

Love to Read

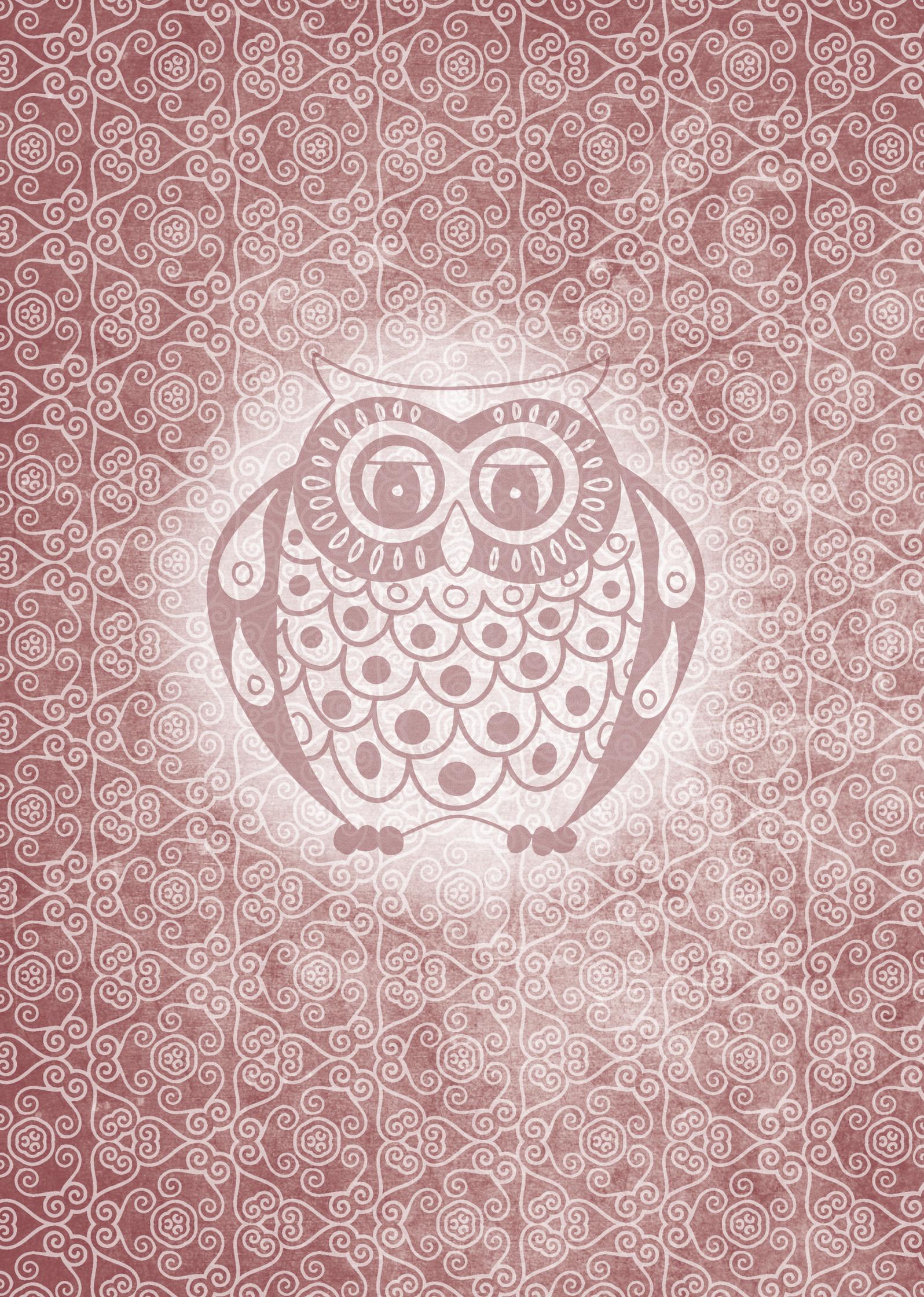


Private Peaceful

2003

Michael Morpurgo

An extremely moving novel, forming part of the First World War literary canon and appealing to both boys and girls. It is a compassionate story protesting against injustice, class inequality and war, but also manages to be a great family love story.



