise narrative suspense (evident in a story or event with a strong element of surprise) and to encourage the use of prediction skills with the children might be – while first reading the story to the children – to stop reading at the last line on page 3, on the cliffhanger sentence ‘A hand closes on my arm’ and ask the children to think, silently, for a moment or two, about whose hand might be closing on Flynn’s arm – if it’s a friendly hand or not – and what might be going to happen next.

There is another cliffhanger ending on page 5 – ‘If someone’s lying in wait this is where they’ll be. I want to turn and run: instead I speed up … I rush right in, swinging my torch around.’ Leave a moment for the children to conjure up, in their imaginations, the watchtowers of the priory and to think silently about the place and about who or what might be under the entrance arch.

AFTER READING

(A) WORDLESS BOOKS

The title suggests that the story might be about a haunting, and we find that a ghost (of sorts) does appear and is even captured in Polaroid images. The story also ends with the death and rebirth (of sorts) of one Finbar Flynn. This story explores identity and the ways we see ourselves and how a slight change in our own self-perception can make a big difference. The author, Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick, is an award-winning author–illustrator – her 2016 Owl Bat Bat Owl is a completely wordless picture book. Ask the children if they have any prior experience of wordless books (e.g. Shaun Tan’s The Arrival) and to suggest some possible advantages of wordless books for the reader. Can they also suggest possible limitations?

(B) ILLUSTRATIONS

Ask the children to look at PJ Lynch’s illustrations of this story, preferably using a visualiser or the interactive whiteboard, and encourage them to see the setting and story emerging through looking at the illustrations alone. Encourage them to appreciate the softness and texture of the media the illustrator used, the quick marks that sketch out some edges and outlines, the directional marks that create depth in the figures and shadows and so on. They might examine in particular pages 10–11 and discuss the brightness/whiteness of the fire, the places where the fire hits the boys’ faces and hands, and the dark shadows where detail is lost. You might also ask the children to look closely at the composition of that double-page illustration and discuss how the artist places the two boys at either side of the fire, leaning in towards one another: they bookend and frame the text that is hanging symmetrically between them.

Having thought about PJ Lynch’s illustrations, the class could look at some picturebooks by Marie-Louise and think about how she might have illustrated her own story for this book.
**DISCUSSION POINT 1:**
**WHAT’S IN A NAME?**

(a) Finn says that ‘Gren’s a really cool name’ but is told that the name is ‘A lot cooler than what it’s short for’ (page 12). Ask the children if shortened versions of names are sometimes considered preferable by their owners than the ones given them at birth. Perhaps suggest some short versions of names, e.g. Chessie for Francesca, Bes, Liz or Lizzie for Elizabeth etc. Ask them to think about what name they’d most like to be called – what name might they have chosen if they could have named themselves?

(b) What’s Gren’s real name? Finn immediately thinks of a possibility but dismisses it, and Gren changes the subject by preparing to leave. Ask the children to suggest what Gren’s full name might be and to say if the name he chooses to be known by tells them anything about his personality or life outside school.

(c) Name-calling and disrespectful language are often taken for granted as natural, part of growing up, something that people just have to accept, especially in school. Nicknames can be affectionate or deliberately hurtful and provocative, and can focus on looks, physical ability, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or intelligence and studiousness. In the story, to the boys in school, Finbar is ‘Finbar Swot-face Flynn’ (page 5), and Gren seems to accept the inevitability of this verbal bullying when he says, ‘Secondary school will be three kinds of hell with a name like Finbar.’ Gren seems to believe that it’s a matter of choosing your own identity, your own name: ‘Finn Flynn. Now that’s a cool name’ (page 11), but is it as simple as Gren suggests to change your name? ‘Just start using it. Like you mean it. Write it on your schoolbooks and your copybooks. Next time someone asks your name, you’ll say …’ (page 12). Is it that easy? Ask the children to reflect on the nature of nicknames and pet names and to suggest other ways both Finbar and Gren might address the problem of name-calling as opposed to nicknames.

**DISCUSSION POINT 2:**
**‘FINBAR FLYNN IS DEAD AND GONE, LONG LIVE FINN FLYNN’**

When Finbar Flynn ‘dies’ and is no more, when the boy leaves Finbar behind and becomes Finn Flynn, is he still the same person? Where did the boy who was Finbar go? Does that old Fin(bar) still live with the new Finn? (pages 12–13)

**DISCUSSION POINT 3:**
**CHARACTER**

Gren is a powerful character – he is popular and cool. Finbar appears to be more of a wet blanket and is teased and called names. Ask the children to think about Gren’s motivation for choosing Finbar Flynn to be part of his conspiracy or plan to fool his classmates and if his choice was proven to be wise.
ACTIVITIES

(A) ART: PERSPECTIVE AND PLACE

Ask the children to imagine the view from a favourite window, to write about that view in about 100 words and to give that description to another child, preferably in another class or better yet in another school, in another country or even country. That other child is to draw the view – in any medium – as they imagine it from the written description and give it back to the child who wrote it. The differences between the actual view, the imagined view of the child who knows it and the view of the child who has never seen it but has drawn it from a written description will be startling and will highlight the importance of place to one’s viewpoint, and also the way we all perceive things differently – great for generating discussion on the art of the illustrator and author. The children’s drawings could be displayed, highlighting the difference in perceptions.

(B) WRITING

1. Ask the children to make a list of essentials needed when ghost-hunting – e.g. flour to sprinkle on the ground to show up possible prints, since a ghost leaves no obvious trace; luminous paint; garlic. You might also give the class, in groups, words and phrases commonly associated with ghost stories – e.g. shadows stirring, misty moon, screech-owl flitting, long, dark corridors, clinging cobwebs, pitiful moans, tormented wails, cackles, chains, luminous eyes. Ask them to select a genre – a poem, a narrative, an imaginary set of instructions or recipe and so on – and use some of these phrases in their writing.

2. Ask the children to think about the difference between Finbar’s thoughts and the words he speaks aloud, and why he might be choosing not to voice his real thoughts: he thinks ‘What thing? When? Where? … Will it hurt?’ But all he says out loud is one word ‘Sure’ (page 3). Internal conversations like this can be represented to great effect in comic strips, as it is easy to see the character’s thoughts in ‘thought-bubbles’. Maybe the children could represent some dialogues without using words – they could make their own storyboards of a spooky story in pictures, using no words (their own wordless picture book) – or they could make a comic-strip version with thought and speech bubbles. Encourage them to think about the place in which their story will be set before they begin, as the setting may affect the character’s words and deeds.

3. Having participated fully in the midnight adventure, Finn could be said to have a kind of power over Gren, in that they share in a conspiracy: if he chose to, Finn could burst open Gren’s ghost-hunting story. Or could he? Is it a story that can never be told? Ask the children to think how Finn could prove the truth of what happened that night, how he could ever persuade anyone to believe him. Working in groups, they could write the conversation Finn has with a group of the boys as he tries to convince them of his starring role. When they have finished, ask them to role-play the scene for the rest of the class.
(C) PLACE AND PERSONALITY

We all play different roles throughout each day. These roles usually depend on where we are and on who we are talking to or working with: when in school, a child’s role is that of a pupil; when at home, they are a son or a daughter; when playing outside, they are usually someone’s friend.

Ask the children to reread the first four pages of this story and, in groups, to share ideas about how different people might view Finbar: e.g. his parents think he’s ‘good as gold’, his classmates have him down as ‘a bit of a wet blanket’ and so on. At times the descriptions might overlap – teacher and parents might both think he’s well-behaved but the teacher could also think him a daydreamer, so the word ‘well-behaved’ might be written in the intersection of a Venn diagram with teacher on one side and parents on the other. This activity can help to gain deeper insight into any characters, real or imagined, children encounter in daily learning (and in daily life).

Ask the children to spend a few minutes thinking about how other people might see them and then to write the description a grown-up who knows them well (teacher or relative) might write of them.

