

BBC

The Machine Gunners

by Robert Westall



Teacher's Notes by Katie Myles

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Centre for Literacy in Primary Education

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The Machine Gunners by Robert Westall

Introduction

Robert Westall

Robert Westall was born in North Shields in 1929 and grew up in Tynemouth during World War Two. He studied Fine Art in Durham and London and afterwards taught art at various secondary schools. He liked to write in his spare time and after he retired at the age of fifty-five, devoted his life to writing. Robert Westall died in 1993.

The Machine Gunners, published in 1975, was Robert Westall's first book. It won the prestigious Library Association's *Carnegie Medal* and was also a *Guardian Award* runner-up. It went on to become the *Honor Book* for the American Boston Globe Horn Book Award, and to win the German *Preis der Leseratten*. Finally, in 2007, it was voted by popular consent into the CILIP *Carnegie Medal 70th Anniversary Top Ten*.

Robert Westall said that he wrote *The Machine Gunners* for his son, Christopher and that the story is based on his own experiences as a young boy growing up in Tynemouth during World War Two. The fictional town of Garmouth, where the action of *The Machine Gunners* takes place, is based on Tynemouth, but Westall changed the name because geographically they're not exactly the same. All the characters in the book are based on people Westall knew in Tynemouth at the time - but regrettably he and his friends didn't find a crashed German bomber or a machine gun or harbour a German rear-gunner in a fortress! You can find out more about Robert Westall and his work here:

<http://www.robertwestall.com/index.html>

Downloading the episodes

Each episode of *The Machine Gunners* is available to download for 30 days after broadcast. Simply click on the yellow 'Download' link on each of the episode pages. You'll be offered the option to download either a higher or lower quality version of the episode. The higher quality version will provide a better listening experience; however, if your internet connection is slow you may prefer to opt for the lower quality

version. Downloads of the episodes acquired this way may be kept in perpetuity and played with your class as and when you choose, using either a computer or from an mp3 player such as an iPod or smart phone. Although the download files will no longer be available after 30 days you will still be able to access each episode: simply click the 'play' button in the lower left corner of the main image on each of the episode pages.

Using the episode 'chapters'

You will see on the individual episode pages of the website that each episode has been divided into three segments of approximately 5 minutes each (once the episode is available). Use these segments to break each episode into shorter sections. At the start of each new session you can navigate easily using the segments to the point at which you ceased listening in the previous session.

Using these notes

Titles in blue in these notes have been hyperlinked to the relevant pages of the website, meaning you can navigate with ease from the notes to the audio files online. (NB: you will need to be connected to the internet for this function to be available).

Teachers should be aware this series includes references to some difficult issues which include the impact of war on a population and individuals, death, grief, bullying and violence. Teachers will want to make sure they have listened to the whole series before they share it with pupils. However, the series and teaching notes offer a range of opportunities to cover a diversity of themes in the PSHE programmes of study. For example, it would allow teachers to explore stereotypes and the changing attitudes towards different groups within British society throughout recent history.

Understanding would need to be shown when introducing the story to a class in which a pupil may have experienced conflict or bereavement; although the sessions could provide a safe and supportive context through which they may be able to express their feelings.



The Machine Gunners by Robert Westall

1: The hunt for war souvenirs



Click on the image to display a larger version online if you are connected to the internet

Synopsis

After a heavy night of German bombing, the central character Charles McGill (Chas) starts looking for war souvenirs. He ends up in Chirton Hall wood where he finds the tail of a German plane (a Heinkel HE111) with its machine gun still hanging from the turret. He climbs up the plane to try and dislodge the gun and is shocked to find the dead gunner still in place. He hears the factory hooter signal the time and rushes home to get ready for school.

All day he thinks about the machine gun. After school, he returns to the wood with his friends Cem and Audrey to try and claim the machine gun.

Before listening

Before listening to the dramatisation, immersing the pupils in the historical world of the story can support them to have a deeper understanding and experience of the narrative. Ask the class to consider what they know about World War Two. Ask small groups to work together to complete a table in which they record:

- What they know
- What they think they know
- What they would like to find out

Following this, gather the class together and compile their notes and ideas. This can support assessment for learning, guiding the following sessions and any cross curricular learning that will take place during the sequence. Ask the pupils to return to this grid and add notes to it as they listen to the story and engage in the sequence.

