

Children of Winter by Berlie Doherty Teachers' Notes

Introduction: curriculum context

Literacy

Children of Winter is a good choice for a whole class novel, particularly for reading aloud to children in years 4 – 6. It has broad appeal and is likely to engage both boys and girls through the survival, adventure and historical elements of the story.

These accompanying notes make reference to the NC POS for Speaking and Listening (En1) Reading (En2) and writing (En3). Furthermore, connections can be made with the renewed Literacy Framework units: Y4 'Stories with Historical Settings'; Y5 'Novels and Stories by Significant Children's Writers' and Y6 'Authors and Texts'. Berlie Doherty is a good choice for an author to study at the KS2/KS3 transition as her body of work includes books that appeal to readers at the top end of the primary school and secondary students.

Alternatively, sets of the book might be read in guided reading sessions with fluent, confident and independent readers. This might take the structure of a linked series of three guided sessions with pupils engaged in independent reading in the intervening period. They might use reading journals to record their thoughts, feelings and responses to the story and to prepare for the guided sessions.

The novel could also be read and discussed in self-managed reading group sessions. The group reading notes, are presented chapter by chapter to support groups working in this way.

History

Although the Stuart period is not explicitly studied in History in Ys 4 – 6, pupils in year 4 working on the QCA enquiry based approach to a local study might investigate their own locality in 1665/6. Pupils in London for instance might investigate the impact of the bubonic plague. They can research and investigate plague carriers, cures, burial and the fire of London,

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Although it is unlikely that all of the villagers acted in morally upright and selfless ways throughout the crisis, the acts of courage and bravery involved in the self-imposed quarantine was undoubtedly heroic. The story provides food for discussion about 'the greater good.'

The Book

Synopsis: *Children of Winter* was first published in 1985 and is available in a new edition from Catnip (2007) Set in 1666, it tells the story of three children from the plague village of Eyam in Derbyshire and their bid for survival by holding out over winter in a remote barn. A story frame around the main narrative is set in the present day. A family walking across the moors are caught out by a turn in the weather, the three children shelter in the barn, where the past is played out. Is it a game? Do they slip back into the past? Is it a dream? The skilful weaving of past and present leaves the reader with unanswered questions and their own ideas about what really happened in the old cruck barn.

Characters:

- Catherine Tebutt/ Catherine Tebbutt; oldest child, imaginative,
- Patsy Tebutt/ Tessa Tebbutt; middle child, caring and mothering
- Andrew Tebutt/ Da Tebbutt
- Mother
- Clem, the shepherd
- Mistress Hogg, a villager who has lost her children

Setting

- Time 1666/1667 between autumn and spring
- Place. The Village of Eyam in Derbyshire. A remote barn isolated from the village and therefore an ideal refuge for the children

Narration

- Third person narration. While most of the book is experienced from Catherine's point of view (e.g. 'It was then that Catherine knew for sure that she wasn't making up stories or pretending.') , the third person narration allows the reader access to Dan and Patsy's feelings (e.g. It was coarse and sharp through the fabric of his clothes, but after the long haul up from the village in the rain it was comforting enough.' Shifts in viewpoint at key moments allow the reader to see Catherine from the point of view of the other characters but also for events to which Catherine is not privy to be witness e.g. Tess's meeting with Dick Mossop. In chapter 11 the first paragraph, which describes the villagers burning their furniture, is narrated from an objective viewpoint. A third person narration provides flexibility and enables Doherty to

show the different ways in which the children respond to their situation, especially their thoughts and feelings.

Structure

- Time-slip. Present day frame around the chronological narrative about the three children and their survival in adverse circumstances

Teaching Suggestions

STIMULUS DISPLAY

The story of the Eyam villagers is has captured the imagination of writers, playwrights, film-makers and even musicians. The Children's Film and Television Foundation produced a film 'Out of Darkness'; a play 'The Roses of Eyam' was made into a television series and the script is still performed regularly by schools and colleges. Stephen Sondheim supported an aspiring lyricist and musician to write a musical version simply called 'Eyam'. Writers Malcolm Rose, Geraldine Brooks and Jill Paton Walsh have all written about the plague village. A display of photographs and books about the Eyam plague can be made in the classroom to provide extension material for those children who would like to find out more.

AUTHOR DISPLAY

Make a display of Berlie Doherty's books. Add posters, interesting quotations, reviews and interviews. Encourage children to add to the display during the course of reading *The Children of Winter*.

READING AND RESPONDING

Provide plenty of opportunities for pupils to respond to what they have read. Encourage them to express thoughts, feelings and opinions using a reading journal.

LITERACY

1. Genre: Timeslip

'I'm coming.'