Ask the children to create a Snapchat or similar profile that Finbar might have written for himself in the weeks after his adventure with Gren – do they think what he’d write after the adventure would be very different to what he might have written before that midnight visit to the Seven Castles car park?

(D) MINDFULNESS

Sometimes we feel inadequate when we compare ourselves with our siblings or peers. Experiment with differences: think about when you may have tasted different flavours of a given product; think about the smell, taste, feel – did each one taste/smell/look the same?

For this activity, you should first be aware of any sensitivities or issues in the class around foodstuffs and take care to offer only foods that are safe for all to eat and touch. Break the children into pairs. Have each child select two small pieces of one flavour of chocolate from a selection or two slices of an apple from a selection of varieties and so on. Ask the children to close their eyes, taste one of their pieces and savour it, then give the other piece to their partner and take a piece from them. Their variety tastes different but is it any less good/valuable/useful etc.? What, if anything, is there to learn about difference from this activity?
THE PUMPING STATION by Roddy Doyle

BEFORE READING

This story is narrated by one of the children of the family, now an adult, looking back on his childhood. This is quite a common structure for books that have children as major characters – the story often starts with an adult narrator and then a flashback in time to recount childhood events. In this case the narrator has a particularly unique perspective on what happened because of his special knowledge.

The title is not exactly place specific but the story is about a particular pumping station; its subtitle, the date 7 September 1968, is so specific that the reader might wonder if some boy actually did jump from that pumping station on that date, ‘a week after the end of the summer holidays’. Ask the children what seeing this date might make them think about the story before they read: do they think it is going to be a true account of real events? Why? Why might a writer choose to begin a story in this way?

AFTER READING

(A) CHANGE

The story is set partly in 1968. As tumultuous and dangerous as the world might seem today, in 1968 America was at war with Vietnam, there were riots in Paris, and in Trinity College Dublin students were protesting – but the church and its teachings still had huge influence over many, including the boy in this story.

1968 was a time of change in Europe, and particularly so in Ireland, a time when small villages suddenly sprouted. And although school-going children may have seen many changes in their built environments, generally, children haven’t been around long enough to fully appreciate how much things change over time, how – as we read in Pat Boran’s poem on page 51 – ‘the land / bends to our will’.

The housing estates that spread out from our towns and cities nowadays weren’t in place before the urbanisation of the late 1960s, when this story is set. Places like Lucan, Tallaght, Finglas, Kilbarrack and so on were no more than villages, with acres of farmland all around them. This is why the adult Kevin is so astonished to see the changes that have taken place in the forty years: ‘And Flood’s farm across the road was gone. There were houses there, hundreds of them … There were more houses – and a factory’ (page 23). Ask the children if they have noticed any changes in their own environment and if those changes took long to get used to. If there have been changes, ask them if they can remember what the place looked like before and how those changes make them feel about the place.

(B) RULES

Parents (and many other grown-ups) don’t always fully explain the reasons behind their rules and expectations in language children can understand. The result is that children may often imagine far more dramatic reasons for their regulations and warnings. Ask the children if they have ever had any experience of unexplained rules and to work out, in groups, the real reason their parents or guardians made those rules.

In 1968 children were generally expected to have respect for their parents and to obey without questioning or second-guessing them. Ask the children to consider why Kevin’s parents are so adamant that he must never, ever jump off the pumping station – clearly there is the motive of concern for his safety, but is there is more to it? What exactly happened to Kevin when he jumped (some dislocation of time, though not of place)? Perhaps it has happened before, and he wasn’t the first to experience that time-travel? Do his parents have some insider knowledge he doesn’t have? Ask the children, in small groups or with partners, to think about what might have been in the minds of Kevin’s parents when they warned him never to jump off the pumping station.
(C) EXPECTATIONS

If reading the story aloud to the class, you could show the first page of the story (page 16) on a visualiser or IWB. The children could then read the page at their own pace, in their own heads, and picture the sea that is announced at the end of the page: ‘Then you saw it – the sea.’ Even one minute spent imagining the sea, in high tide, before the next page (page 17) is shown on the overhead is time well spent. Because the first words there may come as a surprise to the children: ‘But you didn’t. That was the thing. The public toilets and the pumping station were in the way. You should have seen Dublin Bay and Bull Island, and you did if you looked to the left or right. But right ahead was the pumping station, a kind of yellow, flat-roofed block.’ Encourage the children to explore and appreciate the description of the disappointment, the expectations dashed, by the harsh, final sound of the word ‘block’.

ACTIVITIES

(A) RESEARCH

Ask the children to think about the place they live in and about what was there before (e.g. before there were houses, there were fields; before there were fields, there were bogs; before there were bogs, there were forests; before there were forests, there were etc). How could they find out more? Who could they ask? Where could they look for information?

They might interview a grandparent or elderly neighbour, asking that person to describe what a particular place in their own locality was like in the past. Encourage the children to try to find out about the sights, sounds, smells, characters of the place in the past. Preparing a set of key questions in advance will help. The children could then answer the questions about the place in the present – and both accounts might be presented orally, as a dialogue, to other senior classes or children. (All interviews or research should be conducted with parental permission and appropriate supervision and in accordance with the school plan.)

(B) ART

Ask the children to find images of Kilbarrack (or their own town, village or townland) in the late 1960s and discuss the changes that have almost certainly happened in the intervening fifty (almost fifty!) years. If any difficulty presents itself, you could find photos on the Internet of any well-known place then and now and display on the IWB.

(C) EXPLORING TEXT LAYOUT

Often a poem or a story will be laid out on a page in a particular way by the publisher. They will choose the layout they believe presents the words and images to the best possible effect – i.e. text can be laid out to enhance the imagery suggested by the words.

After the story has been read and the children have had time to appreciate it and take themselves back out of Kilbarrack in 1968, you could draw attention to the shape of the prose on the pages – ask them to think if there was a particular reason why the text might have been laid out as it is. Ask them to think about what happened when Kevin jumped into the water and, more importantly, how he might have felt as he realised the enormity of what had happened. Sentences such as ‘He turned. The pumping station was gone’ (page 20), ‘And Flood’s farm across the road was gone. There were houses there, hundreds of them … There were more houses – and a factory’ (page 23) might prompt discussions on the nature of place. For example, what has happened? Things have changed. Things that had been there when he jumped are not there anymore. ‘Kilbarrack Road seemed the same. But it wasn’t.’ It ‘seemed’ the same place yet it looks foreign to him – it’s the same place yet not the same place. He knows it’s Kilbarrack but he isn’t comfortable there anymore: he is unsettled. How could this be? Encourage the children to sense and empathise with Kevin’s rising panic and fear from the short and staccato sentences.
Kevin’s first reaction to seeing how his own house – his home – has changed, and to seeing people he’d never seen before sitting in his own sitting room, is to get sick. But as he looks again, his parents aren’t smiling, and when his dad opens his mouth he says one word that Kevin hears ‘Clearly’: another page ending with one word.

‘Quick!’ The next page (page 26) starts and ends with a single word and more short and tension-filled sentences in between. ‘Yes!’ How does Kevin feel at this point? Ask the children to take a moment to think about and describe Kevin’s feelings and encourage them to share a time when they too might have felt as he did.

The time Kevin has spent in the place that is, and at the same time isn’t really, his place has changed his feelings about the area: ‘He loved those steps.’ When the children get to the end of the last page, give them time to think about and appreciate this (and the final, powerful) sentence. Ask them to think of words to describe their reactions to the final page.

**DISCUSSION POINT: SEEING YOUR FUTURE**

Ask the children to think about how Kevin might now look to his own future, knowing as he does that at some point he will be living in the same house as his parents and he will be married and have teenage daughters. Ask them to think about this question silently and then to share their thoughts and ideas – first with a partner or in a small group, and later with the class if they wish. Ask them to think about how such a glimpse into your future life might affect how you live. Ask them to think whether they would try to make it come true in some way, or would they just let it happen? Or might they try to avoid the future that they had foreseen? Why?