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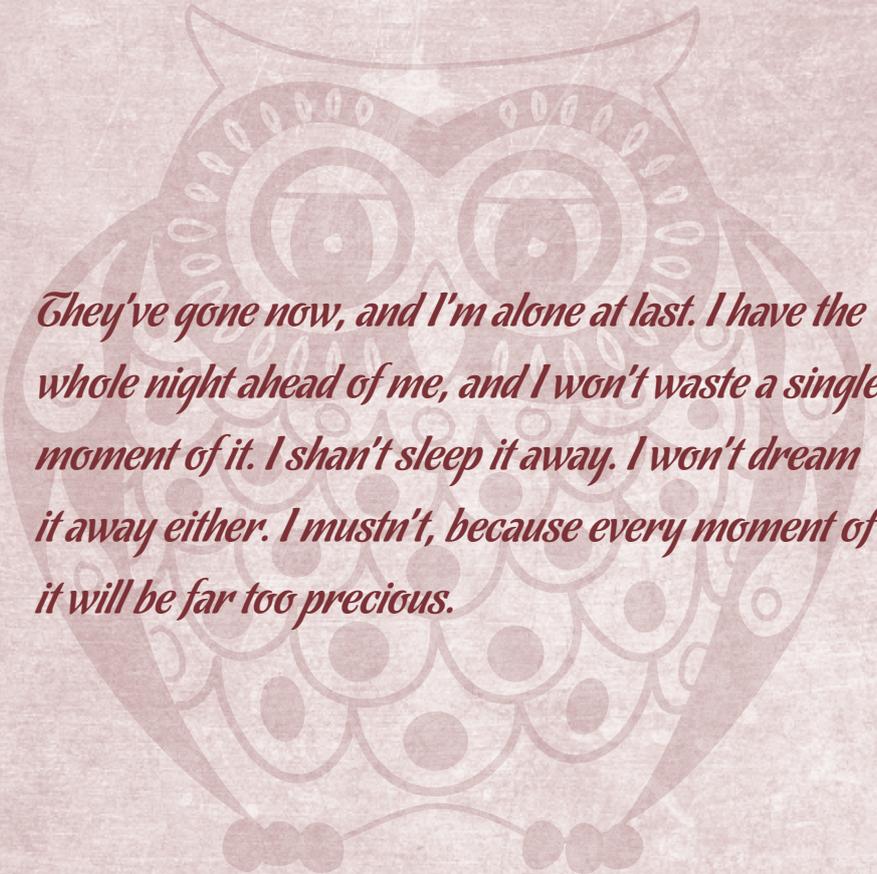
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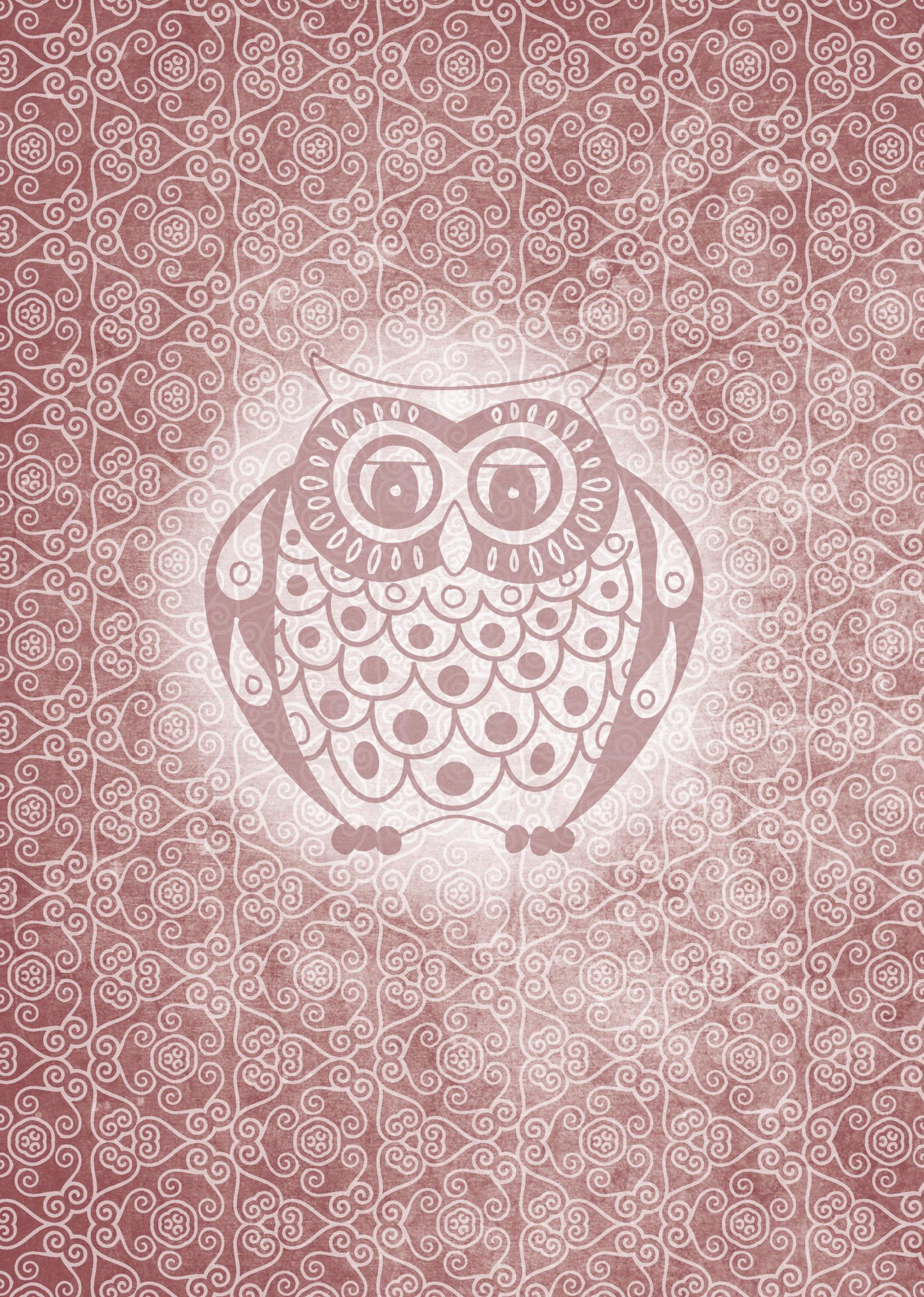


They've gone now, and I'm alone at last. I have the whole night ahead of me, and I won't waste a single moment of it. I shan't sleep it away. I won't dream it away either. I mustn't, because every moment of it will be far too precious.