Over the stile, she thought. And into the past. (p.11)

Story frame:

- Why do you think Berlie Doherty chose to have a contemporary story frame rather than a purely historical novel?
 - e.g. To show continuity with the past? To help children today empathise with characters from the past?
- Do you know any other stories that have a timeslip element? By what mechanism do the children slip back into the past in those stories? How do they compare to the Children of Winter?
- Invite the children to think about the power places have to connect us to the past. Buildings in particular have ways of connecting past, present and future. You could make a visit to a local place of interest and conduct a guided visualisation to help children imagine the past. Explore the environment of the building using touch as well as sight. Invent your own stories about events that might have taken place in that building.

2. Setting: A sense of place

Investigate how settings are built up from small details

'What was it like, she thought, before they had buses out here? Before the roads were built? People must have spent weeks and weeks in their own homes and fields, never seeing another soul...'
(p.9)

One of the themes that emerges in the book is the connection to the past through landscape and buildings. Catherine finds it easy to imagine the past it is almost as though she is recollecting or remembering.

What clues are there in the opening chapter to link the place to Catherine's past?

- Catherine Field, 'Her field.'
- The family name Tebbutt: Tebutt Field, Grannie Tebbutt
- Her intuitive or imaginative knowledge about the past 'People put it outside their houses to keep away the evil spirits.'; She has knowledge of the barn even though the others can't see it;

'And they could all see it now, snug in the hollow of the little field. An old stone and timber barn and the door swinging open.'

Behind the little field that enclosed their barn the moorland rose up steeply to a high Edge, with huge boulders and sprawling bushes of gorse and bramble, and here and there, tall trees with crows

gathered. It was just where the boulders became the far wall of their field that the children found the tiny crack of a stream that Catherine had already christened the 'trickle-stream'. Here it splintered from rock to rock.'

In deepest winter: Berlie Doherty contrasts the scene outside the barn with the cosy interior that the children have created. Look closely at two contrasting comparisons, one of the barn and one of the inhospitable winter landscape. Annotate the pictures with words and phrases from the text and display them in the classroom.

The children can demonstrate their understanding of the setting through drawing. Ask them to read and identify key passages that describe the setting. They might draw the landscape or the inside of the barn.

Study in detail passages that show the changing seasons. Why is the weather so important to this story? Write a description from the point of view of the children waking up to find that snow has covered the hillside. How has the scene changed? What are their feelings about the snow? Will it bring new difficulties that they must overcome? Alternatively, write a description about waking up to the sound of the trickle-stream after the long hard freeze of winter.

Find images of the Peak district at different times of the year and create a multimedia presentation using Powerpoint. Key passages from the text can be used to accompany the pictures.

How does Berlie Doherty show that time is passing in this story? The story takes place between autumn and spring. Create a timeline in the classroom adding new information as you read the story. Show how the seasons change and mark the critical incidents.

3. Speech and Dialogue

The Tebbutt children speak in dialect e.g. but the Tebbut children speak Standard English (spoken). Compare two extracts that show these differences. What would the dialect phrases be if written in Standard English. Record some of these phrases in a table.

Dialect	Standard English
'Art thou afeard?'	Are you afraid?
'Dost thou understand?'	Do you understand?

Consider the reasons Berlie Doherty might have chosen to show these differences in the ways the children from the past and the present speak.

Ask the children if they know any dialect words or phrases from your local area. Who speaks in dialect?

4. Character: Three children from the same family but all different

Each of the Tebbutt children is different in temperament and behaviour. Invite children to talk about their favourite character.

- Dan is resourceful, he finds food for the family and skins the rabbit
- Tessa is nurturing and sensitive to the feelings of others
- Catherine has responsibility and a keen sense of what is practical

They might write a diary from the point of view of that character for critical incidents in the book. This could be a sustained piece of writing while the novel is being read.

Does the experience change the children in any way?

5. Theme: Survival and Triumph Over Adversity

In small groups improvise the scene where mother takes the children to the barn. Help the children to identify the moment of greatest dramatic tension and freeze that moment. Use 'thought tracking' to explore the different characters thoughts and feelings at this time. What words do they speak? How might the words spoken be different from their private thoughts.

Discuss the range of difficulties the children have to overcome e.g.:

- Loneliness
- Finding food
- Keeping food away from rats
- Keeping warm
- Avoiding the plague
- Worry about their parents
- Keeping clean
- Sanitation

How should they deal with each of these problems? Ask the children what they would do if they found themselves in a similar situation.

A survival kit: the children have food and candles in their barn. What other basic tools would be helpful if you were trying to survive in these conditions?

What are the main threats to the children's survival? Create two freeze frame images of each these critical incidents: one showing the action taken by the children, a second image depicting what might have happened. Use the freeze frame images to discuss the choices that the children make.

In chapter 4, *Making a Home*, the children unpack a bundle of items left for them by their mother. Imagine that each of the children has one special item to remind them of home. Ask the children to draw the item that they have chosen and then tell the rest of the class why it was so important to them.

Each member of the 'family' could write a diary entry for the first night that the children spend in the barn. What are their hopes? And their fears?

