



# A Girl Called Blue

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Marita Conlon-McKenna

## Teaching Guide

By Irene Barber

### RATIONALE AND THEMES

Many children will already be familiar with books by this award-winning author and may have read her *Children of the Famine*

trilogy. This moving and uplifting novel has been selected for use in the senior classes of primary school and in the junior cycle of secondary school as it deals with important and universal themes, such as:

- The importance of belonging
- The meaning of family
- The corruption of power
- Loneliness
- Loyalty
- Life in an (Irish) orphanage in the 1960s
- Child labour
- Physical and mental abuse
- Courage and hope

### SUMMARY

This is the story of Blue, a young girl abandoned at birth and brought up in an orphanage called Larch Hill. Life is harsh but not unrelentingly so. Blue has good friends, and receives occasional kindnesses from one of the nuns, goes on trips to the seaside and on Sunday visits to families who take an interest in her. However, the inhuman cruelty of Sister Regina, the drudgery of long hours of bead-making, the loss of a younger girl she cared for, the presumed drowning of her best friend and the deep longing to find a family of her own, culminate in Blue's running away from Larch Hill. In the end she does find a loving family, though not entirely as she'd expected.

### APPROACH

For the purposes of this class exploration,

the book is divided into five units. The pace at which the novel is read is entirely up to the teacher.

The setting for most of this story is an Irish orphanage in the middle of the last century. An RTÉ television series 'States of Fear', produced by Mary Raftery and broadcast in the late 1990s, exposed the terrible hardship and abuse suffered by vulnerable people in the care of some Irish institutions. To find out more about institutionalised violence against children (and adults), you might like to read the following from the O'Brien general list:

*Fear of the Collar: My Terrifying Childhood in Artane* by Patrick Touher (978-0-86278-727-1 )

*Freedom of Angels: Surviving Goldenbridge Orphanage* by Bernadette Fahy (978-0-86278-595-6)

*Evelyn* is a film based on the true story of Evelyn Doyle's time in an Irish institution, starring Pierce Brosnan [Irish Dreamtime].

Information can also be found on the following websites:

[www.childabusecommission.ie](http://www.childabusecommission.ie)

[www.cari.ie](http://www.cari.ie)

[www.abneys.co.uk/IrishSurvivors/irishhome.htm](http://www.abneys.co.uk/IrishSurvivors/irishhome.htm)

## Unit 1 Regrets and Rules Read pp. 9–42

### SUMMARY

Since she was a baby, Blue has lived in Larch Hill children's home. Because her mother has not signed the necessary papers, Blue cannot be adopted. Life is bleak, with poor food, many rules and regulations,

harsh punishments, hard work and little love or understanding. We first meet Blue, her hopes of being taken out for the day dashed when, inexplicably, the glamorous Hickey family fails to show up. She is sent to help with the babies and befriends a younger girl, Molly, who becomes a surrogate sister. Molly wets the bed and Blue does her best to protect her from the anger of the nuns and the scorn of some of the other children. A mystery tour organised by Dublin taxi drivers relieves the hardship and monotony of life in the orphanage.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Assemble all the information we are given about the Hickey family. Why do you think they chose to cut off contact with Blue? Sister Monica sent Blue off to mind the babies. Would this have been therapeutic and helped her get over her disappointment, or was it insensitive?
- Larch Hill was described as 'an orphanage'. This is inaccurate. Why?
- What effect did the cruelty of orphanage life have on the children? How can you explain Sister Regina's cruelty? How could the nuns have made life easier for the children?
- The trip to the Zoo was deemed by the children to be 'the best day out ever'. What was your best day out ever so far? Page 29 gives a clue as to which decade the story is set in. In what ways has childhood changed since then?
- What evidence indicates that Blue is (a) practical (b) resourceful (c) kind? Find and list examples from the story to date.

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. Setting the scene

Pretend that you peered in the window of the parlour as Blue was waiting impatiently to be picked up by the Hickeys. Describe in detail what you saw.

### 2. Pictures in your head

Child A looks at picture from a copy of *National Geographic* or similar. Child B cannot see the picture but attempts to draw/paint it from Person A's description. Reverse roles with a new picture.