Ask the pupils to imagine they are a part of a community who lived in together in World War Two. Ask what they think this would be like and what impact the war could have had on people's everyday lives. Ask the pupils to note down any ideas and suggestions. They can then refer back to this after they have heard the first episode.

To support the learning in this sequence it would also be useful to create a word or language bank to scaffold the children's understanding of the language in the story, especially historical language and words linked to the particular time period - for example, 'Anderson shelter' or 'wireless'.

You may want to give the pupils their own journals to record work through this sequence; the children could have a small book to use as a diary. You could ask the pupils to choose a central character from the story and to write in role as this character or they could all write in role as Chas - the protagonist. In this diary the pupils can continually write in role reflecting the character's changing thoughts and opinions. In the diary or journal, they could also record a variety of types of writing, such as small 'secret' notes describing what they have done with the machine gun, poems to illustrate their character's emotional journey, facts and figures they have learned about the war.

During listening

Encourage the children to note down as they listen, any words that they are unfamiliar with. Encourage the children to look up the meanings in dictionaries. Ask the children to write these words and their definitions onto a given template reflecting the topic, for example on a ration book coupon or identity card template. These can then be added to an ongoing display that the children contribute to throughout the sessions.

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Ask the pupils to note down ways in which the characters' lives are affected by war. Does this confirm their initial thoughts? Also ask them to note down anything which gives information about the central characters.

After listening

Begin a [role on the wall](#) for the character Chas (Charles McGill). Role on the wall is a technique that uses a displayed outline of the character to record feelings (inside the outline) and outward appearances (outside the outline) at various stopping points across the story. Using a different colour at each of the stopping points allows you to track changes in the character's emotional journey. You can include known facts such as physical appearance, age, gender, location and occupation, as well as subjective ideas such as likes/dislikes, friends/enemies, attitudes, motivations, secrets and dreams.

Have a template of a boy cut out and pin this to a learning wall. Ask the class to write on sticky notes words or phrases they would use to describe Chas's feelings or personality, which can be stuck on the inside of the outline and what the children know about his outward appearance or other people's impressions of him, to be stuck on the outside. Include quotes and descriptive pieces from the script that has been heard, as well as impressions from the class.

Using templates of people, also begin class profiles on each of the children in the story, to be added to as you listen to the episodes.

You may want to spend some time investigating the plane that Chas has found - a Heinkel HE111 - so that the children can visualise what this looks like as they listen to the story and so that they have a better impression of the significance of the theft of the machine gun.

In this episode it is revealed that Chas collects war souvenirs and is in competition with another character, Boddser Brown, to have the best collection in Garmouth. To support the children's understanding of the period in which the story is set and also Chas's obsession with these souvenirs you could create an object display, based on some of the items he has collected and based on artefacts from the period.

If your school has a local Resources Centre they should be able to provide you with a range of real objects for the class to explore, otherwise you could have a laminated set of pictures. Give the pupils a range of objects such as a ration book, a gas mask, bullets, a tailfin. Ask the class to consider what the objects are and what they were used for. Then give the pupils time to research the objects and to find out what they are. Following this ask the class to write short descriptions of the different objects including captions and labels.

You could then consider which objects Chas would want to collect and why, which objects would have given him more status and allowed him to have the 'better' collection.



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2: Keeping a secret



Click on the image to display a larger version online if you are connected to the internet

Synopsis

In this episode Chas, Cem and Audrey return to the crashed plane. They saw the gun from the plane but, as it falls, it discharges several rounds of ammunition, puncturing the aircraft's tail. They try to escape with the gun, but they are detected and the police officer Fatty Hardy is once again on their tail. They are saved by another air raid and manage to get the machine gun back to Chas's house - it's stuffed down the leg of Cem's Guy which is on Cem's 'bogie' (a low truck on four small wheels).

Before listening

You may want to explore Tynemouth in the North East where the story is set. Consider in particular why Tynemouth was target for German bombers.

Ask the children to record as they listen the ways in which the aerial bombardment is described in this episode and the characters' feelings at being caught up in yet another air raid.

After listening

Consider with the class the motivations driving Chas to possess the machine gun. Consider if his desire is only to have the best collection of war souvenirs or if something else may be driving him. Add the pupils' thoughts and reflections on his character to the Role on the Wall and continue to explore his motives as you listen to the rest of the story.

