

Maggie's Door

by Patricia Reilly Giff

This is the story of Nory Ryan and her neighbor and friend Sean Red Mallon—both embarking on the journey from Ireland to America. Sean departs first with his mother and Nory's little brother, Patch; Nory departs her home a few days later. As they make their way toward Nory's sister's house in Brooklyn, they face trickery, cruelty, starvation, filthy conditions, and storms at sea. It is only because of their courage and perseverance that they finally reach their destination.

THEMES

Irish history, immigration, self-esteem, problem-solving, family, friendship, responsibility, courage

Middle Grade Unabridged Audio

I. PRE-TEACHING

A. Have the class define and discuss these terms:

eerie, biscuit, pewter, gnawed, blight, squalls, meandering, scuttled, gauzy, quay, fester, massive, muted, ballast, axle, peat, hulks, hoarse, billowing, bilge, cascading lurches, drenched, sty, steward, clout, berth, pert, lightning, wrenching, frenzy, galley, trundle, clenched, rivulets, keening, bulkhead, calluses, wastrel, tallow

B. Before beginning the story, discuss the following questions with the class:

1. Have you read *Nory Ryan's Song* about the famine in Ireland? Would you like to know what happened to Nory and her family before they decided to go America?
2. What was it like to sail to America during the 19th century? Was the experience different for the rich and the poor?
3. Have you ever been on a ship? What is it like? What is it like to be caught in a storm?
4. Why did so many people leave Ireland to go to America? How did the people who arrived safely get jobs to support themselves and their families?

II. PRESENTATION

A. Understanding the Story:

1. Begin with Chapters 1 - 8: What does Nory hear as she travels to Galway? Why does she decide to give the bread to the white bird? Why will this be a problem for her? Why do Sean's wrists hurt? What does the Englishman want Sean to do? What does he promise in return? Describe Nory's journey. What is she afraid of as she travels? How does she hurt her foot? What does she see behind her? What happens when Sean goes to the Englishman's house? How does he get food? How does he get away? What does he discover when he gets back? Who had been following Nory? What does the girl give her? How does Sean find out where his mother and Patch have gone? Why does he keep the stool? How does he get passage on a ship?

2. Advance to Chapters 9 - 16: What is it like for Sean as he travels to Liverpool? What does being "ballast" mean? Where does Nory find Sean's mother and Patch? What does Mrs. Mallon decide to do? Describe Galway. Who does Nory meet? What does he tell her about Celia and Da? Why was he chosen to wait for Nory? What does the ticket seller tell them? What does Nory see the dark-eyed girl do? What is it like on the ship? How does Sean spend his time? What is the cook like? How does the man with the books treat Sean when he spills the tea? What happens to the dark-eyed girl? How does Nory help her? What story does Garvey tell Sean? What does the girl in the cabin show Sean?
3. Complete the story with Chapters 17 - 25: What does Nory imagine Brooklyn will be like? Why did Eliza have to leave Ireland? What memory does the coming storm evoke in Nory? How do Sean and Garvey prepare for the storm? What happens when the storm hits? What does the bookman's wife ask Sean to do? Where does he find the girl? What are Granda's last words? How does Nory mourn for him? What does Garvey ask her to do? What has happened to Sean? In what ways is Brooklyn different from what Nory expected? What does the little girl give Sean? What does Eliza give Nory? How do they feel when the family is reunited?

B. For Discussion:

1. The author chose to tell the story in alternating narratives, switching between Nory and Sean. How does this device help you follow the story? How does it add suspense?
2. How does the remembered advice of their family members help Nory and Sean cope with the journey?
3. What is ironic about the fact that the ships carrying the Irish were once slave ships?
4. What are some of Nory and Sean's expectations about Brooklyn? How realistic are they?

III. EXTENDING THE LESSON

Give students the opportunity to work with partners, groups, the whole class, or alone.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS:

A. Language Arts:

1. Nory wonders if the crying she hears is a selkie. Have students learn about creatures from folklore like selkies, mermaids, and dragons. Students might make up their own tales about these creatures. Why did people tell tales about creatures like these, especially those that are half human?
2. Nory and her family speak Gaelic rather than English. Have students learn more about this language. They might compile a Gaelic/English dictionary illustrated with Irish symbols.
3. Have students try to remember what it felt like not to be able to read. How did they feel when they saw books and wished they could read? You might arrange to have the class share books with younger classes or pre-school children.
4. Have students find out how their ancestors came to America and write their stories.

B. Art and Music:

1. Have students select background music that is appropriate to some of the scenes. They could use Irish folk music featuring the fiddle and Irish songs that Nory might sing as she's healing Eliza and Sean.
2. Have students make a bulletin board about the story. They could cover the board with blue for the ocean, cut the shape of Ireland and America out of construction paper, and trace the voyage. They could add pictures of the famine, of potatoes, and of ships.
3. Have students do a decoupage on a stool and use it as a place to sit to share stories.

C. Social Studies:

1. Have students learn about the history of Ireland. They might concentrate on the famine of 1849, but also the relationship between the English and the Irish. Why is there still antagonism between the English and the Northern Irish?
2. Have students learn about the great immigrations to America that occurred during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Why did so many immigrants come? What countries did they come from?

3. The ship Nory and the others travel on had been a slave ship. Have students learn about the slave trade and how slaves were transported to America from Africa.

D. Science and Math:

1. Have students learn more about the blight that affected the potato crop in Ireland. Could such a thing happen again? Why or why not?
2. Anna has taught Nory the art of healing with herbs and other natural materials. Have students learn about herbal and holistic medicine in the past and today.
3. Sean's sister Mary and others in the story have pocks from smallpox. Have students learn about smallpox. Why does it leave marks on the skin? How serious was it? Do we still have this disease today? Why or why not?
4. Have students find out how many Irish left Ireland during this time period. Where did they mainly settle? They might make a graph or a chart.

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