### 3. Timetable

Draw up a timetable for an average Tuesday in Larch Hill.

### 4. Nicknames

What nicknames do the following three characters have and why? Sister Regina, Sister Monica, Bernadette Lourdes Una.

### 5. Letter-writing

Write a formal letter of complaint about conditions in Larch Hill. Address it to the Minister for Education.

### 6. Strategy

Using bullet points, write out Blue's plan for getting her revenge on Joan.

## Unit 2 Trouble, Trouble Read pp. 43–86

### SUMMARY

Blue's placement with a farming family, the Maguires, is spectacularly unsuccessful and she gives up hope of ever being fostered. The orphanage children attend the local school and have to endure the ridicule of the school children when nits are discovered. A rigorous de-lousing programme causes heartbreak to a new girl, Sarah, and Blue seeks revenge on her behalf. The older children in the orphanage are compelled to make rosary beads in sweatshop conditions.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- '...someone she could love or care for who would love her right back' (p.43). What do you think of Blue's idea of a family? How many people do you really need to make up a family?

- The Maguires offered to foster Blue as Mrs Maguire wanted some female company. What were the Maguires' motivations for inviting Blue and how might they have tried to ensure a more successful outcome?
- The other schoolchildren sniggered and jeered at the children from the orphanage. Why do you think they were so contemptuous of Blue and her friends? What might have been done to change their attitude?
- When it was discovered that Sarah had nits, her long hair was cut off by the nuns. Sarah was traumatised by this event. Why is having one's hair cut off so shocking? Can you think of any other instances of women having their hair cut by oppressors? Why is it done?
- Blue faced false accusations that she was careless, that she was cheeky and that she stole from Mrs Maguire. She was furious. Have you ever been accused in the wrong? What happened?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. Finding the right word

Blue probably would not have agreed with the words used to describe her, eg, 'wild', 'unsettled', 'bold' and 'troublesome'. Write four adjectives which you would use to describe yourself. Now write four others which your teacher, parent, brother, sister or friend might use to describe you.

#### 2. Report-writing

Write a short factual report on Blue's placement with the Maguires under various headings, eg, description of child and of family; what happened on the first and second visits; conclusion; recommendations.

#### 3. Rosary beads

Write a series of instructions for making rosary beads (see p.81). Then read your instructions to a partner who follows your instructions exactly. Were your instructions accurate enough to be correctly followed?

#### 4. Child labour

'You are doing God's work,' was how Sister Rita justified the exploitation of the children making the rosary beads (p.82). Nowadays this kind of child labour is illegal under EU law. However it still happens in many developing countries. Find out more about forced child labour [www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ippec/scream](http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ippec/scream)

## Unit 3 Missing Read pp. 87–127

### SUMMARY

Blue's dressing up as an African princess, complete with beads and feathers, does not meet with Sister Regina's approval and Blue is in trouble again. A wonderful holiday ends in tragedy with the disappearance at sea of Blue's best friend, Jess. She is even more determined to find out about her own mother when she discovers that the woman who had periodically visited Jess was in fact Jess's mother. Blue steals keys to Sister Regina's office but her file reveals no information about her mother or her place or date of birth. A newspaper clipping indicates that she was abandoned at birth and that her mother was never identified.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- What was the best dress-up costume you ever wore for a party or 'trick-or-treating' at Hallowe'en? Where did the idea come from, and where did you get the costume?
- Discuss the conflict between the culture of freedom of expression of the 1960s (eg the Beatles, Flower Power, Civil Rights) with the culture of repression and misery at Larch Hill.
- Sister Regina was totally outraged by Blue's costume. What might you have to wear today to get the same reaction as Blue got to her African Princess outfit?
- The abuse of children in Ireland continued for as long as it did because ordinary people were afraid to speak out. Sister Monica was a well-travelled, wise and experienced nun. Why did she not challenge her superior?
- What valuable lesson did Blue learn (p.100)? Did a younger person ever say anything that made you examine things in a new light? Why might Molly be so obsessed with building sandcastles?
- Do you think Jess did drown? She was a good swimmer. Is there any possibility that she escaped and started a new life somewhere else?
- Why is it even more important now, following Jess's disappearance, for Blue to trace her mother?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. The sixties