Overview for teachers



Context

About the author

Born in 1943, Michael Morpurgo states he is “...oldish, married with three children, and a grandfather six times over.” He was Children’s Laureate between 2003-2005 and has written extensively for children including another novel with the theme of war at its heart: *War Horse*. Once a primary school teacher, he began writing books for children as he “...could see there was magic in it for them...”.

He set up Farms for City Children in 1976 with his wife, an organisation which aims to enrich and diversify the experience of young children from inner city areas with a purposeful, active week on farms in the countryside.

What’s the story about?

Tommo, a private fighting in the First World War, is awaiting the execution of his ‘heroic’ and defiant older brother, Charlie. Tommo reflects upon their life together as a way of keeping his brother ‘alive’. He relives their school days together, their family life, and meeting Molly; the girl who both boys fall in love with and who later becomes Charlie’s wife. It is not an idyllic childhood: death and misfortune exist, but this serves to strengthen the strong unity within the family. Tommo clearly hero-worships his older brother.

War arrives and changes everything. Charlie is forced to enlist after being blackmailed by the vengeful Colonel, the man whose estate they live on. Tommo, although underage, also enlists so he can be with and ‘look after’ his brother, since Molly is now pregnant.

At first, in training, war is a lark, but it soon takes on a more dreadful tone, leaving Tommo shell-shocked and Charlie unfairly court-martialled and executed. The ending is left open for the reader to decide what fate may lie ahead for Tommo.

Themes to look out for

- War
- Love
- Death
- Justice
- Guilt
- Time
- Memory and remembrance
- Strong versus weak
- Relationships
- Family
- Humanity versus inhumanity

Literary techniques

Presentation of character is achieved through

- What the character says
- What the character does
- What other characters say about them
- How other characters react to them
- How they are described in the narrative



Characters

Tommo

Tommo is the narrator of the story. He is presented as a gentle, sensitive and passive character. His language is full of what he 'can't do' in contrast to what Charlie 'can'. He watches while Charlie sets the traps, he sits while Charlie is 'busy' and is compared to a defenceless animal - 'I curl up in a ball like a hedgehog to protect myself'. At no time does Morpurgo ridicule him for not being as 'strong' as Charlie. Instead he is treated with great sympathy. Morpurgo uses the character of Tommo and Big Joe to highlight how some people in this world need looking after and should be looked after. He advocates that it is humane for the strong to protect the weak rather than attack and exploit them (as the crow does with the robin in the first chapter).

'Tommo' is a derivative of the name 'Tommy' given to the English 'Everyman' during the First World War. The fear and shell-shock that Tommo goes through at the end of the novel is not unique - many men during the Great War had similar experiences.

Charlie

He is the most important character in Tommo's life. Tommo 'clings' to him literally and metaphorically throughout the novel. He is hero-worshipped by Tommo, mentioned by name many times and Tommo often defers to Charlie's opinion, 'Charlie always thinks that's very funny.' Charlie is a natural leader; self-possessed, defiant, resourceful and with a strong sense of justice, like his mother. He is portrayed as possessing awe-inspiring characteristics, but these same characteristics often land him in trouble with the story's authority figures; they are either resentful or cannot cope with being defied and therefore punish him. Indeed, the Colonel's view of Charlie is that he is a 'ruffian' and a 'despicable thief'.

Molly

She is a bright light in their lives, full of love and showing gentleness to all members of the family. She inspires Tommo and makes him feel like he 'can' do things he feels he 'can't do' or is too shy to try, like tying his shoelace or jumping into the river.

Mother

She has a strong sense of morality of right and wrong. She believes in treating people fairly and is very measured in her opinions of others; she will not be drawn into disparaging the Colonel, but instead reminds the family that he puts a roof over their head. She is an industrious woman, well-liked and respected. She also symbolises humanity and pacifism within the novel - kind and patient towards Big Joe and refusing to let the Colonel beat her children. On the surface she is a woman in control of her emotions, but we see chinks of private mourning that only help to reinforce how courageous she truly is.

Big Joe

Big Joe is loving, kind and beautiful, but also suffers inner torments and fears that the reader can only begin to fathom. He is incredibly trusting, but also vulnerable.

Father

Despite dying early on in the novel, Father is portrayed through the family's anecdotes and recollections. His language is more informal than his wife's, he irreverently calls the Colonel a 'silly old fart'. It later transpires that his wife is probably from a different 'class' to her husband. He loves his children and they love him.

Colonel

He owns the land the Peacefuls live on; their cottage is tithed to his estate. The Colonel represents injustice and the landed class and is described in unflattering terms. He gives 'nasty' looks, according to Tommo, 'cracks his whip' and roars. Tommo states that 'No one at home ever spoke well of the Colonel...'. He shows a lack of real concern for those less well off than himself, but is not entirely without feeling, if somewhat misplaced and cold; he offers to put Big Joe in a lunatic asylum, thinking he is being helpful rather than brutal. He also allows the family to live on in the cottage, fulfilling his late wife's wishes and as the Mother acknowledges, '...he's a man of his word...'. He exploits his position and power later in the novel though when he vengefully demands Charlie enlists if they want to carry on living there.