In this episode it is revealed that the adults in the story also want to get hold of the machine gun, but for different purposes. The children in the story then become involved in a 'cat and mouse' style adventure to try to keep the location of the gun secret. To support the pupils' understanding of the narrative structure and different characters featured, you could create a map of the town featuring the key locations in the story and a diagram of the different characters, indicating their motives for finding the machine gun.

During the episode, the children find themselves caught up in another aerial bombardment. Analyse the language used in the script to describe these onslaughts which the pupils should have noted down as they were listening. For example, in the script the falling shrapnel is described as 'whispering and pattering down like steel rain all around' or the boys are described as feeling 'like two small flies crawling across the tablecloth'. Consider what this adds to the audience's understanding.

Following this, consider with the class what the impact of these constant air raids and bombing attacks would be on the children and inhabitants of the town. To support this, you may want to show them videos or play sound clips of sirens and the noise of heavy bombing, as well as images of the result of an airstrike such as the destruction of buildings. Supporting resources can be found here from the [School Radio website](#).

Sensitivity would need to be shown here if a pupil in the class has had experience of conflict.

Ask the class to consider what it might feel like to step into this scene. What might they see, hear, smell and feel? Invite the pupils to discuss in groups and note words and phrases that they feel would best describe these sensations. Once the pupils have had time to discuss and note their reflections draw the grid below on a flipchart and use this to take suggestions.

See	<i>Motionless lights in the sky</i>
Hear	<i>The drumming of bullets</i>
Smell	<i>Acrid smoke</i>
Feel	<i>Trepidation</i>

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Take the time to value the suggestions given, say them out loud, pause and reflect on their effect and discuss how the reflection and range of ideas can support the refinement of the contributions. Consider what synonyms could be used to refine the quality of the language.

Model with the class how you might use the range of language generated so far to compose a poem inspired by the scene.

Use the framework below to support the structuring of this composition.

Phrase expressing what you might see, hear or smell

Word expressing the feeling

Phrase expressing what you might see, hear or smell

Word expressing the feeling

Phrase expressing what you might see, hear or smell

Word expressing the feeling

Phrase expressing what you might see, hear or smell

Word expressing the feeling

Once you have created a draft, you may want to encourage the class to look at the poem again to see if they would like to refine the words or phrases chosen.

Explain that you are now going to rehearse a collaborative performance of the poem. Discuss the different aspects of poetry performance that enhance the experience for a viewer such as tone of voice, intonation, volume, facial expression and gesture. Rehearse and then perform the poem, evaluating the impact of the language and performance. What impression was created of the bombardment through the poetry performance?

3: Getting the better of Boddser Brown



Click on the image to display a larger version online if you are connected to the internet

Synopsis

The authorities and Boddser Brown (Chas's arch rival) are all looking for the missing machine gun. Boddser now has the German gunner's flying helmet and Chas leads the authorities into thinking he's the prime suspect to have the gun. Meanwhile the gun is safely hidden elsewhere.

The air raid siren goes and a night of heavy shelling begins. In the morning, Dad wants to check on Nana and Granda and asks Chas to go with him. The town has been badly damaged. At Nana and Granda's, the flag staff is still standing but the roof has been blown off. Nana and Granda are unhurt and defiant.

After listening

Hold a discussion in which the class debate whether or not it was right for Chas to imply that Boddser Brown stole the machine gun. Following this, you may want to complete an investigation into the way in which different authors present contrasting characters including the trope of 'goodies' and 'baddies' in children's and Young Adult literature.

Ask the class to give examples of characters they know that have similar relationships to Chas and Boddser, in other books they have read or TV series, films or popular culture. Examples you could explore: Captain Hook and Peter Pan, Harry Potter and Draco

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Malfoy, Katniss Everdeen and Coriolanus Snow, The White Witch and the Children, The Grand High Witch and the Boy, Fantastic Mr Fox and Boggis, Bunce and Bean.

Ask the class to consider what distinguishes this type of relationship. Reflect with the pupils on the idea of heroes and villains and the concept of an arch enemy.

In the previous episodes the characters have had to hide in air raid shelters. Explore with the children why and how shelters were made during the war. Many still exist so it may be possible to visit a real example as part of the sequence which would enhance the pupils' comprehension. Discuss with the class what materials the shelters were made from, why they were made from these materials and what different functions or purposes an Anderson Shelter needed to fulfil. To support the session, the pupils could make prototypes in a DT lesson, working in pairs to make a model Anderson Shelter that will be strong enough to survive a tennis ball being dropped on it.

