

## ***Granny was a Buffer Girl* by Berlie Doherty**

### **Teachers' Notes**

Mum did catch my eye then, and her look promised me that I wouldn't be going away from home without sharing all its secrets, all its love stories, and all its ghost stories too.  
(p15)

#### **Introduction: curriculum context**

These notes suggest a number of ways in which teachers might use *Granny was a Buffer Girl* to stimulate **historical enquiry, discussion, reading and writing and drama**. The activities and teaching suggestions are most suitable for students in KS3. They may also be used by mature pupils at the upper end of KS2. The novel provides scope for **cross-curricular English, History, Geography and Drama work**. Specifically it links to the QCA History topic on **what it was like to live in a particular locality in the past, and on the background to religious prejudice in Ireland**.

An understanding of this topic relates to the religious conflict stemming from Henry VIII breaking away from the Roman Catholic religion, and the tensions between Catholic and Protestant religions which resulted, particularly in Ireland and among those who migrated from that country to find work in the manufacturing industries of mainland Britain.

It also requires an understanding that issues of social status were more pervasive, obvious and restricting, even in the recent past, and charts an overall levelling of social class and opportunity over the years.

*Note: Granny was a Buffer Girl is first and foremost a series of intertwined love stories which form a family's recent history. It should be read for pleasure before undertaking the following activities. These notes are not a scheme of work and it is not intended that you work through all of the activities, but select those that suit your purposes.*

#### **The Book**

*Granny was a Buffer Girl* won the Carnegie Medal, the Burnley Book Award and the Globe-Horn Honor Book Award in 1986.

#### **Synopsis:**

Jess is 18 and is leaving home to go to France for her gap year. She is scared that the home she is leaving will change and that the place she loves will never be the same again. Jess also has a secret that she must share in case she doesn't get the chance when she returns. The rest of the book sees Jess and various members of her family spanning three generations sitting and telling the stories of their lives. Jess learns that everyone has secrets and that change is natural and builds memories and lives. The book is about change and sharing, with the stories that the family tell each other that night bringing them closer together and also helping them to understand each other a little better too.

#### **Characters:**

- Jess Bradley
- Her paternal grandmother, Granny Dorothy
- Her paternal grandfather, Grandad Albert
- Her maternal grandfather, Grandpa Jack
- Her maternal grandmother, Bridie
- Her father, Michael
- Her mother, Josie
- Her brother, Danny
- Her brother, John
- Her Auntie Louie and Uncle Gilbert

- Her friend, Katie
- Katie's brother, Steve

### Setting

- Sheffield and its steel industry
- Bole Hills
- Rivelin Valley
- Derbyshire
- Time – 1930s-1980s

### Narration

- Jess tells her own story (first person narration)
- The stories she is listening are in third person narration.

### Structure

- Chapters relating family histories (effectively short stories), arranged chronologically, interspersed with those telling Jess's own story.

### Teaching Suggestions

Students in KS2 will be familiar with QCA units which look at what it was like to live in a particular locality in the past, and this can be extended with KS3 students to consider the wider area, both historically and geographically.

#### 1. What types of evidence can we use to find out about life in Britain since the First World War?

The QCA KS3 scheme of work for **History** suggests that teachers use a vivid story to help students understand the significance of religion on society in the past. Stories can help develop a deeper understanding by combining thought with feeling and encouraging an empathetic response.

*Granny was a Buffer Girl* is essentially a written record of the spoken memories of three generations of one family. It is therefore an apt starting point for a project looking at recording memories of the past from those who remember it.

Learning outcomes include the following: students will

- listen to, and record memories about Britain in the past
- extract information from the interview to supplement, and compare with, their own conclusions about life in Britain since then

They can use this material

- to identify links and connections between different aspects of British life since the First World War
- to realize that change in one area can lead to change in another area

In KS3, QCA unit 17 looks at why it has proved so difficult to achieve peace in Ireland. This is relevant to the story of Jack and Bridie, and *Granny was a Buffer Girl* widens our realization of how religion dominates everyday life, even within communities in recent historical and present-day Britain.

The notion of personal freedom, particularly in relation to relationships, marriage and religious belief, is a relevant topic for discussion in **PSCHE**. There is also the story of Jess's brother, Danny, who is disabled. Students could consider

- why does Jess feel such guilt about Danny's inevitable death?