Grandma Wolf

A sour, vile character who 'scowls', is 'ashamed' of her relatives and wears black. Morpurgo highlights through her treatment of the children, especially Big Joe, how cruel and damaging to the human spirit this type of character can be. She is inhumane and violent, beating Big Joe instead of trying to understand and love him. She 'hates' whereas Big Joe 'loves'. She has a 'lair', bears her teeth, has a moustache, rants and snores - not a flattering portrayal! There are no redeeming qualities to her character.

Sergeant 'Horrible' Hanley

He is Charlie's nemesis, 'chief tormentor' and eventual cause of his downfall. He is a man with 'eyes of steel' and a 'lashing voice'. Like all the other authority figures before him, he expects respect and obedience because of his position rather than for what he does.

Setting

The setting can

- Be a backdrop to the action
- Reflect characters' experiences
- Symbolise ideas the author wishes to convey
- Have its own culture and values
- Cause conflict and distress



Rural Devon

The first half of the novel is set in the close, confined community of the Colonel's estate and local village life. Views are parochial and narrow. There is a natural beauty that is often referred to and remembered when Tommo is fighting on the frontline. He also states how much he loves where he lives, part of his motivation for going to fight in the war.

World War One France/Belgium

The second half of the novel relocates symbolically through a 'dark tunnel' to the war in France and Belgium and the difference to Tommo's former setting couldn't be more extreme. This is a technique used deliberately by Morpurgo to highlight the alien world of war and the feeling of vulnerability within the men. It is a crowded world of discomfort, noise and ugliness.

Narrative techniques

The story is told in the first person narrative through the character of Tommo. This strengthens the illusion that the story is real and makes the story far more personal. The lower rank of soldier during the First World War did not have a 'voice' - Morpurgo gives them one in this novel.

Structure

Structure is the order or pattern in which a novel is put together and should

- Maintain the interest of the reader
- Move the action from one episode to the next
- Arouse a reader's interest in character or situation
- Create a moment of crisis
- Create expectation or surprise



The structure is a key feature of this novel. First of all, it is a novel that can be broken down into two sections: 'Growing up in rural Devon' and 'the War'. The first is needed to add poignancy to the events of the second. In the second section, the events and effects of the war dominate. The first section offers premonitions of what happens later. For example, Charlie getting the cane at school for protecting Tommo against the school bully echoes later events during the war when Charlie gets in trouble with Sergeant Hanley for protecting Tommo. This serves to highlight the steadfastness of Charlie's character and links the two sections of the novel.

Secondly, the inclusion of letters from home are a structural device used by Morpurgo to highlight Tommo's distance from home and give a window into the feelings of other characters.

However, the most interesting structural device is the clever use of two time frames, a present and a past, that begin at different points in the story, but converge at the end. The first time frame, the 'present confessional', expands as the novel progresses, shifting the emphasis from the past to the present as the present situation presses on Tommo more. The author gradually reveals that the two time frames are linked and that the narrator is the same person, Tommo, awaiting his brother's execution, looking back on their life together in an attempt to keep him alive for as long as he possibly can. The novel is a tribute to Charlie and those he represents.



Language

The use of past and present tense is a key language feature of the novel. There are two narrative time frames running in *Private Peaceful*. The first one, the 'confessional', is always told using the present tense. The other, the 'recollection', uses a mix of past and present tense. Present tense is used more in the first few chapters of the novel, and past tense as the novel continues. Tommo uses the present tense in an attempt to keep the memory of Charlie alive. If he were to talk about him in the past tense then it would be an acknowledgment that his brother is no longer going to exist. Slipping back into past tense could be interpreted in different ways: Perhaps Tommo is letting go of Charlie or finding it difficult to keep him 'alive'.

However, much later in the novel, the tense changes momentarily back to the present tense when Tommo begins to describe the fighting he was involved in that left him shell-shocked. Reverting to the present tense during the fighting scene highlights that it haunts him still - it is part of Tommo's present and the event has a profound impact both upon him, and on Charlie's future.

Morpurgo uses the typical language of World War One to add realism and to highlight the dreadful conditions the soldiers endured.

There is a lack of physical description of characters, instead Tommo focuses more on what they do. This could be because Tommo knows what the people around him look like, so there is no need to go into detail, adding to the idea that this is an authentic memoir. Also, a person is more importantly defined by what they do rather than what they look like.

Paragraph links (repeating language at the end of one paragraph and the beginning of another) is a sophisticated technique to show that ideas, time or character are connected somehow. For example, in Chapter *Twenty to Eleven*, the first line of the first narrative states, 'I don't want to eat...' and the first line of the second narrative begins, 'Big Joe ate...'. In Chapter *Nearly Quarter Past Eleven*, the first lines are 'There's a mouse...' and 'Grandma Wolf hated mice.' Later, Morpurgo links the end of this chapter with the beginning of the next. The chapter ends with the boys saying their 'prayers' and 'Amen' for Molly, who is ill, while the next chapter, *Ten to Midnight* begins with 'I'm not sure I ever really believed in God...'.