**ART ACTIVITY**

Have the children then, using mixed media, make pictures of themselves and their families now and in the distant future. As they work, walk around and discuss with them individually what they are representing in their pictures – what changes have occurred, how are the families different, are there more people in the picture than are now in the family, are any new inventions visible etc.?
THE CABIN IN THE WOODS BY ENDA WYLEY

BEFORE READING

As reader/listener reaction to any poem is so intensely private and personal, even in a classroom setting, you might read this poem (and the others in the book) through, maybe two or three times, so that the children can appreciate and enjoy the sounds and images conjured by the words.

Read the title aloud to the children and allow a moment or two for them to picture a cabin in woods. Then check their understanding of the word 'cabin' by writing the word on the board and asking them what image(s) immediately spring to mind. Ask if the title reminds them of anything they have heard or seen before, and if so, what.

In small groups or using a visualiser/IWB, look at PJ Lynch’s illustration for the poem: what words does this image inspire in the children? What stands out most in the picture for them? Why?

AFTER READING

When the children have heard/read the poem, ask them for their thoughts, maybe prompting with questions. For example:

- What images does the title now conjure in your heads?
- What time of year do you think it was? Can you say what words make you say this ('late summer', fourth stanza)?
- Do you get any feelings from this poem? Can you say what these are?
- Do you think the poet actually knows this cabin, or one like it – that she has maybe stayed in this cabin or one like it? What makes you say this?

Show the double page on the visualiser or IWB and allow time for the children to look closely at the illustration again. Does the illustration develop or alter previous mental images now that they have heard/read the poem?

Some children enjoy being asked very specific questions of the ‘Do you remember’ type. For example:

- How was the cabin heated?
- What were the walls made of?
- What birds are mentioned?

Questions like this sometimes provide a way in to a poem, especially for a child with specific learning issues.
DISCUSSION POINT 1:
LANGUAGE AND PLACE
(A) PLACE

We know that the cabin is set in woods in Co. Wexford but, now they’ve heard/read the poem and seen it on the IWB or visualiser, ask the children what anchors this poem to a specific type of place (i.e. a place that is not the city, that is in the countryside). Remind them of the story of the Town Mouse and the Country Mouse, which they may have read or listened to when younger, and ask them to find and reread it in small groups. ‘And there’s us – wild haired, / with dirty finger nails.’ Ask the children to consider how the place in which a person lives might affect their physical appearance (e.g. the clothes worn by the Town Mouse and the Country Mouse were completely different, yet completely fit for the purposes of the wearer: dressing for climate – protection from sandstorms etc.)

(B) CHILDHOOD

The poet powerfully captures the feeling of what it was to be a child in a group of children, carefree all.

• Ask the children to think about and discuss the third stanza, in which the poet talks about ‘yesterday’s / ghosts chattering’. Ask them consider who or what these ghosts might be (e.g. if these might be the ghosts of the children themselves, as they were in the past, when the poet was young).

• Ask them to think about phrases such as ‘standing hip-high / in the damp black grass’, ‘And there’s us – wild haired, / with dirty finger nails’, ‘Time to gather / the breakfast eggs’, and to think about how much, if any, of this could happen in the city.

• Ask them if they suppose the poet is describing childhood memories, or creating images entirely from her imagination, or if they think the poet is describing something from her adult life – is she perhaps visiting this cabin as an adult with her adult friends or family?

• Ask the children how to think about how the adventure might be described from a purely adult point of view.

DISCUSSION POINT 2:
‘POETRY SHOULD BE PART OF OUR EVERYDAY LIVES’

(a) Ask the children to listen to Sarah Crossan, who won the CBI Book of the Year Award in 2016 and has been shortlisted on more than one occasion for her books written in free verse. You will find the video clip on https://vimeo.com/166527713 ‘Poetry should be part of our everyday lives … Poetry is important,’ she says, ‘because poetry belongs to everybody.’

(b) Ask the children to watch this short clip of poet Roger McGough discussing why he thinks poetry is important: ‘poetry is always a journey … poetry can begin anywhere, it can begin at the end …’ You will find it at: https://player.vimeo.com/video/166527712?color=

These and other clips of poets the children are probably familiar with will spark discussion and debate about the importance of poetry in all our lives.
ACTIVITIES

(A) WRITING

In this poem, the sense of place dictates a large part of the feeling of the work. It brings us to the countryside after a warm day, watching the night fall, feeling the damp waist-high grass, listening to the rustling noises of the fox or the horse. Ask the children to think about what other animals or sounds they might expect to hear outside a cabin in the woods. Then ask them to try writing something – a piece of descriptive prose or a poem – that puts them in a contrasting place, e.g. a city street, a noisy concert, a frenetic train station.

(B) ART: THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE

‘We’re city guests / awed by the quiet’: ask the students to think about the sights and sounds (or lack of sound!) that seem strange to the children in the poem. Ask them to list all the animals, birds and other references to the natural environment that they can find in the poem and to look at and think again about the illustration in which PJ Lynch has deliberately left the charcoal images soft, as if a morning mist were protecting and gradually revealing the cabin in the wood – if they were to illustrate the poem, what might they include? Where might they start?

Ask them to think for a moment or two about a scene that would lend itself to being represented in charcoal and soft pencils, then put plenty of each on the tables, along with A4-sized good quality paper, and let them spend some time trying to capture that scene.

(C) DRAMA/MUSIC: COMPOSE A SOUNDSCAPE

Read the poem aloud (or have the children read it themselves), verse by verse, and then ask the children to spend some time thinking about which sounds are suggested by the words and phrases in the poem, with a view to making these using their bodies, voices or musical instruments. Give the children, in small groups, some time to select and rehearse sounds, then ask them to perform their interpretation of the poem and its soundscape for themselves or another class. (They would also need to decide democratically who among them will read the poem to this other class.)
The Bear by John Connolly

Before Reading
(a) Sensitivity
A change in a family relationship is always very difficult to deal with, at any age, and most particularly so when it’s the loss of a parent or sibling, whether this loss be caused by death or separation or divorce. Stories have always been used to teach or get across messages about life’s journey – for example, by accompanying Frodo on his quest to find the ring, the reader may discover much about their own honesty, determination and courage. Through story, the reader can realise that they are not alone in facing trouble or unhappiness or other challenges and can come to know that others have experienced the same distress and similar dilemmas. This story beautifully captures the confused emotions, the genuine distress, the hopes (sometimes hopeless hopes), the fears but most especially the unchanging love of family members during the emotionally traumatic upheaval caused by parental separation. As ever, you will need to be sensitive to the fact that some children may have experienced or be experiencing family separation.

(b) Bears
With text covered, you could show the illustrations on the IWB or visualiser to the children before reading, asking them to suggest other stories they have heard or seen that include bears and to say what they think might happen in this story.

After Reading
This story has as its place Ballylongford, Co. Kerry, in an area ‘short on caves and woods’. The ‘newly reduced family’ has moved to live in the grandmother’s old house – it’s their ‘new home’. This house may be dusty and may smell of old clothes but the fields behind it stretch for miles – it’s not at all like living in the city.

Begin a discussion with the class about the word and concept of ‘home’, which for a child is probably wherever they are with their family. On the board, write down all the different things the word means to the class: home can be, and often is, in a hostel or hotel room, in an apartment or in a block of flats, in a caravan or on a farm in the country. It’s not the location of the place – rather it’s who’s in the place. As the old adage advises: Home is where the heart is. It’s generally wherever the parents, family or carers are, though, of course, not in the case of the many unaccompanied minors fleeing war and political unrest.