History has a significant role to play in **citizenship education**. In particular, using this novel as a springboard for their own investigations

- pupils can learn how the past influences the present, what past societies were like, how these societies organised themselves, and what beliefs and cultures influenced people's actions
- pupils can see the diversity of human experience, and understand more about themselves as individuals and members of society
- what pupils learn can influence their decisions about personal choices, attitudes and values
- pupils can develop skills that are prized in adult life

### A. Religion and life

In relation to the questions of **religious prejudice** evidenced in *Granny was a Buffer Girl*,

- pupils can learn about legal and human rights, religious diversity and the importance of resolving conflict
- pupils can analyse interpretations and think about topical, political, moral, social and cultural issues
- pupils can consider reasons for studying aspects of Irish history through a class discussion

Bridie came from a large brood of Irish Catholics...they never even took the non-Catholic glances [of local boys] into consideration...they would marry the girls off to good Catholic boys of the parish when the time came...

(p18)

Jack's father... [and] his wife...were a deeply religious couple. And if there were one thing they disliked, it was a Catholic.

(p19)

In *Granny was a Buffer Girl* the story of Bridie and Jack's relationship brings to life this centuries-old conflict which has divided countries, communities and families.

'I want to m-marry you'  
She didn't look at him. 'Will you turn?'  
'I couldn't be a Catholic. You know I couldn't'  
'Then my father will never let us get married.'  
... 'They've always told me how wicked non-Catholics are,' Bridie whispered, 'And here I am, in love with one. What am I doing, in love with a Protestant?'

(p24)

But Jack and Bridie realize that their love is more important to them than their different forms of religion. Although have each been brought up in fear and loathing of the other religion, they realize that when it comes to individuals, you must make your own mind up, and so what seems right to do. For them, it is a personal choice, which only they can make, and which their parents cannot dictate.

'There's no answer,' said Jack. 'There's nothing we can do'  
'Unless we get married, anyway,' said Bridie, daring.  
'And don't tell them, you mean?'  
'Tell them after. They couldn't do anything about it then. It's our lives. I don't mind marrying a Protestant.'  
'I don't mind marrying a Catholic,' said Jack, surprised.

(p25)

The long historical background to Jack and Bridie's respective beliefs, the break from Rome and the relationship of ethnicity and class to religion is the background to their problem. But here, as in many real life relationships, we see personal relationship overcoming religious difference. Bridie risks her mother's disapproval, and her father's outright opposition to continue meeting with Jack, while Jack dares not tell his parents that he is meeting her. Although she lives in 1930s Sheffield, Bridie, with her surname of 'Rooney' can be instantly identified as coming from an Irish background, with a Catholic tradition stretching back to before the Norman invasion. Even today in some parts of Britain people's religious affiliation is presumed on the basis of family name. This is an issue relevant to a multicultural society.

Yes, once Jack and Bridie have married, it is clear that both sets of parents are prepared to tolerate each other, and by the 1980s, when Jess is listening to their stories, it is clear that religion is no longer a burning issue in their family.

### Activity

From reading Chapter 2 of *Granny was a Buffer Girl* what do we discover about:

- Catholic daily life, social class and views of what Protestants are like?
- Protestant daily life, social class and views of what Catholics are like?

List the points in a grid using quotations from the book.

<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Protestant</b>
Pope is the head of the Church and is independent of individual states.	Monarch is the head of the Church. State and Church are viewed as one.

### Discuss:

- Whether similar religious divisions exist within states today. Where?
- Is Britain a religiously tolerant society?
- Are people persecuted on the grounds of religion?
- Encourage students to discuss their views honestly and without censure.

### Research

Use other sources, including primary source material to find out whether these views accurately reflect the beliefs held at the time.

## **B. Sheffield before and after the Second World War**

### **Granny was a Buffer Girl**

- What do we discover about buffer girls from reading *Granny was a Buffer Girl*?
- How does adolescent life change – all the characters enjoy going to dances, but the restrictions placed upon them by their parents differ from the 1930s to the 1950s, and are different again in Jess's own time
- Do adolescent feelings about relationships change?

### Activity

After reading the book, construct a 'role-on-the-wall' of Dorothy, or one of the other characters.

This technique is used to help students organise their thoughts about the character.

- Simply draw an outline of the character chosen on a large sheet of paper. If you have some rolls of paper used for lining walls, your outline can be life-size.
- Annotate the outline
  - Feelings are written in the area around the heart

- Thoughts are written as thought bubbles
- Descriptions e.g. events, interests etc. written around the outline
- Any special objects or things known about her appearance can be drawn onto the outline
- Images (e.g. portraits) could be displayed around the 'role-on-the-wall'
- Alternatively, a blank outline can be displayed on the wall and added to during the process of reading the novel, as and when new things are discovered.