Individually, or working in groups, research some major figures or events of the '60s and mount a class project. Read *The 1960s: Ireland in Pictures* (ISBN 978-1-84717-303-4). The captioned photographs may help you. Suggested topics for research include: The Sharpville Massacre, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Berlin Wall, Bay of Pigs Invasion, Marilyn Munroe, Andy Warhol, James Bond, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Cassius Clay, first landing on the moon, the Beatles, the Mini car (and skirt!), Mick Jagger, Aberfan school disaster, Che Guevara, Star Trek, Sesame Street, Hippies, Woodstock, Flower Power. Compile a '60s soundtrack and play it as you work.

### 2. 'A wicked wild child'

'You are a wicked, wild child,' thundered Sister Regina when Blue appeared as an African Princess (p.92). If Blue had written a diary entry immediately after she left the room, what might she have written?

### 3. Let the punishment fit the crime

Sister Regina appeared to take pleasure in making the punishment fit the crime. Think up Sister Regina-type punishments for not doing homework; for being home late; for fighting with your younger sibling; for leaving your room in a mess.

### 4. Postcard from Brittas

Write a postcard that Blue might have sent to Sister Monica at the start of her holiday.

### 5. Orphanage Girl Missing, Presumed Drowned

Write a newspaper article (or script for a short documentary) reporting on the presumed drowning of Jacinta (Jess) O'Reilly at Brittas Bay. It is unlikely that Jess's disappearance would have been reported in the national media when it occurred. The nuns might well have hushed it up. So write your report as it might be written now.

Make it a hard-hitting piece. Talk about safety procedures, supervision, bereavement counselling, freedom of information, how Jess's mother Eileen was traced and what her reaction was. Include a quote from Blue, Jess's best friend.

## Unit 4 The Best-laid Plans Read pp. 128–168

### SUMMARY

When Sister Regina discovers that Blue has been in her office she is furious and attacks her with a leather strap. Blue stumbles into the fire, is burned and hospitalised. She has several chances to tell what has happened, but the subtle intimidation of the nuns ensures her silence and though hospital personnel suspect abuse they feel they can do nothing if no allegation is made. Eventually Blue recovers. She suffers a further setback when her 'adopted' little sister Molly is reunited with her father and leaves the home to live with him in England. Blue gets into trouble again for fighting and decides to run away as there is nothing left for her at Larch Hill. Mary Doyle, her friend, also plans to leave the home to search for her brother who has been taken to a boys' home in Galway.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Why, do you think, did Blue incite such anger in Sister Regina? What was it about Blue that so infuriated the nun?
- 'Remember child, Sister Regina and I will see you tomorrow,' was Sister Agnes's parting remark when she left Blue (p.137). What was she really saying? Was the warning effective?
- Blue received kindness from many people, from Jimmy Mooney, Nurse Griffin and Sister Monica among others. Why do you think Sister Regina and many of the nuns were so cruel and abusive to the children in their care?
- Molly's father returned from Liverpool to take her to live with him. She was over the moon to be going with him. How do you think Blue must have felt when she heard that Molly was leaving?
- Why do you think did Blue side with the native American Indians and why did everyone else support the cowboys? Which side would you/ your class take? Have views on this issue changed since the sixties? Give reasons.
- What combination of circumstances caused Blue to run away? Was it a wise decision?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. Lights, camera, action

Read pp. 129–130. In groups, re-enact the scene where Blue is beaten, struggles, falls against the fire and is burned. Act out also the argument between Sister Carmel and Sister Regina as to whether Blue should be taken to hospital or not.

### 2. Naming and shaming

Imagine that Blue told Dr Lynch what was really happening in the orphanage. Write what she might have told him. If Blue had done this how might the story have ended?

### 3. Comics

Blue was almost thirteen and enjoyed the *Bunty*, *Judy* and the *Beano* comics. Do a class survey to see what comics are read now. Is there a difference between those boys and girls read? Are any of those Blue read still available? Why have some stayed in publication while others have not?

### 4. Changing times

List all the presents you got last Christmas. Beside your list write all the presents Blue got (see p.154). What conclusions (besides the obvious) can you draw from a comparison between the two lists?

