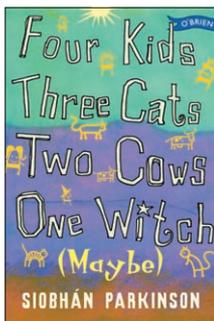


FOUR KIDS, THREE CATS, TWO COWS, ONE WITCH (MAYBE)



by Siobhán Parkinson

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Four children set off to explore nearby Lady Island. Beverley, organised and practical, prepares lists and persuades the dreamy Elizabeth to join her in an expedition to explore the island 'hovering greenly out of the sea', and reluctantly allows Elizabeth's cousin, Gerard, to accompany them, if only to do the dirty work. But Beverley loses control of the adventure when Elizabeth uncharacteristically insists that local lad Kevin should join them. Together the four children and Gerard's cat, Fat, set off on a journey which is ultimately one of self-discovery. Their instinctive feeling that they are not alone proves correct – when they meet the eccentric Dymphna they find, not only refuge from a storm, but elements of their personalities previously unrecognised. An Author's Note points up the deeper resonances of the story, which operates on many levels.

LANGUAGE – ENGLISH

- ◆ Vocabulary extension: Ambiguity, pedantry, complacently, protocol, undulating.
- ◆ Colourful writing: E.g., 'a splashy, squelchy paddle-walk' (p.9), 'beer-and-ham-smelling pub-cum-grocery' (p.10), 'a sheep, standing half-undressed ... its coat-tails flapping' (p.64), 'butter-red and silken-streamy' (p.85).
- ◆ Descriptive writing: Human emotions ascribed to inanimate objects, e.g., 'this island ... looked lost, homeless, thrown-aside ... it longed to be visited, as if it were lonely out there in the sea' (p.9).
- ◆ Language of story: E.g., 'in all the best stories with picnics in them, they have condensed milk' (p.19), 'he had not read the right island books' (p.53), 'their spines ... like bookends without any books between them ...' (p.80).
- ◆ References to story: E.g., *The Canterbury Tales* (pp.99–100, 145, 168), *Little Women* (p.22), *Alice in Wonderland* (p.166), *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (p.166). Explore.
- ◆ Discussion: The four children and Dymphna each tell a story. Read Dymphna's response to Gerard's question on p.181 and analyse the five stories with this comment in mind.
- ◆ Discussion: Gerard understood the significance of Dymphna's comment that everyone tells their own story. 'She didn't give us the key to the code,' he explained, 'because that's not how stories work. You have to work them out for yourself and make your own sense of them ...' (p.190). Discuss this explanation and say if it is significant that Gerard, alone of the four children, understood the meaning of story. What might this tell us about his personality and character?
- ◆ Story: Read Ch.1 of *Juliet's Story* by William Trevor in which we are told that Juliet liked 'listening to stories' because 'you had to give the people faces'. Would Juliet have understood or agreed with Gerard's explanation?
- ◆ Creative: Discuss the phrase 'poetic licence' (p.45). Write an accurate account of break-time at school. Rewrite, with a lot of poetic licence!
- ◆ Creative: Diary entry. Imagine a day in the life of a village shopkeeper/witch/city-dweller/farmer. Imagine if they swapped roles, what would each find strange about the other's life?
- ◆ Creative: Newspaper report. Write the

report you would give, live to camera, as you watch the four missing children return from the island. Write interview questions and replies.

◆ Creative: Letter-writing. Dymphna writes to her friend about her unexpected visitors.

SESE – SCIENCE

- ◆ Plant and animal life: Using the detailed descriptions on pp.9, 55–56, 63–66 and 78–79, record as many examples as possible. Use an encyclopædia or other reference books to locate information on coastal plant/animal life.
- ◆ Environmental awareness and care: Beverley refused a white plastic bag (p.12), and she was also conscious of litter pollution (p.145). Contact Enfo at 17 St Andrew St, Dublin 2 (Tel: 01-679 3144), or www.enfo.ie for further information on packaging and plastic recycling.

SESE – GEOGRAPHY

- ◆ Weather, climate and atmosphere: Collecting weather lore, especially local traditions and knowledge. Read the description of the storm experienced by the children on the island (pp.153–165), study the Beaufort Scale and assess the wind-force of that storm.
- ◆ Human environments: Discuss island formation and continental shifts (p.9) and list islands off the west coast of Ireland. Advantages and disadvantages of island life: Dymphna's water supply was pumped directly from the well, she used a gas stove and her groceries had to be collected by boat (p.130).

MUSIC

◆ Dymphna called both of her cats Pappageno, the bird-catcher in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* '... they both catch birds' (p.156). Listen to the two arias *Der Vogelfänger bin ich ja* (Now tell me, did you ever see) and *Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen* (A girl, or a little wife) and discuss your reactions to the music.

SPHE

◆ Myself: The story each child told revealed much about their self-perceptions and experiences. Verbalising these self-perceptions may have helped both to clarify their own thoughts and alter the opinions of the listeners. Beverley's initial opinion of Gerard was far from positive, yet she displayed 'unexpected tenderness' toward him later in the book (p.115). Discuss the possible reasons for Beverley's change of heart.

◆ Myself: Recognising some physical disabilities and how they can affect people's lives. Gerard had quite severe asthma attacks, which made him anxious. Contact the Asthma Society of Ireland, 15 Eden Quay, Dublin 1 (Tel: 01-878 8511 or Callsave 1850 445464) and learn what you can about asthma. Was Elizabeth right in saying 'people with asthma shouldn't have cats' (p.21)? Beverley suffered from vertigo (pp.72–75) but Kevin showed understanding and helped her to deal with the attack. Find out what causes vertigo and how to cope with the condition.

◆ Myself: Beverley believed that she 'was just growing out of seaside holidays' (p.7), she resented her parents who were 'going through one of their sticky patches' (p.8). Yet she 'had a sudden longing for her parents' when she realised that her independence had brought with it responsibilities (p.150). Read the Author's Note (p.6). How is this story a rite of passage experienced by the four children?

◆ Myself and others: Exploring and discussing families and homes and how they can vary in many ways. Gerard had found that there 'were two sorts of people in the world ... the ones who despised you because your mother wasn't married, and the ones who bent over backwards to show you that they didn't disapprove ...' (p.19). In his story, he tells of the 'disgrace' of being pregnant and unmarried (p.104). Discuss the families of the four children: Beverley's parents were 'squabbling' (p.7), Elizabeth's were 'cool' (p.26) and Kevin's dad had left his first family to start 'a new life ... in England' (p.191). Are there parallels between their stories and their actual family lives? Has the home-life of each child affected his/her self-confidence and/or self-identity. If so, how?

◆ Myself and the wider world: Dymphna is regarded as an outsider by the community and we hear that 'the locals kept well away from [the island]' (p.29), though 'there was no harm in her, some people said' (p.32). Later, Dymphna explains that she is on the island 'on sufferance' (p.144). Suggest reasons for the local community avoiding Dymphna. Are these reasons based on fear or prejudice? How might Dymphna's knowledge of herbal lore have been regarded in former times? Read what Kevin says (p.188) and say if such behaviour can ever be justified.