

## ***Impossible!* Michelle Magorian**

### **Teachers' notes**

These teaching resources, with ideas for discussion and activities, cover themes from the book, including relationships between the characters, and aspects of life and theatre at the end of the 1950s, with comparisons to today. At the end are suggestions for further reading.

***Impossible!*** is a story of London's theatre world in 1959 as 12 year old Josie tries to find success as an actress. She attends a finishing-style stage school where she is firmly told she has no acting ability. Fortunately she finds herself cast as a boy in an American comedy but in a case of mistaken identity she is kidnapped and imprisoned in a dockside warehouse. Managing to escape, she and a fellow runaway take refuge in the Theatre Royal, Stratford. They are offered work by the legendary Joan Littlewood, founder of the Theatre Workshop Company, and here she realises how thrilling acting can be. Much to Josie's surprise this leads to a role in a Saturday-morning film. However, the kidnappers haven't given up yet and they are hot on Josie's trail. Their pursuit of her leads to dramatic climax on the Thames - before Josie is safely back with her family and friends and the exciting offer of a place at the Italia Conti stage school.

**Michelle Magorian** is the author of the award-winning novels *Goodnight Mr Tom* and *Just Henry*. She has also written *Back Home*, *A Little Love Sing*, *Cuckoo in the Nest* and *A Spoonful of Jam* (which is about Josie's sister Elsie)..

*Goodnight Mr Tom* has recently been re-issued as a Puffin Book, Stories to Last a Lifetime. It has been translated into thirteen languages and has been televised and made into a play as well as a musical.

Michelle is an actress as well as an author and has trained at the Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama, and Marcel Marceau's L'Ecole Internationale de Mime in Paris. She lives in Petersfield in Hampshire.

She has a website at [www.michellemagorian.com](http://www.michellemagorian.com) where you can find interviews with her about writing *Impossible!*

## **From readers and reviewers**

*"(Michelle Magorian's) unflinching realistic approach and her warmth and humour makes her books unputdownable. In this, Josie must dodge kidnappers, mistaken identity and a gang of villains to pursue her dream of becoming an actress" Sunday Express*

*"Part theatre story, part adventure and part homage to Joan Littlewood, the trail-blazing maverick director and founder of the Theatre Workshop ...an immersive read, featuring a wonderful cast of characters and great dialogue, in a beautifully written novel, full of incident and humour" The Guardian*

*"As I got into the story, I could hardly put it down. There's tension and excitement, both on stage and in the events off-stage, and almost 600 pages flew past so that I finished it within three days."*

*"Buy this for any stage-struck youngsters - it will tell them so much about acting and what makes you good at it - or buy it for anyone who likes a proper adventure with real characters, tension and excitement, humour, and insight into the workings of the human heart. Loved it, loved it, loved it."*

*"Love how the book shows how adults can have a stick in the mud opinion and don't want to learn from the next generation"*

## **Impossible! Introducing and reading the book**

Look at the blurb, set the scene, and read Chapter One either together or individually. Talk about the people and settings being introduced in this chapter, to get people going on reading the whole book.

Then read this book all the way through, letting everyone read and experience the book for themselves.

Try not to interrupt the flow of the story but you may want to stop every so often to gather people's responses, understanding, and questions, and talk about what has happened so far. At the end allow some time for people to reflect and think about their responses to the book.

## **Talking about the book: some book-talk questions**

Get everyone to share their first responses to this book. This could be with the whole class – or students could discuss in small groups, and then share key feelings and questions with everyone.

Ask lots of open questions to get people talking and encourage discussion about feelings and responses to the story, the characters, and the writing. Explain that there are no right or wrong answers – we will all have our own feelings and opinions about the book, and the things we like, or don't like.

Here are some questions you might use.

- How did you feel when reading this book? And when you'd finished it?
- Which parts of the story do you remember most?
- Did you skip any parts? Which ones?
- Was there anything that took you by surprise?
- Were there any parts you didn't make sense of?
- Did any parts make you laugh/cry? Which parts?
- What was the thing you most liked finding out from the book?
- What kind of a book did you think it was going to be?
- Did you feel swept up by this story, all the time wanting to know what happened next?
- Are there parts you want to read over again?
- If you gave up on this book can you say why?
- Does the story work for you? Could you follow it? What does the book say to you?
- Has reading the book changed or affected you? At the end of the story did you feel as if you'd shared a real experience?

## THINGS TO TALK ABOUT

**Why do you think the book is called *Impossible!* ?**

### Inspiration

*'Ever since she had read the first of the Arthur Ransome books, 'Swallows and Amazons', her dream had been to go camping and sailing.'* (p29)

Talk with students about the books which have inspired their current ambitions – and things which they have already done.