Discussion Point: Home
1. Ask the children to think about where home is for Steven and for his brother David and to discuss with their partner or group if they’d consider ‘home’ to be the place the brothers have just left – or the new place, in Kerry.
2. Ask them to consider if ‘home’ is in the same place for each of the boys.
3. Ask the children to reread, slowly to themselves, the paragraph in which the boys’ mother went across the garden to where the bear sat, when ‘the bear reached up and removed his head, and now the rain fell on their father and mother both’ (page 46). Then give them a few moments to talk with their partner or group and share their thoughts or feelings if they feel like doing so.
ACTIVITIES

(A) WRITING: CHARACTER WORD-PORTRAIT

The story might be described as whimsical – it turns what the reader might expect on its head with an opening sentence that reads ‘The bear appeared shortly after they arrived in Kerry.’ The reader might expect an enormous adventure, but the bear in this story just sits in the house, watching telly. So it could be said that this is not a story where much actually happens in the physical world, but where much happens in the minds and feelings of each of the four characters.

Ask the children, in groups, to write what they think is going on in each character’s head. Choose Steven, David, their mum, their dad and the bear and assign a character to each ‘group’. Ask them to study the picture they are presented with and the line of text, and to consider the concept of ‘image’ and ‘visual text’. The concept of ‘image’ does not necessarily exclude words as they occur in oral or written communication. In spoken language, we use ‘verbal images’, which are, of course, not visual, but mental images. A great illustrator or a good picturebook will often show you an ‘image’ that has not been visually described in the text in order to add another layer to the overall book or story. The group should write as many adjectives and adverbs as they can to describe their ‘character’ and then underneath write a sentence that captures the essence of their character. For example, ‘David constantly brings home creatures that are damaged or feel imprisoned – perhaps unconsciously reflecting how he feels about his parents’ relationship?’

When you are adding to your character you should try and add as many details as possible so you paint a picture in the reader’s mind.

(B) PLEASE LOOK AFTER THIS BEAR: THE TEDDY BEAR PROJECT

Children have also always had a special relationship with bears, or at least with bears that aren’t real – Paddington Bear is one of the most loved characters in the English language. Ask the children how they feel about teddy bears: if they had one when they were young, if they still have it, if it was handed down from parents or grandparents, or if they were given it at birth and so on. (You might want to suggest that you still treasure a teddy bear you were given as a small child, as children in the senior classes of primary or junior classes of secondary schools might be a bit reluctant to admit to owning a teddy bear without the support of others!)

There are now shops where children can personalise and design their own bears, and the junior classes often send a teddy bear with a child who’s going on a holiday or journey during the year – the child can send back photos of the bear on its travels.

The children in senior classes could help children in first or second class to send a bear with a letter and photos about what is happening in their room to children in the same class in a school in a different part of the country. They can watch http://travelingteddybear.com/ for ideas on how to get started.

(C) WRITING: FASCINATING UNFACTS

The author of the book 500 Fascinating Facts about Kerry seemed to ‘have a strange idea of what a fact might be’, the fascinating facts not being facts at all – though the children might think carefully about the 500th one, which might be both fact and non-fact …

Ask the children if to consider if the ‘facts’ reveal anything about the state of mind of the narrator.

Have the class compile their own book of plausible but bogus fascinating facts about their own county or about the country – probably altogether more fun than finding factual facts! Here are some to start them off, and of course these ‘facts’ may or may not be true …

- In the seventh century, St Kilian became the only Irishman to be offered the papacy. He refused the honour.
- The Sligo antelope is the only antelope in Western Europe with webbed feet, allowing it to swim out to graze on seaweed.
- The Scardan Waterfall in County Donegal is the highest in Europe, falling 1,800 feet off the Cock of Shruhill.
The Ram King by Eoin Colfer

Before Reading

Although we are familiar with stories traditionally beginning ‘Once upon a time’, all stories have a place. As Eoin Colfer says (in his introduction addressed to the reader, page v): ‘Stories have to be set somewhere.’ The author has taken a place – Hook Head – and transformed it, through the magic of story, into another place entirely. ‘Gulliver’s Travels would have been pretty boring without Lilliput to land on,’ Colfer continues, and it could be fairly said that, were the Hook Peninsula not to exist, or were Eoin Colfer never to have spent time there as he did, this story would not exist. This anthology is called Once upon a Place, and in this story, the place is clearly inspired by Hook Head. As Colfer’s story might be said to gently poke fun at the many great myths and legends of Ireland, it could be said to be a whimsical ‘Once upon …’

After Reading

(a) Exploring Myths and Legends

Ask the children if they have ever heard (or watched) a story like this before and if so where. Encourage them to think about the story itself and about the genre the story might belong to by asking some prompt questions.

1. What are the features of myths and legends? If necessary, start them thinking about the stock characters by writing one or two on the board: a widowed king, the only child a princess and so on.
2. Remind them that legends require the most improbable skill sets from their heroes (being able to hide behind a spear, for instance, or to stand inside the span of a ram’s corkscrew horns).
3. Do all the children know and understand the word ‘shenanigans’? What, if anything, might this word tell us about the storyteller? (Shenanígán is a seanchaí or storyteller.)
4. Do the children know the names of any myths or legends?
5. Can they retell a myth or legend that they know to their classmates or partner?
6. Ask them to find a myth or legend that specifically features another ram (or a bull or a golden fleece) or to create a legend from their own imaginings.
7. Ask them to identify a place special to them and write or narrate their own mythical account of their place. That account might tell how the place came to be. This activity could be done in pairs or individually.

(b) Heroes in Myths and Legends

This story takes old Fiannaíocht-type tropes and reverses them – for example, legends usually have a male hero; this story has a female hero at its core. The hero is, in fact, the princess, Aoibh (and of course calling her Aoibh might be a deliberate reference to the biblical Eve and that other great myth). Explore with the class why it might be ironic or unusual to have a female hero in a story like this. Unlike many national mythologies, Irish legends include a relatively large number of strong female characters, and Queen Rosileen and the Princess Aoibh could certainly be included in their ranks. But Aoibh is different even from these. Unlike Deirdre of the Sorrows, she can by no means be considered a victim, and unlike Medb, she is in no respect a petulant villain. Aoibh merely wishes to be in control of her destiny, just as a male hero would expect to be. Unlike Gráinne, who could be said to manipulate all around her to get what she wants, Aoibh achieves her destiny by her own, positive action. She doesn’t ruin anyone else to achieve it, and she even takes the time to save Wulfus, the expected hero, who ‘as a boy had dreamed of the day when he would single-handedly save the village from a Battering Ram’.
More than any other character, Aoibh seems to know that they are playing out an ancient myth or legend. Ask the children to suggest, recall (or find) examples of this. For instance:

- page 93 – ‘This is not the stone age anymore. It’s the iron age now. Nobody can pledge my hand.’
- page 100 – ‘Really, father? A thousand daughters?’
- page 102 – ‘Perished? No, Captain Eternal Love got a cramp in the ocean. I had to save his old carcass and kill the ram.’

(C) STORY IN MYTHS, LEGENDS AND FOLKLORE

A **legend** is a semi-true story that has been passed on from person to person and has important meaning or symbolism for the culture in which it originates. A legend usually includes an element of truth or is based on historic facts, but with ‘mythical qualities’. Legends usually involve heroic characters or fantastic places and often encompass the spiritual beliefs of the culture in which they originate.

A **myth** is a story based on tradition or legend that has a deep symbolic meaning. A myth ‘conveys a truth’ to those who tell it and hear it, rather than necessarily recording a true event. Although some myths can be accounts of actual events, they have become transformed by symbolic meaning or shifted in time or place. Myths are often used to explain universal and local beginnings and involve supernatural beings. The great power of the meaning of these stories to the culture in which they developed is a major reason why they survive as long as they do – sometimes for thousands of years.