What do the children need to survive a winter in the barn? Make a list of the items they use to turn the barn into a home (food, log for sitting on, candles). Which of these items is most important? What could they survive without?

Thinking of home: throughout the story the children are reminded of home. What sorts of things trigger these memories:

- What mother would say
- Songs
- Cloudy

In chapter 7 *Theft at Dawn*, Catherine steals two hens from Mistress Hogg. Discuss whether her actions are justified. In pairs children could prepare a case in favour of Catherine's actions and a case against.

Working together: The children survive largely because they are supportive of each other. They have unique strengths as well as individual weaknesses (see above). Construct character profiles for each of the children and encourage pupils to reflect on the contribution each child makes to the survival of the family. How might things have been different if the children were not supportive?

Ask children to consider the following:

- How well do you think the children cope?

- In your view would children today be able to cope as well, or not as well?
- Encourage them to justify their ideas

Chapter 9 The *End of Dancing* When Clem arrives at the barn, the children have to decide what to do. Before reading on to find out how the children cope with this problem, in groups of three improvise the discussion that they might have had. Decide on an outcome. Read chapter 10. How do the children solve the dilemma? Is this different or the same to the outcome of the improvisation?

Investigate other real life and fiction stories which have the same theme. Create a class display of these books and encourage children to read them and share their thoughts.

6. Symbolism: Light and Dark

At the end of chapter 11 the candle blows out and the children are left in darkness. There are lots of references throughout the story to light and dark. Find instances where candle light, shadows, sunshine, gathering gloom are being described. What effect is created by these contrasts of light and dark?

What meanings can be attributed to a candle. Prepare the children for this activity explain what you are going to do and that afterwards you will be asking them to write down their thoughts without talking to anyone. Explain to the children that it is really important that they sit in silence or the activity will not work. Taking account of safety regulations, light a candle in a darkened room. Play some relaxing music. Then sit in silence for a while. Blow the candle out. After the children have had time to record their responses, share them. This can lead to poetry writing (individual, group or whole class poems).

Create a musical interpretation of the contrasts between light and dark.

Which instruments might be played to represent the following:

- the play of shadows
- the candle flame
- the fire
- the sunshine
- the dark clouds
- the darkness in the barn when the light is extinguished.

Create a collage of sound using key words and phrases from the book.

Combine music with words to compose a piece to perform to other classes or the school.

You might read Michael Rosen's *The Sad Book* which uses light and dark to reveal mood and suggest hope in darkest moments.

HISTORY

1. The Plague and the Plague Village of Eyam

Prior to reading *The Children of Winter*, ask the children what they know about the plague. Has anyone heard about the village of Eyam in Derbyshire?

Record what they know in a KWL grid

What I KNOW	What I WANT to Find Out	What I have LEARNT from research	What I have LEARNT from <i>The Children of Winter</i>

Brainstorm a list of questions for research and add these to the grid.

Research the plague of Eyam using a range of sources including the internet (see websites below).

- Causes of the plague
- Symptoms of the plague
- The impact on people's lives
- Living conditions in 1666
- The village of Eyam
- The plague in London

Complete the grid showing what has been learnt from research and what has been learnt from reading *The Children of Winter*.

Use the information from the grid to write a report about the plague in Eyam.

The plague at Eyam has inspired several plays and novels. A class play about this episode in history could be produced for performing to another class or for a school assembly.

2. Families and Family History

Catherine is interested in family history. She feels connected to the landscape where her ancestors lived.

Children can investigate their own family histories by asking parents, grandparents and greatgrandparents to tell stories about their childhoods.

The provenance of family names can be researched in dictionaries of names, or by using internet sources.

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1. Putting others before ourselves

The villagers of Eyam put others before themselves by isolating themselves from the outside world. This does not mean that their behaviour was unequivocally saintly, as Berlie Doherty shows when Maggie Hogg tries to attack the children. Nevertheless, their collective decision was a brave one and contained the plague in a small area.

In circle time, ask children to recount a time when they put others before themselves.

Read stories about other selfless acts of humanity.

Resources

Novels about the Plague

Malcolm Rose The Kiss of Death Usborne

Don Taylor The Roses of Eyam Heinemann

Jill Paton Walsh A Parcel of Patterns

Geraldine Brooks Year of Wonders

http://www.nodanw.com/shows_e/eyam.htm

Websites

<http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/plague/index.html>

<http://www.eyammuseum.demon.co.uk/index.htm>

http://www.survivors-mad-dog.org.uk/MD_Eyam_Roses.html

Other Books by Berlie Doherty

Street Child (Collins 1995)

Spell Horn (Collins, 2002)
The Snake-Stone (Collins, 2003)
Abela (Andersen, 2007)
Jinnie Ghost (Frances Lincoln, 2006)
Fairy Tales (Walker, 2002)
Blue John (Puffin, 2003)