The paragraph links indicate that it is the same character narrating both stories and it also acts as a technique to show how memory is triggered.



Special feature

Themes and motifs

A novel is not just about plot or character, but also serves as a device in which the novelist can express themselves about certain ideas, issues or morals. Sometimes the author will have a clear message they want to convey about a particular issue, sometimes they will simply present ideas and leave it up to the reader to decide.

Themes

War: Although it doesn't explicitly appear until half-way through the novel, its existence has hovered from the opening paragraph. Even the title of the novel refers to the army status of one of the characters.

Family love: There is a profound sense of fairness, patience and love in the Peaceful household that pervades the novel. The family cope with every adversity together and squeeze what joy they can out of life, appreciating its beauty. They symbolise a powerful antidote to the inhumanity and injustice in the novel. Morpurgo shows how beautiful, noble and life-affirming love can be, but it does not stop bad things happening. On the contrary, love can be a character's downfall: Father dies trying to save Tommo, and Charlie is executed because he refused to obey orders and leave his injured brother.

Humanity and inhumanity: This theme occurs throughout the novel in different guises: the treatment of Big Joe by Grandma Wolf, the shooting of Bertha by the Colonel and Sergeant Hanley's exacting and brutal vengeance on Charlie. This is juxtaposed against the profound humanity and love of life found in the Peacefuls.

Guilt: Tommo feels immense guilt for his father's death throughout the whole of the novel and it is only at the end when he confesses and is absolved by Charlie that the burden is relieved. He blames himself for Charlie getting caught poaching because he fell asleep.

Memory and remembrance: It is of the utmost importance to Tommo to keep the memory of his father and Charlie, as well as his family back home, alive. Storytelling is one way of preserving a person; keeping their spirit alive. It also serves as a comfort to him.

Justice and injustice: The poaching scenes show the difference between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' - the Peacefuls are struggling to survive while the Colonel has 'plenty' and will not share/open up his grounds, but punishes instead.

Motifs

Birds: This motif has very mixed connotations. There is a dead crow in the first chapter and the owl later on signifies foreboding and death. However, larks represent positive ideas of freedom and joy.

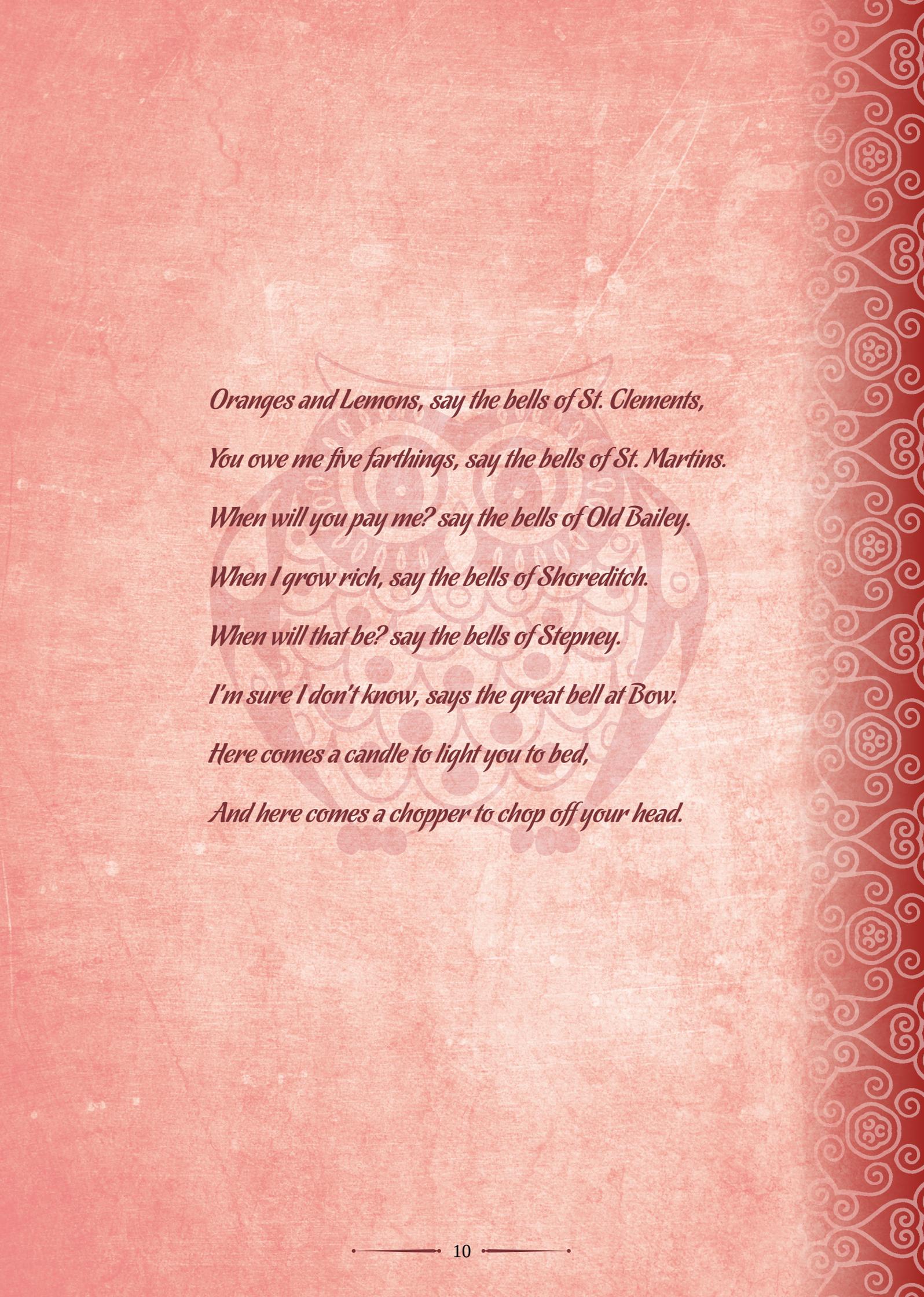
Flowers: These are used when Tommo remembers and describes his parents, Big Joe, and happy, idyllic memories and moments. They have a positive connotation.