**Folklore** is based on popular stories passed on in spoken form from one generation to the next. Usually the authors are unknown and there are often many versions of the tales. Folklore comprises fables, fairy tales, old legends and even ‘urban legends’. Again, some tales may have been based on a partial truth that has been lost or hidden over time. It is difficult to categorise folklore precisely because it fits into many categories.

Myths, legends and folklore are hard to classify and often overlap. Imagine a line with an historical account based on facts at one end and myths or cultural folklore at the other; as you progress towards the myth/folklore end of the line, what an event symbolises to people, or what they feel about it, becomes of greater historical significance than the facts, which become less important. By the time you reach the far end of the spectrum, the story has taken on a life of its own and the facts of the original event, if there ever were any, have become almost irrelevant. It is the message that is important.

The **seanachaí** is a traditional Irish storyteller who recited ancient folklore. During medieval times, when most Irish people didn’t have books, the seanachaí used storytelling to pass down stories from generation to generation through theatrical stories, prose and song. Even with the introduction of parchment and quills to the general population, the tradition of the spoken word was kept alive. **Seanachaí** became famous across the island of Ireland for their ability to tell tales from memory, reciting detailed historical events, poems and Irish legends, all without the use of books.

The author might be said to have created a myth here and, with it, given an insight into how myth is created and handled by the seanachaí, who in olden times would embellish the story in his head. Colfer’s seanachaí, Shenanigán, can’t see what’s happening, but he knows what a hero myth requires, so that is what he creates for his audience.

One of Eoin Colfer’s most exciting legacy projects as Laureate na nÓg was Seanachaí, a storytelling project that took place as part of the 1916 commemorations. While Eoin’s Once upon a Place programme saw himself and a group of storytellers travelling around Ireland bringing their own stories to audiences of children throughout the country in the tradition of the seanachaí, this project was designed to pass on the art of storytelling to the children themselves.

The idea behind the project was to explore ways that children could be encouraged to learn how the events of 1916 unfolded, not just in Dublin, but in their own communities and areas. These children would then learn the skills to gather those stories and tell them in their own words and voices. As with all stories, the teller is describing his or her own experience, which colours their tale. You can watch the results here: [https://childrenslaureate.ie/ seanachaí](https://childrenslaureate.ie/ seanachaí)

Encourage the children to gather stories and memories from older generations of your community and their own households and families. You can choose a theme – it could be historical, like this project, or cultural or perhaps based around an important event in your local area. Encourage the children to ‘learn’ the story in the traditional method and recite it for the group.
ACTIVITIES
(A) DRAMA: CHARACTER PORTRAITS

Provide the children with a blank character grid (see the example below), or trace some children’s outlines on a long sheet of paper (this will be the template for their ‘character portrait’). Ask them to find evidence from the text to show what each character is like. Different groups might take different characters. Some pupils could complete this exercise independently or in groups, while other pupils could work with teacher or SNA as scribe.

Once the character portraits are complete, the children could take on the roles of the characters. Sitting in the ‘hot seat’, each character might be interviewed by the rest of the class in the role of journalists or reporters eager to get each character’s side of the story.

The completed character portraits could be decorated and coloured using charcoal, paints, crayons or chalks and be compared with those by PJ Lynch (pages 89, 92, 93 and 101) before being displayed in an assembly area.

KING FILAN

- page 87: ‘would have dearly loved to sneak off to his lodge for a snooze’ (he is not that interested in the history of his kingdom right now? He would prefer to sleep!)
- page 87: His reaction to the phrase ‘cost you a fortune’ tells us something about what really motivates him
- page 89: he is not decisive, he cowers with fear, gives no directions to his army
- page 90: “Commands”… “Yes. Commands we must have.” (Is this the royal ‘we’? It is his responsibility to give commands, especially in times of danger.)
- page 94: “I didn’t know Aoibh could swim.” (He doesn’t know his own daughter!)

AOIBH

- page 89: “To the boats! Everybody make for the boats!” (decisive)
- page 91: “Our only option is to row down the coast to the Kingdom of Salt Flats.” (fearless)
- page 93: Princess Aoibh was appalled. “This is not the stone age anymore. It’s the iron age now. Nobody can pledge my hand.” (empowered)
- page 102: ‘so that the ram’s blood could be sluiced away from her trunk … Princess Aoibh emerged from the salt water, and unbuckled the breastplate’ – usually this behaviour is that of a muscled male hero in legends and myths.

WULFUS

- page 91: ‘an excellent name for a soldier’. Why might the author have chosen this name for this character? What do you think he looks like?
- page 91: “Allow me to quote a verse.” (Full of pomp/confidence)
- page 94: He winked at Aoibh.

ROSILEEN

- page 87 believer in sand crystals according to Filan
- page 90: first to recover from the sight of the ram and speak
- page 91: appeared very lucid ‘all of a sudden’. Teasing and making fun of Filan is something she enjoys!

(B) ART: PLACE AND SPACE

It’s easy to believe you’re at the centre of the universe when you’re on a promontory like Hook Head, or on a rocky shore like the crab in Séamus Cashman’s poem (pages 82–83): the sheer emptiness makes you realise how huge the universe is.

Ask the children to look at the lighthouse on the back cover of the book and to imagine being there. They might then investigate the geography of Hook Head, which inspired the kingdom of Exterios.

- Ask them how they might visually represent the tiny kingdom, using the textual clues or the physical features of Hook Head in Wexford.
- They could represent Hook Head in 3D, using clay or other materials.
- Ask them to represent the feeling of being on a wide open space on an ‘arrowhead peninsula bordered on two sides by a treacherous ocean’ in poem or prose.
SNAIL PALS BY GERALDINE MILLS

BEFORE READING

You could write the title of the poem on a flipchart page and ask for immediate thoughts – e.g. do the children think it’s about two or more snails that are friends, in whose voice do they think the poem will be etc.? (The children might first think of snails racing one another or of two snails sharing the lettuce in someone’s garden – all suggestions could be written down and saved. These first reactions can be discussed later and could prompt the children to write their own poems or creative pieces in Lia’s voice, or in the voice of one snail envying the other’s runner bean plant etc). Using a visualiser, if possible, ask the children to look at the illustration of this poem: in the foreground we see the snail apparently observing the huge, stationary stone castle – does anything about this image strike them? If so, what? Might this picture hint at images or events in the poem? When in time might poem be set? Does this image remind them of anything else?

AFTER READING

This poem’s place is near Oughterard in County Galway, close to Lough Corrib and the tall Twelve Bens. It is the snail’s (and most likely Lia’s) favourite place – Aughnanure Castle (from the Irish words áchadh na nIubhar or field of the yew [trees]). The snail (who obviously carries her own castle around with her!) and her human friend Lia head to the castle built by the ‘ferocious O’Flahertys’ in the 1500s, which still can be visited today. Standing on what is almost a rocky island, Aughanure Castle, an Irish tower house, is quite well-preserved and visitors can see the remains of a banqueting hall, a watch tower and much else besides. The poem describes the snail’s journey to the castle, but we don’t really know just how large the castle must appear to the snail – though it’s not really that tall or impressive by human standards.

• Provide some information about tower houses. For example, tower houses were often designed to a standard plan, three or four storeys high with a vault over the ground floor. The roof was pitched slate or thatched. Within the walls were staircase passages and other features, such as garderobes or toilets, and so on.