### 5. Kindred Spirits

What kind of person was the elderly Sister Monica? Write a list of appropriate adjectives. Support your ideas with evidence from the book. Do you think all of these adjectives also describe Blue?

### 6. Single-sex institutions

The boys had to leave Larch Hill when they were eight and go to an all-boys' home. Why do you think that was the policy of the time? List the arguments in favour of and against segregated education. Think about the second-level schools in your area. If you have enough information, find out what percentage of the class intends going to co-educational schools or single-sex schools. Is there a gender difference?

## Unit 5 Safe Harbour Read pp. 169–216

### SUMMARY

Mary and Blue escape to Galway and find Mary's brother, Tommy, in

St Gerard's Orphanage. Mary stays with him and eventually they are sent together to the same institution in Donegal. With nowhere to go and no resources, Blue returns to Dublin where she is picked up by Jimmy Mooney, a taxi driver who had earlier taken her on an outing from Larch Hill. He brings her back to his house, where she is warmly welcomed by his elderly mother. Blue gets some care and respite here before she returns to Larch Hill. On her return she is severely punished, forced to sleep in a locked cell away from all the other children. However, Jimmy continues to keep in contact. His efforts to foster Blue are not successful as he is separated from his wife and child, and as his mother is too elderly. But, to Blue's delight, he arranges for her to visit at weekends and holidays and offers her a place to live when she is old enough to leave the orphanage. At last she has realised her dream, a family of her own.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Can you identify changes that have taken place in Dublin since Mary and Blue passed through O'Connell Street? [See *Decorative Dublin* 978-0-86278-784-4 for information and

photographs.]

- Can you remember the occasions on which Jimmy Mooney has already appeared? Is there evidence to suggest that he had taken a particular liking to Blue prior to picking her up in Dublin on her return from Galway?
- Blue was happy to be in the Mooneys' house. What was it about the house and its inhabitants that appealed to her? The word pictures you create will become a picture of Blue's idea of a happy home.
- Do you find the ending satisfactory? What might happen when Blue is old enough to leave Larch Hill? If Blue were real, she would now be about fifty years old. How might she remember her childhood years?

#### ACTIVITIES

##### 1. Happy families

'...somewhere deep in her hungry heart she knew that Jimmy and Nance Mooney were the exact people she wanted to have as family.' (p.215) The realistic description of the Mooneys shows that Blue is going into this arrangement with her eyes wide open. However there is potential for further heartbreak. If you were advising Blue, what might you say to her?

##### 2. States of Fear

Over 70,000 children were in institutions similar to Larch Hill up until 1970, and up to 40,000 survivors of industrial schools are still alive. In 1999, the Irish government set up a Commission on Child Abuse in State-supported institutions and issued a State apology to victims of abuse in Ireland's industrial schools. What incident in Larch Hill was most likely to scar Blue for life? As Blue became an adult how might that pain have been lessened?

##### 3. Compensation

In 2002, the President of Ireland signed the Residential Institutions Redress Act, designed to compensate people who suffered abuse while resident in an institution. Under the terms of this Act, would residents of Larch Hill be eligible for compensation? What evidence would Blue need to present to the Board? By what date should she make an application? If Blue died before her application was processed who might benefit? Is Blue eligible for counselling? Consult the website [www.abneys.co.uk](http://www.abneys.co.uk) for answers.

## About the author, Marita Conlon-McKenna



Marita Conlon-McKenna is Ireland's best-loved children's writer. Her first novel, *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, was an instant hit and won the International Reading Association award, and she now has nine novels for young readers. She has since won the Bisto Book of the Year award (for *The Blue Horse*) and a Bisto Merit award (for *Wildflower Girl*). See [www.obrien.ie/marita-conlonmckenna](http://www.obrien.ie/marita-conlonmckenna) for details, as well as teaching guides to many of Marita's other books.



#### Praise for *A Girl Called Blue*

'The suffering of children in the care of church and state in orphanages and other institutions is a very topical and politically sensitive issue at present, as Irish people re-examine the past ... Conlon-McKenna would seem to be the obvious writer to undertake this task. She does so with great care and sincerity.'

Celia Keenan, *Inis* magazine