Oranges and lemons: This song initially belongs to Big Joe, something he sings to himself when he is happy or to soothe himself. It is picked up by the whole family and becomes an anthem for defiance and togetherness in the face of adversity.

Death: There are many occurrences treated in different ways: Father, a mouse, Bertha, the Colonel's wife, unknown soldiers and finally, Charlie.

A motif is a recurring image that symbolises a theme, for example, the characters sing 'Oranges and Lemons' whenever they are in a difficult position or showing defiance.





*Oranges and Lemons, say the bells of St. Clements,
You owe me five farthings, say the bells of St. Martins.
When will you pay me? say the bells of Old Bailey.
When I grow rich, say the bells of Shoreditch.
When will that be? say the bells of Stepney.
I'm sure I don't know, says the great bell at Bow.
Here comes a candle to light you to bed,
And here comes a chopper to chop off your head.*



Activities for children

Before reading

Ideas for getting started

Engaging with the world of the novel

Remember, remember

Visit a war memorial to find out the names of men who died during the First World War. Choose three to five names from the memorial and research their names using the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website.

Find out why poppies are used as a symbol for remembrance. Why was this flower chosen and when does the tradition of remembrance date back to?

Create a timeline of important events between 1914 and 1918.



Debate

What is conflict? Is it possible to resolve conflict without using force or aggression?

*Is it important to remember? What is your strongest memory?
What is the strongest sense for triggering memory?*

*Who has been the most important person in your life so far?
How has this person helped you?*

Pictures and objects

Explore photographs from the First World War. Compare similarities and differences between the pictures and identify any features which help to date when a photograph was taken. Think of questions you would like to ask the people in the images. Discuss what you think their emotions might have been at the time the photograph was taken.

Explore First World War enlistment posters and discuss how persuasive they might have been to people at the time.

Facts

*What can you find out about Michael Morpurgo?
What other books has he written?*

A Private Peaceful really existed. Can you find out anything about him?

What is shell shock? Make a list of the symptoms and find out how soldiers were treated for the condition.

When did the First World War take place? Which countries were involved and how did it start?

During reading

Stopping places

Developing understanding of narrative and literary techniques



Read to the end of Chapter Five Past Ten

Focus on...

- First impressions of the novel
- Morpurgo's literary style



Things to discuss

Narrative: Who is 'I'? Is the 'I' in the first paragraph the same 'I' who tells the rest of the story in the chapter? What questions would you like to ask the 'I' character?

Structure: Look at the chapter title - why do you think it tells the time? Could this be important?

Story: What do you think the novel is going to be about? What do you think of the first chapter?

Language: A sense of desperation and urgency is created in the very first paragraph with the use of short sentences and emphatic negatives 'won't waste', 'shan't sleep', 'won't dream', 'mustn't...'. Why do you think the character feels so desperate? What might have happened before this situation? Why might 'tonight' be so important to the character? Do you think this sense of urgency will continue?

Morpurgo shifts tense a lot in the novel and the first chapter is no exception. Look for examples and discuss why they occur when they do. Do you feel more or less involved in the story when reading it in the present tense?

Morpurgo shows that there is a way of keeping people alive: through memory and stories, and he uses the present tense to emphasise this point. Father is written about in the past tense for most of the chapter, except near the end with 'Father loves larks'.

Motif: There is a recurring motif of birds in this chapter and throughout the novel. Highlight any examples you can find. What ideas do they depict? Is there a contrast of ideas? Why choose birds to depict these ideas?

Tone: What mysteries does Morpurgo hint at? How does it make you feel?

Character: What are the differences between Charlie and Tommo? For example, Charlie 'can', Tommo 'can't'. Do you blame Tommo for the death of his father? Look at the description of his father's death - how does it make you feel? He never tells you how he feels, just what he does and sees. Why do you think that is? How do you think he feels?

The reader is introduced to the two of the authority figures: Mr. Munnings and the Colonel. How do you feel about them? How do you think the writer feels about them?

Setting: What do you think of Tommo's childhood world? Look out for images of nature and death. Why does Morpurgo link the beauty of one with the grimness of the other?

You could...