Following this, allow the class to work in groups or as a whole class to create a shelter that they can explore and use as a role-play area. If possible build this in an outdoor area. If this is not possible have a role-play area inside the classroom that the children have built themselves. Once the shelter is built, give the children time to experience what it would have been like for children to hide in a shelter during a bombing raid.

For example, you could play the sounds of air raid sirens while the children are inside. [The School Radio website](#) has two sound files you may wish to use: i) the authentic sound of [an air-raid siren sounding the warning](#) and ii) a sound montage of [an air-raid in progress](#).

Be aware that some children may have actual experience of conflict and so teachers would need to decide if this session would be appropriate.

After the children have spent time exploring the shelter, give the children the opportunity to respond to their experiences through the medium of art.

Encourage the children to draw what it was like for them in the shelter, reflecting the dark, the cold, the damp and the feelings the experienced provoked. Link this to the children in the story, particularly Chas's emotional response to the raids.

Following this activity, return to Role on the Wall for Chas and reflect again on why he is so determined to keep the machine gun.

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4: Setting up camp



Click on the image to display a larger version online if you are connected to the internet

Synopsis

The secret of the gun is shared with Clogger, a boy from Glasgow who is staying with his aunt for the duration of the War. Chas wants to make friends with Nicky whose garden is private and overlooks the sea.

Nicky is bullied by Boddser Brown so the gang takes Nicky's side and there's a fight between Chas and Boddser. Chas wins by cheating and Boddser is left seeking revenge.

Chas and Audrey start spending time at Nicky's house after school. They start building a secret camp at the bottom of the garden in a hidden rockery overlooking the bay, from where they can see the barrage balloons round the mouth of the river.

After listening

Reflect on the depiction of the bullying that Nicky suffers. At this point, you may want to plan for an additional PSHE lesson in which the children consider bullying, the impact this has on victims of bullying and what they can do if they or someone they know is being bullied.

To support the pupils understanding of the events of this episode you may want to explore what 'barrage balloons' were and how they were used to deter or block German bombing raids.

Supporting resources can be found on the [BBC People's War website](#) and for barrage balloons on [Find My Past](#).

Ask the children to consider Chas's actions in this episode, along with what else they have heard so far, what impression do we get of his character? Add any additional information gathered to the Role on the Wall.

Following this, ask a child or several children to hot seat in role as Chas, thinking about what has happened and what might happen next in the story. Give the class time to discuss questions they might ask beforehand, which will elicit the most interesting and full responses?

The children playing the part of Chas will also need time to prepare and inhabit the character. Simple props can be useful to support this process, such as a jacket or hat. Additionally, or as an alternative activity, you can also repeat the same session but concentrating on the character of Boddser Brown.

Following the hot seating, the class could write a diary entry exploring Chas's feelings at this moment in the story. Or the children could write a contrasting diary entry in role as Boddser.



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5: Life at the Fortress



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Synopsis

The five children are spending most of their time in Nicky's garden. By Christmas, they've completed and extended 'Fortress Caparetto' having acquired cement, sand bags and a machine gun emplacement from unsuspecting adults. The Fortress is covered in three feet of earth and rockery. It's heated by a paraffin heater, there are bunks with mattresses, and a patchwork quilt is used as a draught excluder.

Teachers will need to be aware that in this episode the children trick a man with special needs into helping them build the fortress. At this point teachers may want to plan for a PSHE lesson in which some of the more sensitive themes in the episode are discussed.

After listening

Discuss the way in which the children build a relationship with John so that they can build the fortress more easily. Consider if the pupils think that they have exploited his trust and 'used' him for their own gains. Reflect on the morality of the situation and the power dynamic in this relationship, comparing the ways in which they have tricked the other adults around them into helping them to build the fortress.

Discuss the context in which the story was written and the historical period in which it was set, in order to contextualise this for the pupils. Consider the positive changes in attitudes and understanding towards

people who live in our communities that have special needs.

The class may have also noticed the way in which the children in the story conform to outdated notions of gender roles. For example, Chas throws himself over Audrey during an air raid as he considers this to be a 'man's duty'. Audrey also performs a more adult and 'motherly' role in the story, cooking and cleaning in the fortress, compared to the boy characters. Discuss with the class the way in which these roles may have altered if this were a contemporary story.