### Research

Locate and research historical sources (primary and secondary) to find evidence for buffer girls and the steel industry in Sheffield.

Is the industry still there today? Why?

### Discuss:

For the 'role on a wall' activity,

and in many of the other activities (including the initial reading of the book) different students will find different character's stories more or less engaging. As it deals largely with female experience, boys may find it more difficult to empathize with a character, although both Grandpa Jack and Mike, Jess's Dad, are strong characters as teenagers and adults.

Ask students with whom they feel the greatest bond, whose story engages them most, and why?

Jess

Her parents

Her grandparents

One of the other characters

### Drama Conventions

Berlie Doherty adapted *Granny was a Buffer Girl* as a BBC Schools radio production in 1990.

Use drama to develop empathy and explore how you might react to the different circumstances we learn about in the novel:

- *Hotseating*: invite members of the class to take it in turns to occupy the 'hotseat' while other members of the class ask questions  
e.g. (of Bridie) What did you feel when you discovered that Jack was a Protestant?  
(of Mike) What did you feel at the dance? etc  
After 'hotseating', reflect on what you have discovered.  
Encourage the students to consider what is based on evidence and what is a matter of their interpretation of how characters felt.
- *Radio drama* – create a script for a radio play – how easy or hard would it be to convert the descriptive passages in the novel so that they could be re-created in sound?
- *Stage play* – *Granny was a Buffer Girl* has been adapted as a stage play, and a playscript is available. Students could consider whether this might be more/less/as successful as a radio play, given the format of the novel
- When adaptations have been created, *thought-tracking* can be used to ask each character in turn to voice their thoughts, feelings, wishes. Observers can be invited to suggest words to describe the scene (e.g. treacherous, unwilling, eager, impatient).

### Taking it Further

Look at other descriptions and images of working class life in the 1930s and 1950s, and compare the representations in these art forms. Try George Orwell's novel *The Road to Wigan Pier*, or Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* for novels of working class life in the 1930s. In the 1950s and 1960s there were many plays, novels and films which depicted life at the time, such as *Look Back in Anger*, *Room at the Top*, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (set in nearby Nottingham), *Billy Liar*, *Chips with Everything* and *Up the Junction*. When we read or watch later representations of these times, can we judge how closely they fit the historical evidence?

Older or more able students can be challenged by discussing the following questions:

- Is evidence the only source of historical truth?
- What truths are these writers and artists expressing?
- What truth is Berlie Doherty expressing?

The following suggestions can be used to construct your role-on-the wall:

### 2.1 Appearance:

There are many descriptions of the characters' physical appearance and clothing. As well as this, Doherty also tells us how people feel, and how other people feel about them

Lucy scraped her thin, straight, and tear-wet hair away from her face, and tucked it behind her ears. She and Jennifer inspected the moon-white face in the mirror, the eyes red and blotched with unhappiness, the thin slit of the mouth. Behind her, Jennifer's hair bushed out, lustrous, her skin bright with health, her eyes dark with sympathy.

p56

The contrast not only between the two girls' physical appearance, but between their state of mind, which is in this scene largely dependent on their self-image, is suggested in many ways.

### 2.2 Opportunity, Education and Background

Jess is about to depart for her gap year before she goes to university.

- Would her female relatives have been allowed (or trusted) to spend a year away from home?

'You're growing up, little sprat. We're proud of you'

(p115)

- What opportunities did Bridie and Dorothy have for education or a career?
- How different was Mike's experience? Why did he have to do 'National Service'? When did this end? The 1980s put an end to his career in Sheffield – what was the cause of this?
- Josie goes off to training college to become a teacher. Is the pattern of her marriage, family and career still true for women today?

### 2.3 Family Life

There is a great difference in the way in which the earlier girls in the family were regarded and spoken to, and looking closely at this shows how independence for girls has gradually been extended.

- Compare how fathers in the book talk to their daughters and to their sons. What are the different expectations of them
  - Through the years
  - Because of their gender

'They're more worry than they're worth, girls are. What are we doing with so many daughters, Nancy, and all this worry they bring us?'  
'What's this nonsense?' his wife asked calmly. 'Who'd be keeping your house clean for you, with me helping you with your boots, if it wasn't for the girls? Who'd cook your meals?'  
There was no answer to that.