Choose a motif or theme and follow it in the novel, noting when it occurs. Discuss what messages the author might be trying to get across by using the motif.



2

Read up to the end of Chapter *Ten to Midnight*

Focus on...

- The changes taking place in the story
- The use of motif



Things to discuss

Theme: Why do you think Tommo's not sure if he believes there is a God? Why do you think he needs to believe in a heaven more than ever 'tonight'? Is religion and God the last hope in a hopeless situation? What's the difference between praying and 'crossed fingers' in your opinion?

Character: Tommo blames himself again for things that go wrong; this time it is when Charlie gets caught poaching because Tommo fell asleep on watch. Why does Morpurgo do this?



'psst...'

It is an important precursor to events later in the novel.

Who does Tommo remind you of when he stares at Mr. Munnings in 'sullen defiance' after getting six strokes of the ruler across his hands for having humbugs in class? Why has Morpurgo linked Tommo in this way to Charlie?

Structure: Why doesn't Morpurgo reveal the conversation between the Mother and the Colonel to the reader? How does it make you view the Mother? How does it make you view the narrative - does it make it more believable that it is from the point of view of the son or less? What do you think happened? Do we need to know?

Motif: An idyllic Summer, and the motif of flowers and nature, is described just before everything suddenly changes. Why does Morpurgo do this? Does it make the loss of Charlie and Molly's company more or less painful for Tommo?

The yellow aeroplane signifies that technology is beginning to encroach upon their rural, pastoral life.

Morpurgo finishes the chapter with the motif of birds again, this time an owl hooting. What might this signify?



'psst...'

In literature, owls traditionally signify foreboding and death. How might this link in to what you know so far in the novel?

Language: Discuss how the imagery of war creeps into his memories and taints them. Tommo says, 'I loved mud, the smell of it, the feel of it, the larking about in it. Not any more.' It has different connotations for him now.

What does this suggest about war?

Prediction: What do you think the consequences are going to be for Charlie after taking Bertha?

You could...

Match quotation cards with emotion cards and explain reasons for your choices. For example, when the Colonel has to deliver the news to the mother that she must come and work at the big house if she wishes to remain in the tithed house, he '...wasn't looking at Mother as he spoke, but down at his top hat which he was smoothing with his sleeve.' Which emotion card would best describe how the Colonel is feeling: Embarrassed? Shy? Humble?

3

Read to the end of Chapter *Fourteen Minutes Past Two*

Focus on...

- *The presentation of war*



Things to discuss

Theme: Three pictures of war are created in the last two chapters:

- The attitudes of those on the homefront in England
- The soldiers' training before going off to fight
- In France/Belgium on the frontline.

What are the attitudes of people at home about the war? Highlight words to do with war. What do they suggest?

Language: Highlight the language Tommo uses to describe the soldiers he sees in the march in his village. What does Tommo have in common with the soldiers?

Structure: Why does Morpurgo include descriptions of the soldiers 'larking' around in training before they reach the frontline?



'psst...'

To heighten the feeling of tragedy, authors often use contrast: the lightheartedness of the training session makes the grim reality of the frontline more shocking for the reader.

Character: How does your own knowledge of the war affect the way you feel about the characters when they think being in the army is 'a real lark'?

4

Read to the end of Chapter *Nearly Four O'Clock*

Focus on...

- Comparing attitudes to war with the realities of war



Things to discuss

Theme: What were the realities of war for the men? How do you think Morpurgo feels about this?

All the time, Morpurgo portrays the German soldiers in a humane, vulnerable way. Why do you think he does this?



'psst...'

Morpurgo presents the reader with a humane depiction of the German soldiers to show that they are not the 'real' enemy - war is.

Character: Who does Tommo and his 'voice' represent?

How do you feel about what Mother and Molly have to say about the war in their letters to Tommo? What do you think Morpurgo's reasons might be for including their letters and showing their point of view? How typical is their attitude towards the war? How are we, as a reader, meant to react to the content of their letters?

Why do you think Morpurgo 'killed' Anna and many of the other characters we meet in this section? How do you feel about their deaths and the way they were described?



Read to the end of the novel

Focus on...

- How the novel ends
- Your response to the novel as a whole



Things to discuss

Structure: How far can we believe everything that Tommo tells us?

Why does Morpurgo rarely tell the reader how the characters feel, making us infer instead?

Why does Tommo not spend time describing what the characters look like but instead concentrate on what they do?

Would the story have worked just as well if it had been told in the third person? Why do you think Morpurgo chose to tell it from the first person? What does that tell you about how the author feels about war and what happened to the Peacefuls?

Character: Is Charlie a hero? Does he create his own downfall?

Who do you think 'Private Peaceful' refers to: Tommo or Charlie? Does it matter?

What's behind a name? Why do you think the family are called 'Peaceful'? Is it apt?

Prediction: What did you think of the end of the novel? Knowing what you know about the outcome of the Battle of the Somme, do you think Tommo will survive?

Setting: What were the values and rules of Tommo's world in rural Devon? Consider Molly's pregnancy, Big Joe, the war, the class system and Molly's parents.

What conflict is caused by the local setting? The land is owned by the Colonel - how does this affect things and what might it symbolise?

What does this world look like? Was it important to the characters? How did you imagine it?