Consider the impact the socio-historical context has on stories and on the way in which the characters in these stories are depicted. Both these discussion points may lead into a wider discussion on current considerations around representation, of gender, class, race, ethnicity and disability in contemporary fiction, television, film and popular culture.

Teacher resources to support the consideration of representation in children's literature can be found here:

http://www.letterboxlibrary.com/acatalog/Book_Themes.html

<https://www.clpe.org.uk/clpe/library/booklists/fearless-females-fantasy-fiction>

<https://www.clpe.org.uk/library-and-resources/booklists/celebrate-kindness-booklist>

Towards the end of the episode the fortress is built and the children in the story begin to spend an increasing amount of time there. Listen to the episode again but this time ask the class to close their eyes and invite them to try to visualise the fortress in their mind's eye as they listen to the description. Elicit from the pupils which words or phrases help them to imagine the fortress for example, 'the long Anderson shelter was

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as warm as toast' or 'Sergeant Jones and Private Nichol lounged on the pink-sprigged mattresses that covered the bunks as content as cats.'

Give the pupils appropriate and available art materials, and then ask them to draw the scene they pictured. You could re-read the section again from the script several times while the pupils draw their pictures. After they have completed their drawings they could annotate the pictures with key vocabulary or phrases, which support their understanding or interpretation. Through discussion, draw out from the class the way in which particular language and sentence structure supported the creation of this world in the audience's imagination.

Give the pupils time to share their work with one another and to compare and contrast their images. Invite them to comment on what is similar and what is different about the way they have illustrated the fortress and why they think this is. Ask the pupils to consider how the way in which they have drawn the pictures express the atmosphere of the scene they had in mind.

6: A home from home



Click on the image to display a larger version online if you are connected to the internet

Synopsis

Nicky and Clogger are now living in the Fortress and the other children are spending most of their time there. One January evening Clogger spots a dot on the horizon. As it comes closer the children see it's a German plane gliding in low and soundlessly. The children aim the machine gun and shoot at the plane, but it's not properly anchored and it sends Chas flying backwards, bullets flying upwards and ripping the roof.

The German plane is eventually shot down by pom-pom guns and Spitfires over the harbour mouth. In the affray, no one notices a small dark shape that has detached itself from the plane which is now drifting soundlessly to earth.

After listening

Consider the way in which the children's perceptions of what they are doing with the machine gun alters in this episode, for example they begin to view all adults as the enemy and move beyond 'playing at' soldiers without understanding the potential repercussions of their actions.

Simultaneously the adults in the story are still trying to find the machine gun and are gradually getting closer to the truth. Return to the map of the town you have created and the flow chart depicting the different characters on the hunt for the machine gun, ask what additional information the class can add to this and to predict what they think could happen next.

7: A German friend

Return to role on the wall that you have created for the character Nicky and ask the class to consider the situation he finds himself in, having being orphaned by the war and terrified by the thought of ending up in a children's home.

Put the class into small mixed ability groups or pairs. Ask the pupils to imagine that they are going to write a letter to Nicky at this point in the story, link this to any PSHE lessons that you have taught so far in the sequence, specifically considering the bullying he faced earlier in the story. Remind the pupils that they need to advise Nicky on how to handle the situation he is faced with, what to do, who to speak to, but also be sensitive to his feelings and wishes. Give the class time to discuss this in their groups and then take feedback and responses from them.

Allow the children time to write a letter of advice to Nicky, considering his feelings of isolation and desperation. Support the pupils to structure their thinking, develop advisory voice and use metalanguage in context through shared writing. As a class, read out the letters and the replies, considering which advice was most helpful. As an extension of this activity, you could ask a parallel year group or a teacher to reply in role as Nicky, considering the children's advice and suggestions.

At the end of the episode the audience is introduced to the German pilot Rudi Gerlath, create a Role on the Wall for this character.



Click on the image to display a larger version online if you are connected to the internet

Synopsis

Wandering into Nicky's garden, Rudi spots three alluring doors, looks inside and comes nose to nose with the machine gun. He's obliged to surrender to the children and they take his pistol. Concluding that Rudi isn't a threat and is tired and a long way from home, the children decide not to hand him over to the authorities as that would be to give away their location and plan.

During listening

Pause the episode at "What are we going to do?" screamed Clem. 'He's a Nazi!' Pose the question to the class: should the children turn Rudi in to the authorities or keep him a secret?