• Ask the children to imagine that Lia places the snail in the field of yews. Ask them to describe the view as the snail now sees it – the tower house must seem enormous! http://www.heritageireland.ie/en/west/aughnanurecastle/

• Ask the children if any of them or anyone they know has ever visited the castle, Oughterard or Lough Corrib. Ask them to find the places the snail mentions using logainm.ie or an old Ordnance Survey map. Are the places mentioned all within walking distance of a young child or are some quite far off? What are the Irish-language place names for these places? What are the meanings of these names? logainm.ie provides information on the townland, barony and much else of places in Ireland and allows the children to view the physical geography of the places mentioned, as well as allowing them to hear the names spoken in Irish and in English


DISCUSSION POINT: SAFETY

A snail can be at home anywhere, its shell is on its back, so its place can be anywhere where the snail chooses to curl up. But this shell, this home, this place of safety, is ultimately fragile, just as Aughnanure Castle, home of the O’Flahertys, proved to be. The castle was a fortified residence and had been built with a watch tower, thick walls and a parapet over the entrance so that stones or other objects could be dropped directly onto attackers to protect the family. But it was no match when they needed protection from artillery, which its defences weren’t designed to resist, and it fell to the English in 1572. So how much protection does a home (shell or fortress) really afford someone? Ask the children to think about, discuss and possibly debate the phrase ‘An Englishman’s home is his castle.’ As always, be sensitive to the possibility that some children in the class may come from places where their homes have been destroyed or damaged by war or fire.
Activities

(A) Visual Arts

Some historians believe that snails could have a special relationship with the Newgrange site in Co. Meath, as many snail shells have been found there and the swirly patterns carved into the rock resemble the patterns of a snail shell. Ask the children to make 2D snail-shell prints (similar in appearance to the carvings at Newgrange) using coiled twine, wool or string on card and paint or inks. Ask them to vary the sizes of the shells to make interesting patterns. A 3D snail is very easy to make from play dough, plasticine or clay – the children could make a long sausage for the body and a longer skinnier sausage to coil into a snail shape.

(B) Research: Stories from the Lives of People in the Past

From songs and stories of Ireland, the children will probably already be familiar with Grace O’Malley, better known as Granuaile, Gráinne Mhaol or Gráinne Ní Mháille, who was chieftain of the Ó Maille clan, a well-educated and formidable pirate queen of the old Gaelic world, who apparently knew no English and conversed with the English queen in Latin. Her first husband was Dónal an Chogaidh (Dónal of the wars) Ó Flaitheartaigh. Ask the children to research the life and times of these famous sixteenth-century chieftains, including their living conditions (homes/food/education and so on). As they begin work, or after listening to the poem a few times, let them hear The Granuaile Suite, written by Shaun Davey for singer Rita Connolly. The album was recorded using a thirty-five-piece chamber orchestra, joined by uilleann-pipe soloist Liam O’Flynn and Donal Lunny on bouzouki.

The best-known song, ‘Ripples in the Rockpools’, opens with an invitation to Dónal an Chogaidh from Granuaile and is easily accessed on the Internet – try finding the clip from Siar that shows a young Rita Connolly singing with Shaun Davey and Liam O’Flynn on pipes.

(C) Science

Some children enjoy specific facts and figures, and these could provide another way in to this poem, especially for a child with specific learning issues. Snail facts include:

- Land snails breathe with lungs
- Sea snails breathe with gills
- A snail’s body is called a ‘foot’
- A garden snail moves at about 1.3 cms per second
- Snails need a diet rich in calcium to maintain a healthy shell

Depending on the time of year, you could bring some garden snails (in a suitable container, with air holes and green vegetation) into class for the children to observe, before returning them to their own habitat. For reasons of health and safety, children should wash their hands soon after holding a snail.
**NUMBER 13  BY JIM SHERIDAN**

**BEFORE READING**

This story addresses the corrosive nature of misplaced guilt and powerfully brings to life events of one night in one place, events that stay with a person forever. You will of course need to be sensitive to the content of this story, knowing that some of the children in the class may have experienced tragic deaths of loved ones.

(a) Explore the connotations of the title with the children and get them to think about what the story might involve. Write ‘Number 13’ on the board and ask questions. For example, what is their first reaction to what they see on the board? To what might it be referring? Might it be a house number? A raffle number? A lucky number or an unlucky number? Can a number bring good or bad luck? Is there such a thing as luck, or might it better be called chance? Is there a difference?

(b) With text covered, show some of PJ Lynch’s illustrations from the story on the visualiser or IWB and ask the children to look at each for a few moments, or choose one illustration (e.g. page 110) and allow time for the children to focus on the nature and characteristics of that face. Perhaps show them the illustration on page 117 that develops our understanding of the characters of both Johnny and the boy. Encourage them to observe the bared teeth of the boy on his back, Johnny’s head thrown back and mouth open – in horror or in surprise? – the expressiveness of the position of the boy’s foot and arm. Or show them only the illustration on page 121 and encourage them to see not only the elements of a ghost-train ride (spiders lurking and so on) but also the shadow carrying a stick in the background by asking questions about what that might signify.

(c) When they have finished the story and have thought about it, ask them to discuss with a partner or very small group if they think PJ’s illustrations serve to enhance our own fears as much as they contribute to our understanding of the character. If children are unfamiliar with discussing illustrations, you could write a few words on the board (for example, atmospheric, frightening, dramatic, helpful/unhelpful) to prompt their observations.

**AFTER READING**

**(A) PLACE**

Johnny had once lived in Number 13 and when he’d gone back ‘to see if it had the same feel as it had when he was young’, he didn’t at first feel anything because ‘of course they had changed the wallpaper and drawers’. So while he was physically in the same place, it wasn’t really the same place, as it would have been ‘all fixed up’ after the fire and repainted and redecorated before being put up for sale. Explore the concept of ‘place’ with the children, asking questions such as:

- What is place?
- Is it always the same?
- What does it mean to come from a place if the place you came from no longer exists and/or has changed beyond all recognition?

You can help the children to make connections with other contributions in this anthology – for example Roddy Doyle’s story ‘The Pumping Station’ or Pat Boran’s poem ‘Bus Stop’ – by asking prompt questions. For example, is the house/district Kevin comes to after he leaves the water the same place he was in when he jumped? Is the ‘backside-numbing bench’ described in the same spot that the man used to visit ‘decades back’?
(B) Memory

The place we call home has some meaning for us. What does the word ‘home’ mean? It’s more than bricks and mortar. It’s not just a building: it’s the familiar sounds, smells, tastes – it’s often a place where you’re understood and accepted. In this story Johnny feels he is responsible for his home being destroyed, but even when he goes back to visit the changed house, the memories of his mother and father are still there.

When we meet Johnny as a man of 70 he has no real place to call his own (he sleeps in tents and travels around) but he remembers his home, a house, in a street in Dublin, over fifty years ago. We have to piece together the story of what may have happened ourselves. We need to read between the lines to realise that, in Johnny’s past, there appears to have been a house fire and we imagine that Johnny must have slipped out of the house earlier and thus survived. His younger sibling may have fallen down the stairs. Johnny may have left the squeaky gate open and his younger brother may have managed to get downstairs, without his parents’ knowledge, lit something and caused a fire. The ‘boy’ on his back may a version of his younger brother from way back then, and we imagine that Johnny is haunted by what his younger brother did because he blames himself for having left the squeaky gate open on the stairs.

Having listened to the story, ask the children if they suppose the narrator is describing childhood memories or creating images entirely from his imagination, or if they think the author is describing something from their adult life, and give them time to think about and discuss their thoughts in small groups or with a partner.

(C) Perspective

1. Because the narrator was so involved in the events being described, he is not a neutral reporter or witness, and his version of events influences the story that is being told and has an impact on how the reader relates to it. Ask the children if they have a mental picture of the narrator as a child/ as a young man and to try to imagine what he must have been like at the time of the fire.

2. The same event, written from a different perspective, would make a very different poem or story. The children already know a little about Johnny’s dad (he was funny) and about his mam (she ran a cow out the back door). Ask them to develop one of the characters further and create a personal voice for them so they can tell the story of what happened that night effectively. They might start by reviewing the involvement in this story, if any, of his mam or dad by jotting down what we are told about the character and about what we are told by a narrator who is far from impartial about his feelings.

(D) Open Questions

1. What did you think of the story? How did you feel listening to this story?

2. Why might some suspect that ‘the boy’ is not real?

3. What words or phrases tell us that Johnny’s dread, resignation and acceptance of his fate increased as the story progressed?