Did the Peaceful family fit in with the world they inhabit or are they in opposition?

Structure: Why does Morpurgo use the present tense when describing something that has obviously happened in the past? What effect does it have?

At what point in the novel did Morpurgo stop writing in the present tense in the second time frame? Why did he do that? Why did he pick it up again when describing the fighting during the First World War?

Why do we need the first section of the novel? How does it impact upon how you responded to events in the second part of the novel?

What purpose did including the letters from home serve?

Story: Were there any events that were unexpected? How did you feel at the end of the story?

Memorable quotes

Molly likes Big Joe. Now I know for sure that I will love her till the day I die.

From the day Grandma Wolf moved in, our whole world changed.

Big Joe always said hello, loudly to everyone. It's how he was.

'Go on, son. You go and fight. It's every man's duty to fight when his country calls...'

Sixty-five minutes to go. How shall I live them?

I had been an onlooker. No longer.

Why would I want to shoot a German?

I had to prove myself. I had to prove myself to myself.

All I know is that I must survive. I have promises to keep.

After reading

Create & imagine

Developing a personal response to the novel

Dreams of home

Choose three memorable events from Tommo's life at home, before the war began. Use drama to create a still image for each chosen moment. Use movement and music to sequence the three still images into a 'dream' of happier times for Tommo whilst he is waiting for the dreaded morning to arrive.

What home comforts would a soldier miss whilst he was away from home? Make a tin with personal items you think a soldier might have with him. What would you miss if you were far away from home?

Your country needs you

Write a speech for a recruiting officer addressing a crowd of men during the First World War. Your job is to persuade all eligible men to enlist. Think carefully about how you might convince them to join the war effort.

Imagine you are a young soldier who has just signed up. Improvise the conversation with your family when you let them know you are going away to fight.



Poppies

Search for images of poppies or photograph real ones. Use digital software to experiment with enlarging, stretching or adding interesting textural detail to a poppy image and display your finished work.

Find historic black and white images of warfare. Display your chosen selection alongside beautiful images of nature and discuss the effect of the contrast between the images.

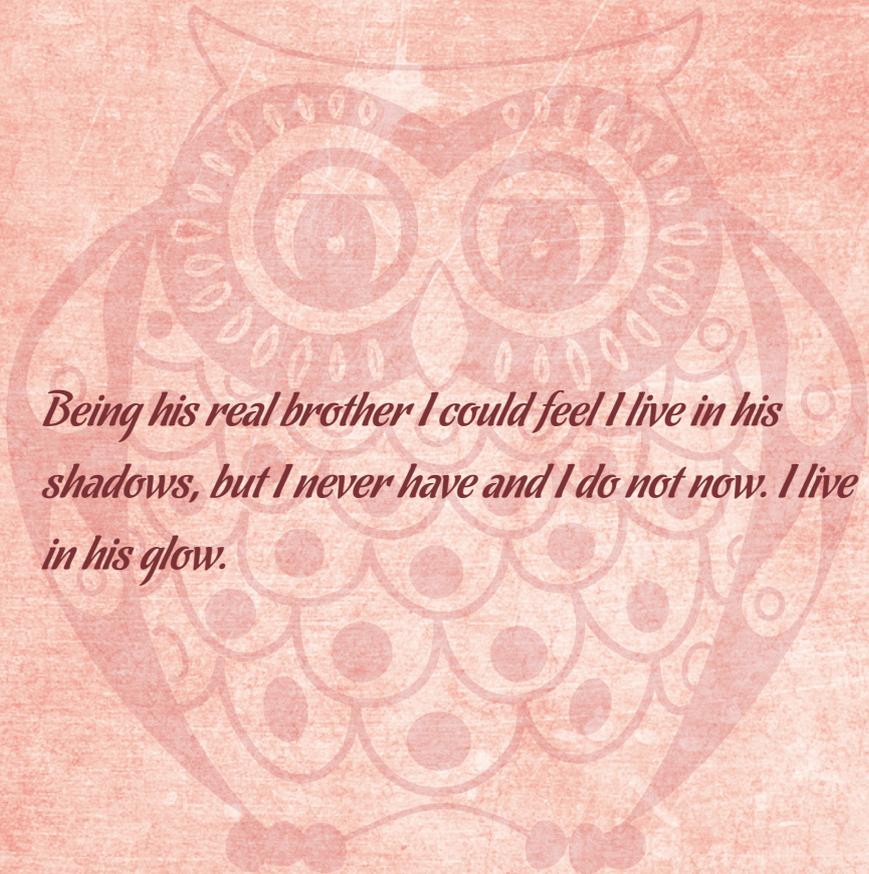


This house believes...

Organise a formal debate using the motion that 'it is the duty of every man to fight for his country'. Choose whether to speak for or against the motion and prepare your argument carefully, supporting your point of view with factual evidence and examples.







Being his real brother I could feel I live in his shadows, but I never have and I do not now. I live in his glow.

“Full of warmth as well as grief, conveying vividly how precious it is to be alive.”

Sunday Times

“This was one of the rare books that actually made me cry.”

Jake, age 12

“Passionate, beguiling and moving, the book is an unflinching examination of the horrors of war.”

Booktrust

“Written from the heart.”

Observer

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