Ask the class to discuss in groups what the children should do next, prompting them where necessary. Groups could then work with each other to prepare arguments for and against before undertaking a conscience alley exercise.

Conscience Alley is useful technique for exploring any kind of dilemma faced by a character/s. The class forms two lines facing each other. One person (the teacher or a participant) takes the role of the protagonist and walks between the lines as each member of the group speaks their advice. It can be organised so that those on one side give opposing advice to those on the other. When the protagonist reaches the end of the alley, they make their decision.

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One side of the alley should argue that the children should take Rudi to the police, whereas the other side argues that they shouldn't. Choose some children to take turns to listen to the arguments by walking down the alley in role as Chas or one of the other children in the story.

Following this have a whole class discussion. Listen first to the children who were in role - which side persuaded them? The teacher or another adult, such as a teaching assistant, could scribe and record the responses.

The class could then write a note to the children in the story advising them of what to do next, based on the evidence that they have heard during this session. When they have finished their writing, ask them to screw up their note into a ball and throw them across the room. The receiver of the note then writes in role as one of the characters in reply to the note telling them what they are going to do. Ask the class to consider the language and style used, including emotive language and repetition, and which was the most persuasive note and why.

Listen to the remaining part of the episode and reflect on the decision the children in the story took.

After listening

Ask the class to reflect on how Robert Westall humanises the 'enemy' in this episode drawing evidence from what they have heard.

Ask the pupils to reflect on Rudi's perspective of the children, that they have had to grow up too fast and are behaving like adults. This could lead to a wider discussion on the impact of war and conflict on children and could link to broader cross curricular work on the lives of British and German children during World War Two.

In this episode it is revealed that the adults have worked out what has happened to the machine gun. Ask the class to discuss what they predict could happen next. You may also want to ask the pupils to write a version of the next episode based on their predictions.

8: Closing in



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Synopsis

A rapport develops between Rudi and the children and Rudi settles into life at the Fortress. Meanwhile, Chas's old enemy, Boddser Brown, is still hankering after revenge and wondering about the whereabouts of the machine gun.

One day, as he's leaving his house for the Fortress, Chas senses he's being followed. He thinks it's a policeman, but despite his best efforts, can't shake him off. He's forced to confront Boddser on the mud flats below Nicky's house. With no one around to help, Boddser easily gets the better of Chas. But eventually Chas plays dead and Boddser lets go of him.

After listening

Return to the consideration of the character Boddser Brown. Ask the class if they are beginning to feel empathy for him. If so, why? If not, why not? Ask the class to consider if they think Chas and Boddser will ever stop fighting one another. Ask the pupils to reflect on how they think Boddser would tell the story they have heard so far, what would his perspective be?

Return to the Role on the Wall created for the character Rudi. Reflect on why he doesn't escape when given the opportunity. What does this reveal about his relationship with the children and also the life he would have if he escaped, either as a prisoner of war or on return to Germany?



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9: The Germans are coming

a sense of tension. Also reflect on how the building momentum of the story leads the audience to also feel a sense of rising panic about what could happen to the children and what they may do with the gun.



Click on the image to display a larger version online if you are connected to the internet

Synopsis

The children pressure Nicky into admitting that his family owns a boat which is stored in a boathouse by the river. They promise the boat to Rudi, if he repairs the machine gun. Meanwhile fear of a German invasion and life under the Nazis has reached fever pitch in Garmouth.

After listening

In this episode the fear of invasion creates paranoia and panic among the residents of Garmouth. One by one the children run away from their parents so that they can be together at the fortress. Discuss with the class why the children all want to be together, with the machine gun. Consider the bonds they have established that tie them together and why they think they can save the town when the adults have been unable to.

Return to the role on the wall for each of the central characters, considering how they have become more alike since the beginning of the story.

Explore the confusion that the potential invasion creates, the ways in which the adults in the story begin to feel suspicions of each other, not knowing who to trust, who is an enemy and who is a friend. Consider how Robert Westall has used this to create

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10: A false alarm



Click on the image to display a larger version online if you are connected to the internet

Synopsis

Rudi sets off in the boat but, realising there's no German invasion, decides to head back to shore. The authorities realise the German invasion is a false alarm. But no one has told the children, who are still hiding out in the Fortress waiting for the Germans. Meanwhile, their families have reported them missing and it's up to Fatty Hardy to find them. He enlists the Polish soldiers to help search for them.

