

POPPY FIELD

By Michael Morpurgo, illustrated by Michael Foreman

Themes

Family, remembrance, places, past and present, the legacy of war, healing and hope.

Did You Know?

Michael Morpurgo OBE is one of the UK's top children's authors. He has written over 100 books and is especially famous for his stories about war, which include *Private Peaceful*, *Flamingo Boy*, *The Story of Adolphus Tips* and his most famous war novel, *War Horse*.

War Horse explores the role of horses in the First World War. It was made into a hugely successful, multi-award-winning play using life-sized horse puppets. It was later turned into a film directed by Steven Spielberg.

Michael Morpurgo has worked with illustrator Michael Foreman many times. Their books together include *Lucky Button*, *The Mozart Question* and *The Story of Adolphus Tips*. Michael Foreman is also well-known for the picture book *War Game*, which he wrote and illustrated. It is about the famous Christmas football game in the First World War trenches – a moment that is also explored in *Poppy Field*. Michael Morpurgo and Michael Foreman have also jointly produced a picture book about this - *The Best Christmas Present in the World*.

Ideas for using this book in your classroom:

In Flanders Fields:

Read the poem *In Flanders Fields*. What do the children think of it? Talk about the last stanza, particularly the lines 'To you from failing hands we throw/The torch; be yours to hold it high.' What do the children think this means? What obligation does it place upon the living?

With more advanced learners: talk about 'the foe'. Who is it? Does the poem advocate continuing the war? If so, how has a pro-war poem been reclaimed as an anti-war one?

Living through history:

The story explores how one family's personal history is linked with the 'great event' of a world-shaking war. Link the story to a history lesson about the First World War, explaining how around sixteen million people died and families all over Europe were touched. You could explore the geography of the war: how towns were bombarded and how the trenches cut through land that had been people's homes, turning them into battlefields and creating millions of refugees. Can the children imagine this? Ask them to draw it or write a story about it.

Remembrance:

Poppy Field explores several ways of remembering: family history, the poppy symbol, memorial events, literature and storytelling.

Ask the children to talk about this in groups and think of more ways in which the memory of the war might be preserved, given that so few people who were alive at the

time now survive. There are memorials, museums, images, audio/video recordings, physical artifacts, works of art and poems/fictional books like this one. How about the huge ceramic poppy installation at the Tower of London?

You could do this in conjunction with a trip to a local museum, or the Imperial War Museum.

Do the children think reading *Poppy Field* will help them understand and remember the war? Ask them to write a short essay about this.

If children in your class come from outside the UK, they could explain to the rest of the class what Remembrance Day events happen in their country of origin, or if there are alternative events to remember the war or significant historical events.

Open the discussion up to explore remembrance outside the context of war. What are some ways of keeping significant cultural memories fresh? You could talk about fairy tales, songs and carols, symbolic objects (Christmas trees, corn dollies, Easter eggs). Also, events surrounding the act of remembering or marking a date: anniversaries, funerals, bonfire night and even birthdays or Christmas. How do these things help us remember?

Genre:

What do the children think about fiction as a medium for exploring history? Do they think reading a fact book would have been as powerful? What emotions did they feel when they read the story? What do they feel are the advantages and disadvantages of exploring history through fiction?

Discuss the impact of the poem *In Flanders Fields*. Why is it so powerful and effective? How can it be used? Some tips: it is easy to remember and quick to recite, and includes vivid imagery and a call to the reader.

Place and memory:

The poppy field is a place of beauty and of death. Both good and bad things have happened there. Marten, the boy in the story, can't bear to go in it, but for his parents it was a place of joy. How would the children feel about entering the poppy field? Can a place with this many ghosts ever be normal again?

Look at some maps and aerial photos of the old First World War battlefields today and discuss the impact that the war still has on the land. Talk about how Marten's grandparents 'worked the farm... filled in the trenches and shell holes, brought the land back to health, replanted the trees'. How do these everyday acts bring hope back to a place of death?

Ask the children to think about their local area. Are there places that serve as memorials, markers or reminders of an event? Then try exploring some forgotten history. Is there an old plague pit, gallows, iron age fort, prison, hospital, theatre, train line, underground station or other feature that people walk past every day, oblivious? Does the past carry an echo, or has the place been entirely reclaimed for the living?

Symbols:

Go round the class and ask children to say or write down what the poppy symbol means to them. Did they all know about it before reading *Poppy Field*? Write the answers on the board (you could draw broad categories as petal shapes) and see how people's ideas intersect. Is there a general consensus? Do the children think it is effective?

Ask the children to think of reasons why the poppy is an appropriate symbol for remembrance. They might discuss its history, its colour, the places where it grows, and the way that poppies can be used en masse and individually to relate the huge numbers of the fallen to individual casualties of war.

Ask children to recall some symbols that have cultural or emotional power for them.

Some examples might be:

Rainbow

CND/peace symbol

Paris attacks symbol (Eiffel Tower)

V sign (Churchill)

Logos for major companies

What do these symbols mean to the children? Do they resonate emotionally? If so, why?

How many can the children draw or describe from memory?

If they were to design a symbol for remembrance, what would they choose? Ask them to draw their chosen symbols individually or in small groups, and then assemble all of the drawings into a Peace Wall.

History in the present day:

In the book, Marten's father is killed by an unexploded World War I shell – a shocking example of the past reaching into the present. Can the children think of other examples of a long-ago event affecting people or places many years later? Some examples might be the discovery of the body of King Richard III in Leicester, the discovery of the wreck of the *Titanic*, or modern architecture in a part of town destroyed in the Blitz.