4. ‘Johnny carries a monster on his back’ – what do you think that means?

5. Did any particular part of the story frighten or disturb you? Which part? Try to say why.
ACTIVITIES

(A) WRITING: LEAVING HOME

Explore with the children some reasons why people are forced to leave their homes—e.g. accidents, floods, fires, emigrating, unable to pay the rent, the landlord has decided to turn the house into flats. Be aware that some children may have had experience of leaving their home in traumatic circumstances.

Ask the children to imagine that they are leaving their home for the last time. Tell them they have the opportunity to walk quietly through the place one last time, to try and create a lasting memory to carry with them. Ask them to close their eyes and think about how they might engage other senses as well (just as Johnny did on page 113) to help them remember their experience of the place. Later, they might write down words or phrases to help capture and create a more lasting memory. If the children are willing to share their memories, they could work in pairs, one child reading the words and phrases and another child miming the memory using props or a piece of fabric to signify things or people in the memory. Give the children some time (10–15 minutes) to rehearse this before asking them to perform their pieces for the class if they wish.

(B) ROLE PLAY: INTERVIEW

Ask the children to think about how the description of the night’s events might change if it had happened recently and not a long time ago. Could the narrator be telling the story to any particular person—if so, to whom and for what reason? A newspaper reporter? A garda? A best friend?

Ask the children to role play the narrator and the interviewer and retell the story in ten sentences. Limiting the role play to ten sentences will keep the children focused on retelling the story.

(C) DESCRIBING THE PRESENT

Johnny once lived in the middle of Dublin, in house number 13. Get an old photo, preferably one taken about a hundred years ago, of a familiar local place—particularly one with a child in it (many photographs are available at www.nli.ie/en/photographs). Ask the class to imagine engaging the child in the photograph in conversation with them. The class is to try to explain to their counterpart in the photograph what will happen as time passes—to tell that hundred-years-ago child what changes they can expect. The class must find the language to explain the advances and changes that are about to happen to a child that does not have the language or experience to understand—for example, how do you explain digital technology, or even traffic lights, to a child who is familiar only with horses and carts?

(D) THINKING ABOUT INFLUENCE

We all influence and affect the fabric of our environment, and Johnny had a particularly profound and long-lasting effect on his. Ask the children to think about how they have changed the place they live in, including the effect they have had on the people who live in the same space. They might also identify five positive contributions they have made—for example, cleaned or picked up some litter from the street; cheered a neighbour with a smile or a greeting; tidied up at home; planted some flowers and so on.

(E) WRITING: SPECIAL PEOPLE

Ask the children to write about the things that make someone in their lives (parent, sibling, guardian etc.) special. Ask them to think about how they make them happy and make them laugh; when they have good times together; how that person shows they care for them and so on. Ask them then to think about the one thing they most want their special person to know—it could be that they appreciate the lifts to football matches or swimming, or that they love the smell of that person’s perfume and find it comforting, or that they understand the tough time their special person is having at the moment and that they love and support them.
THE DIRTY RIVER, STILLORGAN
BY MARK GRANIER

BEFORE READING

Using a visualiser, if possible, or moving the book(s) from group to group, explore the illustration accompanying this poem with the children. Allow some time for each child to look closely at the illustration and then ask what elements from PJ Lynch’s illustration indicate a dirty river. If they don’t comment on it without prompting, perhaps ask why they think the illustrator left an expanse of whitish light in the picture and what might it suggest – does it suggest anything about where the river is flowing? (The river is running through Stillorgan, but in the mind’s eye of the poet as a child, it was like a stretch of the Amazon, so it might be allowing for the ambiguity of the place of the river in the real world and in the author’s imagination. Equally, it’s a means to leave space for the typesetting of the poem itself.)

AFTER READING

The river clearly made quite an impression on the poet as a child, though it seems to have been much abused by the grown-ups in the area, or perhaps by those who built ‘the new housing estates’. He characterises its course as a kind of hide-and-seek game – sometimes you can see it and sometimes you can’t, because humans have encroached ever further on it. It seems from the final verses that the river may have been built over at one point and only survived because it was directed down a concrete pipe, while the houses were built over its original course. But to the children in the poem it was still somewhere to go when they got ‘kicked / out of doors into afternoons / of …’

Ask the children to think about their emotional response to the river, perhaps having listened to the poem being read a few times and having read it themselves. Perhaps they feel sorry for it, smelling of sewage when it rains and practically hidden away by foaming brambles and nettles. Perhaps they feel admiration for a river – ‘little more than a stream’ – that has survived since the days when the ivy-saddled stone of the priory walls ran against its banks.

LITERARY DEVICE: PERSONIFICATION

The poet uses personification, a literary tool that adds colour and interest to a poem or a story when, for example, he describes the river as ‘chuckling’ out of a concrete pipe (though the verb ‘scuttling’, used in the same verse, might more usually be associated with a mouse or a rat). Ask the children to find definitions for the term ‘personification’ and make sure they understand it fully. Then ask them to keep an eye out for examples of personification as they read other poems and stories and to write examples of their own to illustrate the term for the children in the next class. For example, ‘The flowers danced as the wind sang through the valley. / The branches of the large oak moaned as the storm took hold.’
DISCUSSION POINT: FREEDOM

The poet recognised the river as somewhere his imagination could run free.

• Ask the children if they have any similar spot at home where they can play freely and where their imaginations can run free (i.e. not a playground with slides, swings).
• What does the spot look like? Do they think the area will always look as it does now?
• Perhaps the children aren’t allowed to play outside unsupervised as the poet was – do they think they are missing out? How might the poem have been different if the poet had played by the river with a parent or guardian supervising as would most likely happen now?

The poet mentions that the ‘space they couldn’t develop or sell’ was somewhere they could run to when they ‘got kicked out of doors’.

(a) Ask the children to consider if those words indicate that the children really wanted to go out. Do they also suggest that the poet might be thinking of a different time, an Enid Blyton time, a time when children were allowed out to play on their own, to discover smugglers on an island or to invent their own amusement?

(b) Ask the children what they would do if they were kicked out of doors for an afternoon – suggestions of visits to shops or shopping centres not accepted! Ask them to write group, paired or individual pieces on how they would spend an afternoon if they had no access to smartphones or laptops and if they had to entertain themselves with no input from grown-ups.

ACTIVITIES

(A) WHAT’S IN A NAME?

According to Wikipedia (List of rivers of County Dublin), there are more than 130 named rivers and streams in County Dublin. Using Joseph W. Doyle’s book *Ten Dozen Waters: The Rivers and Streams of County Dublin* (page 20) as its reference, it lists Priory Stream as flowing through ‘E Stillorgan’ into Blackrock Park.

• With the class democratically divided into small groups, ask the children to find features they consider interesting in South County Dublin – they might notice, for example, how many residential streets in the Stillorgan area still bear the name ‘Priory’ and might locate Saint John of God’s psychiatric hospital on an Ordnance Survey map or similar.
• Working in the same groups, ask them to locate the Amazon on a globe and in an atlas and to follow the course of that great river. Then ask them to think about how the poet felt when he described his local waterway, the ‘Dirty River’, as ‘little more than a stream’, a ‘mucky stretch’. Yet this small river is addressed as a living entity in the very last line of the poem: ‘Ready or not, there you come.’ Ask the children to think about this change: to consider why the poet might have chosen here to address the river in the first person, when he has described it in the third person in the other verses
• Having closely examined a map of the Stillorgan area, ask the children to suggest why the poet might have particularly mentioned the ‘new housing estates’, the stream flowing through ‘space they couldn’t develop or sell’ and to say what feelings the poet might be indicating with these words and phrases. Ask them to draw the course of the river, even that part where it can’t be seen – ask them to try and include St John of God’s psychiatric hospital (image to be found online if necessary), the trees and foaming bramble, the steep, slippery bank and so on.
(B) ONCE UPON A GAME

Many traditional games are global: they have travelled across continents and been adapted to suit the situations in different countries – for example, in some places parallel lines might be drawn in the soil or sand, whereas in others lines or circles might be drawn with chalk on tarmac or sand. The game Hot Potato, for example, where children sit in a circle passing round a bean bag or soft ball, might have originated with the passing around of a hot potato in the days before bean bags or balls were affordable or available – the child holding the bag or ball when the leader shouts ‘Hot Potato’ is out.