(p.47)

This excerpt is about the 1930s. Twenty years later, girls might not be expected to keep house for their father, but they were still subject to their disapproval:

His dad was in the middle of a row with Maureen. She'd come downstairs in a new polka-dot skirt, rustling along in five or six stiff net petticoats...she had make up on.  
'Where are you off to tarted up like that?'  
He ordered her to scrub herself clean in the kitchen sink.

Jess's dad, Mike, is also afraid to change into his fashionable 'teddy-boy' clothes at home: Bright pink socks, bootlace tie, blue shoes with two-inch crepe soles, and his newest prize – a pale blue drape jacket with a velvet collar

(p48)

- How far have relationships between parents and teenagers changed between the 1930s and 1950s?
- How different is the experience of Jess and her brother John?
- Has it changed between the 1980s and today?

'I'm going out with Steve on Saturday Mum.'  
 How easy it was to tell her that.  
 'That's lovely Jess. I like Steve very much'

(p127)

Research

- Find out why the First World War made the world more accessible for Bridie and Dorothy?
- How did the Second World War change teenage life in Britain? Remember that many people first came into personal contact with Americans and their culture at that time.
- How well does pop music express the teenage culture of its day? Listen to songs, dance and film music of the 1930s, the 1950s and the 1980s – how much does it add to our picture of life then?
- For more of a 'feel' of the times, look at films from these eras too

Activity

Once they have researched some of these areas, students can assemble their findings to answer the question:

What do we learn about how life in Sheffield

- a) changed
- b) remained the same

from the 1920s to the 1980s?

Students can record their thoughts on a concept map.

Research

Use the concept map to develop a KWAL Grid:

What I know about how life changed?	Questions I would like answered	What I have found out
What I know about how life remained the same?		

Use the KWAL grid to find answers to your questions, using a range of sources including books, encyclopaedias, online resources, images etc.

When you have located answers to your questions, write a *report* called *Sheffield in the Thirties* or *Sheffield in the Fifties*. This will be a non-chronological report. Revise the structuring of non-chronological reports before writing.

### 3. Places and People

Build the context for this story by the real events and places mentioned in the book.

#### Activity

Find out about the people and places mentioned. Collect images and create a *collage wall*. This can be done prior to, during or after reading. Create a display of related books and materials in the classroom, or library.

Research can be conducted as a *jigsaw activity*. Small groups undertake to research a specific place or person – this is the expert group. When the research has been conducted, groups are reformed, constituted with experts from the different groups. Each 'expert' provides written or verbal feedback on what they have found out about their subject.

Suggested events and places for investigations:

- The First World War and its effect on life at home
- The Second World War and the American influence on culture
- National Service
- The closure of the steelworks and how it affected cities like Sheffield

#### Places

Sheffield, itself, its industrial archaeology, and its museums ([www.sheffieldgalleries.org.uk](http://www.sheffieldgalleries.org.uk)), particularly:

- Graves Art Gallery (open year round, free) with its pictures of life in the city, including the Buffer Girls
- the Millennium Galleries
- Weston Park Museum: Sheffield Life and Times
- the Traditional Heritage Museum at the University of Sheffield
- Meadowhall shopping centre, once the Tinsley cutlery factory
- the Bole Hills
- the Rivelin Valley
- the Derbyshire/South Yorkshire border countryside where Jack took Bridie on his motorbike

### 4. Writing

#### 4.1 Structure

Berlie Doherty creates Jess's story around the issue of her disabled brother, Danny, his life, supported by a loving extended family, his death, and Jess's feelings of guilt attendant on her resentment of his special status, and his last illness. In many ways he is a catalyst for the action, in that Jess's need to share her secret is the reason that her parents and grandparents reveal their own adolescent experience. Doherty has carefully crafted the novel to allow us small amounts of information about him, before she tells us the detail of his short life. Students could look at how she does this.

- Look at Chapters 1, and 7-11, which tell Jess's story. What clues are there which lead readers to form a view about Danny, and about Jess's feelings?
- Chapter 6 is Danny's story. How does it change our view of

- Danny
- Jess
- Discuss whether this organisation of the story works for you.
- Would the novel have been as compelling if Doherty had constructed it without Danny's catalytic role, and merely written it as a collection of family stories?

#### 4.2 Language and Imagery

'I was a snake, shedding its skin; a glistening, fleshy thing; a jewel in dark grass. I shuddered, thrilled, scared.'