From the Fortress, the children see soldiers speaking a foreign language coming up the hill with Fatty Hardy. They immediately think the soldiers are German and that Fatty Hardy's a traitor. They fire the machine gun. The soldiers fire back. Then, a very bedraggled Rudi emerges from the bushes waving a white flag.

After listening

Discuss the pupils' responses to the ending of the story. What they liked or disliked, anything that puzzled them or any connections they can make to the story.

Use some of Aidan Chambers 'special questions' to explore the children's responses to the dramatisation as a whole - eg:

- Think of yourself as a spectator. With whose eyes did you see the story? Did you only see what one character in the story saw, or did you see things sometimes as one character saw them, and sometimes as another and so on?

- When you were listening the story, did you feel it was happening now? Or did you feel it was happening in the past and being remembered? Can you tell me anything that made you feel like that?
- Which character interested you the most?
- Is that character the most important in the story/ or is it really about someone else?
- Which character(s) didn't you like?
- Did any of the characters remind you of people you know?
- Or remind you of characters in other books?

Robert Westall wrote that the 'drive to possess the gun drove the whole action of the story'. Ask the class if they agree with this statement. Reflect on whether or not they consider this to be successful writing technique and if the ending of the story was a satisfactory one.

This may be a good opportunity to recommend further reading to the class so that they can continue to explore the themes and issues raised in the book.

Exploring the text further

Literacy

- By experiencing this text, the class will encounter language with which they may not be familiar. For example, language relating to warfare, or language that may have dropped out of common usage or that is part of a regional dialect. The class could dedicate a section of a working wall to collecting examples of vocabulary used in the narrative with which they are unfamiliar. They can look up the definitions on-line or in a dictionary and this could provide a starting point to explore the morphology and etymology of certain words.
- Consider screen adaptations of the book and compare and contrast different ways of presenting the same story.
- Conduct an author study exploring Robert Westall's body of work and consider what experiences may have influenced his writing. Supporting resources can be found here: <http://www.robert-westall.com/>

Geography

- The children could study the location in which the book is set - Tynemouth - and compare and contrast this to their own locality.
- The children could compare the location as it is today with how it was in the 1940s.

History

- Allow time to explore the historical context of the story, and explore the comparison between the different motives of the nations who took part in World War Two. Supporting resources are available from the [National Archives](#).
- Explore the role of the home guard during World War Two. Supporting resources are available from The Imperial War Museum and the National Archives.
- Consider how young people lived in the 1940s and how this compares to the lives of young people today.

- The story provides a context for children to consider the effects of war on children's lives. Get them to consider why people might make particular choices and consider how they might respond themselves in a similar situation.
- If the sequence is extended, the children could research the lives of British and German children during World War Two and how war affected them.
- Consider the impact of rationing on people's lives during World War Two, and also the role of the Black Market.
- Explore propaganda from the era, e.g. propaganda posters or short films. Encourage pupils to think about how we receive information today, and why the government at the time used posters as the main way of communicating information to people during the war years. Following this pupils could design and make their own propaganda posters. These could then be added to the historical display that they have created. Supporting resources can be found here: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/government-posters/>

PHSE

- Explore how schooling and education has changed since World War Two, including the use of corporal punishment.
- Explore with the children the power of peer pressure, the impact of charismatic leaders on a population and how difficult it can be for people to challenge the status quo.
- Explore the central themes of friendship, loyalty and courage.
- Explore the stereotypes in the text and reflect on changing attitudes towards e.g. women, people with learning difficulties, in recent history.

Citizenship and Rights

- Explore remembrance services and traditions that commemorate the World War Two.

The Machine Gunners by Robert Westall

Links

BBC Schools website about WW1:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/0/ww1/>

BBC Schools: how to stage your performance of the play Archie Dobson's War (which includes many sound effects relating to WW1):

www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01n4ldk

A portal where you can find all the BBC's content focusing on WW1:

www.bbc.co.uk/ww1

Interactive animations from the BBC, including a 'Night patrol':

www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/launch_ani_wwone_movies.shtml

The homefront and the descent into war:

www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/britain_wwone/

Take a virtual tour of life in a trench:

www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/launch_vt_wwone_trench.shtml

An interactive map of western Europe before, during and after the War:

www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/launch_ani_western_front.shtml

www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/soldiers_stories_gallery_05.shtml