Children still love to play games and, like stories, games develop children’s understanding of language and its sounds. Games can also teach children important lessons in an informal way – for example, through playing games they learn how to make decisions, to share and to be a good winner or loser.

‘Ready or not, here I come’/’Here I come, ready or not’ – these lines come from the game Hide and Seek. What other games do the children know – for example, Dusty Bluebells, Acker Backa Boo, All in, All in.

1, 2, 3 O’LEARY
4, 5, 6 O’LEARY
7, 8, 9 O’LEARY
10 O’LEARY
CATCH ME

In the UK, this game was sometimes called ‘One, Two, Three a-Leerie’ and was played alone or in groups: the child bounces the ball on the numbers in the rhyme and on ‘a-leerie’ or ‘O’Leary’ lifts one leg over the ball and catches it. On ‘Catch me’ the ball is bounced and the child twirls around and catches it.

The children could collect instructions for playing old playground games in a scrapbook or hardback notebook. They might interview parents and grandparents and, with permission, elderly neighbours as part of the project.
STREAM TIME  BY OISÍN MCGANN

BEFORE READING

The ancient Greek writer Heraclitus said, ‘No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man.’ One place, in different timelines, can be intertwined through memory, as with Jim Sheridan’s story ‘Number 13’ and Roddy Doyle’s story ‘The Pumping Station’. In ‘Stream Time’, places at once familiar and unfamiliar are entwined by a river and by time as a ghost-character travels along, experiencing the changing course of the history of Ireland.

(a) What stood out about the story? Ask the children if they can name any other story (in any genre – film, TV, book, poem) that has a ghost-character as narrator or a character who travels through time.

(b) Ask questions to prompt discussion. For example:

• Did the character/characters learn anything new during the story?
• Are there any disadvantages to being a ghost-character in a story?
• Would you like to be able to have the ability to travel back and forth in time? What would be the advantages and disadvantages of time-travel?

AFTER READING

The narrator’s body floats along the river in a leaking wooden boat, through the Boyne Valley, from Trim to its mouth at Drogheda, and some of the most historic countryside in Ireland. Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth, ancient Tara where the Ard Rí had his seat, monastic settlements, the site of the great Battle of the Boyne, Drogheda – scene of Cromwell’s infamous siege: all are located on or close to the river. As her corpse floats along we learn that it’s a shock to her that she’s dead. But then she discovers that when water reaches or touches a part of her she loses a bit of herself, and with that comes understanding: she knows that the language is English, knows that it’s not her language (she’s Gaelic Irish and her husband was Viking), she knows that the Navan she can see is more built up than the Navan she knew, with its stone houses. She realises that people dress differently and, later, deliberately dissolves her foot to learn about the Famine. She has never actually been to Slane but knows that the Boyne Valley isn’t new to her.

By the time she gets to the sea she realises that time is passing ever more quickly: it is accelerating. For instance, early in the story, near Trim, she can see children and animals noticing her as she passes (and this, of course, is a familiar trope in stories: that children and animals are in some way sensitive to those in the spirit world.) Later on, at Navan, a bridge is built almost in an instant before her eyes, by workers who seem to her like insects. She realises she should go – she wants to be with her husband and son.

Explore the history of the places named with the class, perhaps using a map like that found on http://www.discoverboynevalley.ie/driving-route/. Ask the children, in groups, to work on a large timeline (perhaps marking each period on a roll of wallpaper or drawing paper) as they think about the events our narrator might have seen as she floated past and about those that dated from before her time. When they have all finished, see which group most accurately marked the historical periods for when she passes Trim, Navan, Slane and reaches Drogheda and the sea.
DISCUSSION POINT:
HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS WITH NATURE

- Our narrator constantly refers to the disappearance of trees as she travels through time. Many ancient civilisations held trees in high, magical or even holy regard; however our traveller notices that they are disappearing. People and trees seem to have a particularly fraught relationship. Ask the children to consider the reasons for the disappearance of our ancient forests and its impact on our landscape, our culture (you could write on the board a few lines from the lament or caoineadh ‘Cill Chais’, words that lament the destruction of Ireland’s forests in the sixteenth century – ‘Cad a dhéanfaimid feasta gan adhmad? Tá deireadh na gcoillte ar lár’) and on our environmental well-being.

- As our narrator travels she describes some of her experiences in animal terms: she can sense the minds of the living ‘like a bee can find flowers’ (page 148); she yelps ‘like a puppy’ when she sees her toes are gone (page 149); the builders move ‘like flickering insects’ (page 154); a train caused her ‘to flinch and cower in terror’ at Navan, with its ‘whistling howl’ and ‘cloud of smoke’ (page 154); machines are described as ‘steel monsters … spewing smoke like dragons’ (page 155). But the wood and thatch yield to stone and brick and eventually to ‘white seamless stone’ (page 155). Ask the children to think about some reasons why she might choose to describe what she sees in words associated with the natural world.

ACTIVITIES
(A) LISTENING: COMPARISON OF TEXTS

Show the children the words of the very first paragraph again, preferably on a visualiser with the accompanying illustration. Give them a few minutes to think themselves into the small leaky boat and to think about what it must have been like for our narrator to discover herself ‘in a confined space with a dead body’. Encourage them to see how the first paragraph, these first two pages, make it well-nigh impossible for anyone who has read them not to continue reading the story.

You could read or reread the poem ‘I felt a Funeral, in my Brain’ by Emily Dickinson (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45706), which is also about the sensation of consciousness after death and how the spirit leaves the world to go to the beyond. In that poem, the poet imagines that, though dead, she still has her senses, but these gradually shut down one after another, until she is herself gone but has gained understanding.

In ‘Stream Time’, the woman has her reason, but her spirit body gradually dissipates (in contact with the water, itself strongly associated with magic) in return for more understanding about both what is happening to her and the passage of time and its effects on the Boyne valley, which has been her home. Though mortally afraid of the water at the start (she nearly drowned when she was alive, and the loss of part of her arm when it dips in the water terrifies her), her knowledge and understanding come from the water, to which she must sacrifice part of herself. The river is always there, but ever changing – different parts of the river reveal more knowledge, until her thirst for knowledge outweighs her fear of the sacrifice it costs to attain it. In the end she embraces the water and dissipates completely, but with full understanding of what is happening to her.

(B) ART: LOOKING AND RESPONDING

PJ Lynch’s illustrations in this story are evocative of the work of Victorian Pre-Raphaelite painters John Everett Millais and John William Waterhouse.

Using the IWB or relevant art or picturebook, ask the children to explore the 1851 painting of Shakespeare’s tragic character Ophelia, by John Everett Millais, available at http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-ophelia-n01506

The artwork depicts a young woman almost submerged, floating along a stream, surrounded by nature. In Shakespeare’s play readers don’t find out what Ophelia is thinking; though we do hear the thoughts of our Viking woman from ‘Stream Time’. Ask the children if they would they like to know what Ophelia is thinking, if they think Ophelia is still alive in this painting and to give reasons for their answers.

Ask the children to think of how Ophelia might look if she were floating in an Irish stream in the present day and to describe what might surround her. The children might also examine the painting The Lady of Shalott by John William Waterhouse (1888) at http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/waterhouse-the-lady-of-shalott-n01543 for a contemplation of similar themes.