(p12)

This is Jess's description of growing up, and how she comes to terms with her secret, and is empowered to leave for her gap year, shrunken of her guilt. By the end of the novel she is confident that she can face the future.

I wasn't a child, and I never would be, never, never again. The snake had shed its skin.

(p128)

Doherty creates her atmosphere by using descriptive language not only to paint a picture, but to think more widely around the stories.

She also uses one event to comment on another: Uncle Gilbert's resistance to change is cruelly echoed in his stroke and death, and this in turn reminds us of the gradual decline and final death of the whole steel industry in Sheffield.

#### Reading Activity

Throughout the family stories, the characters escape or move on in their life both physically and mentally when they leave Sheffield's industrial areas, and reach the more open areas. Students could identify significant passages where this happens, e.g.

- Grandpa Jack and Jess in the Bole Hills at the start of the novel, on Stanage Edge when the thirteen-year-old Jess and her mother talk, and beside the canal where Jess and Jack meet Davey.
- Jack and Bridie riding in to the Derbyshire countryside when they are also trying to overcome the difficulties they foresee because of their different religions
- John and his dad Mike becoming closer through their pigeons
- Mike escaping his depression through racing the pigeons
- Jess and Steve : they drive to the Agden reservoir to talk about their relationship and future

This last example is rich in *imagery*. Terry shows Jess a heron 'a sad and lonely bird' (p122), but about which he knows a lovely song. He then points out the link between Jess and falconry – in that a jess keeps the falcon on the falconer's wrist, and that the falcon can fly free but then return to it.

Students could examine this passage closely to discuss the implications of this comparison:

- Jess feeling sad and lonely because of her secret
- That, having heard the secrets of her parents and grandparents, she feels empowered to reveal hers, and come to terms with her memories
- She now feels able to leave home (the falcon flying free), but will return freely and happily to her family at any point
- Jess later learns things about Terry which hurt her. Nevertheless this episode allows her to move on in other ways, and to understand herself better
- By the novel's end, we are confident that Jess will cope with her gap year and her relationship with the past and the future:

I opened up the present Mum had given me. It was the photograph of Danny, laughing out at me from the past. Danny, celebrating life.

(p128)

### **Bibliography**

Younger students, or those with less extensive reading skills, might enjoy Tomlinson, T & Lewis, A. (2003) *Errand Lass* Walker Books

Older students could try;

Orwell, G. *The Road to Wigan Pier* Penguin

Greenwood, W. *Love on the Dole* Vintage

Sillitoe, A. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* HarperPerennial

Waterhouse, K. *Billy Liar* Penguin

Wesker, A. *Chips with Everything* Penguin (out of print, but available in libraries and second hand)

Dunn, N. *Up the Junction* Virago

### Teachers' Booklist

Doherty, Berlie (2003) *Granny Was a Buffer Girl* Collins Education playsplus

Harvey, Peter (1993) *Sheffield in the 1930s* Sheaf Publishing

The Working Class Movement Library at <http://www.wcml.org.uk/>

For a more academic view:

*Peter Gurney (1988) Bolton working-class life in the 1930s: a mass-observation anthology,*

Brighton, University of Sussex Library There are many working class autobiographies in a collection at Brunel University:

<http://www.brunel.ac.uk/life/study/library/visitors/collections/workingindex>

### DVD

*Sheffield Time Machine*, Sheffield Central Libraries Local Studies Department

*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*

*The Full Monty* considers the social consequences of the de-industrialisation of Sheffield in the 1980s and 1990s in relation to masculine identity.

### Internet

[www.mylearning.org.uk](http://www.mylearning.org.uk) is a Yorkshire Museums site which includes images and audio clips relevant to the topic

Home Truths at [www.ourselvesourplace.org.uk](http://www.ourselvesourplace.org.uk) personal reminiscences of life in Sheffield from the 1920s – many of these are highly relevant to *Granny was a Buffer Girl*

[www.24hourmuseum.org.uk](http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk) is a website which has a good general introduction of the collections of most UK museums

Newsplan – History in Yorkshire through local newspapers at [www.yli.org.uk/newsplan](http://www.yli.org.uk/newsplan)

### Art

Images of buffer girls and of master cutlers can be seen among the collections in many Sheffield and South Yorkshire museums and galleries

Photographs and other images of industrial and city life in general from the 1930s to the 1980s can be also found in newspapers, books, magazines and galleries