### Women's role

*'Marriage was being stuck at home baking cakes while your husband went out, did exciting work and had cake waiting for him as a reward when he got home.'* (p31)

This is what Josie says about women and marriage in the 1950s. Look also at what her Auntie Win says about how the estate agent reacted when she said she was buying her flat herself? (p23)

Compare this with what women can do today. What differences do people think we now have between men and women's expectations?

## **'No coloureds'**

*'They walked past shabby, run-down lodging houses with signs outside saying NO IRISH. NO BLACKS. NO COLOURED. NO DOGS.'* (p203)

Would you see signs like this today?

*'So you know what segregation means?'... 'It means the separation of black people and coloureds from the white people.'* (p233)

Mr Beauvoisin explains how his parents in America had to move to a poorer area because he was coloured – meaning *'a mixture of black and white.'* (p233)

Talk about the changes in attitudes and legislation in the UK and USA since the 1950s. Explore attitudes today – still complex – eg. immigrants, refugees

## **Revelation**

*'It was the cast of 'Make Me An Offer'...and they were doing the knees up kind of acting Mrs Havilland disapproved of so thoroughly.*

*The odd thing was that they didn't appear to be acting at all. They were real people at a sale, and the sale was happening right in front of her eyes, and although they spoke and moved naturally around one another, Miss Littlewood hadn't given them any moves...Witnessing the way they performed, it was as though Josie had walked out of a dark prison into the sunlight and had been filled with an energy so powerful that it made her want to leap in the air and push aside imaginary cobwebs.'* (p219)

Seeing the Theatre Workshop opened Josie's eyes to the possibilities of acting.

Talk with students about

- a) experiences that have changed their feelings and opened up possibilities
- b) what kind of acting does Mrs Havilland, in *Impossible!*, teach, which is so different from Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop approach?

## **Your favourite film, TV, and theatre**

Talk about people's favourite films, TV programmes, or theatre plays today.

## **TV Adverts**

*'...Murray Mint! Murray Mint!' she sang. 'Too good to hurry mint.'*

ITV was the first TV channel to have regular adverts during its programmes – some popular adverts in the fifties had jingles and slogans like the Murray Mints one which Josie sings.

There was the ad for Pepsodent toothpaste: *'You'll wonder where the yellow went, when you brush your teeth with Pepsodent'*, and the one for Strand cigarettes showing a man walking along a dark wet deserted London street: *'You're never alone with a Strand.'*

Collect a list of recent popular advertising slogans – eg. ‘*Because you’re worth it*’, ‘*Simples!*’, ‘*Just do it*’, ‘*He should have gone to Specsavers.*’

Do people think that adverts and slogans encourage you to buy the products?

## THINGS TO DO

### Characters in *Impossible!*

Josie

Aunt Win

Mr Beauvoisin

Joan Littlewood

Hilda

Esmeralda

Scowler and Moustache

On a flipchart list these characters and talk about their part in the story.

Collect words to describe each of them, and examples from the story to back up these descriptions.

Ask people to put themselves in Josie’s shoes, and come up with words for how they would feel if they were

- a) snubbed by classmates
- b) about to do an audition
- c) kidnapped!

### Popular shows in the 1950s

*Impossible!* refers to several musical shows of the time: *West Side Story* (p10), *My Fair Lady* (p10) and *The Sound of Music*. All of these are still produced today – do students know and enjoy any of them?

Make a list of shows which are in the West End today – eg. *The Lion King*, *Mamma Mia*, *Billy Elliot* – many of them long-standing favourites.

Which do people like best? – maybe through film rather than live theatre.

What might be the reasons for the popularity of these shows?

### Television

Imagine having just two channels to choose from! Both only in black and white!

What are the differences between BBC and ITV, as shown in this book?

Today we have numerous channels and flexibility in how we watch them – list the TV possibilities available to us today – eg. recording programmes to watch later.

## Films

Josie gets a part playing twins in a 'Saturday-morning' film. In the 50s and 60s many cinemas ran a Saturday morning programme showing films for children – some cinemas still do this. Many of these films were produced by the Children's Film Foundation, and ABC cinemas had a Saturday children's club called the ABC Minors – with their own special song!

*"We are the boys and girls all known as*

*Minors of the ABC*

*And every Saturday all line up*

*To see the films we like and shout aloud with glee"*

(See <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/sep/09/childrens-film-foundation>)

## Write a page of screenplay for *Impossible!* – or a storyboard

In page 434 is an excerpt of Josie's script for the screenplay of the Saturday-morning film she is acting in.

Parts of *Impossible!* would also work well as a film or TV play. Have a go at writing some screenplay for it, or creating a storyboard.

Students could choose any passage from the book – for example around page 181 where Josie is kidnapped, or scenes on the Thames from page 512.

Here are some tips for writing a screenplay:

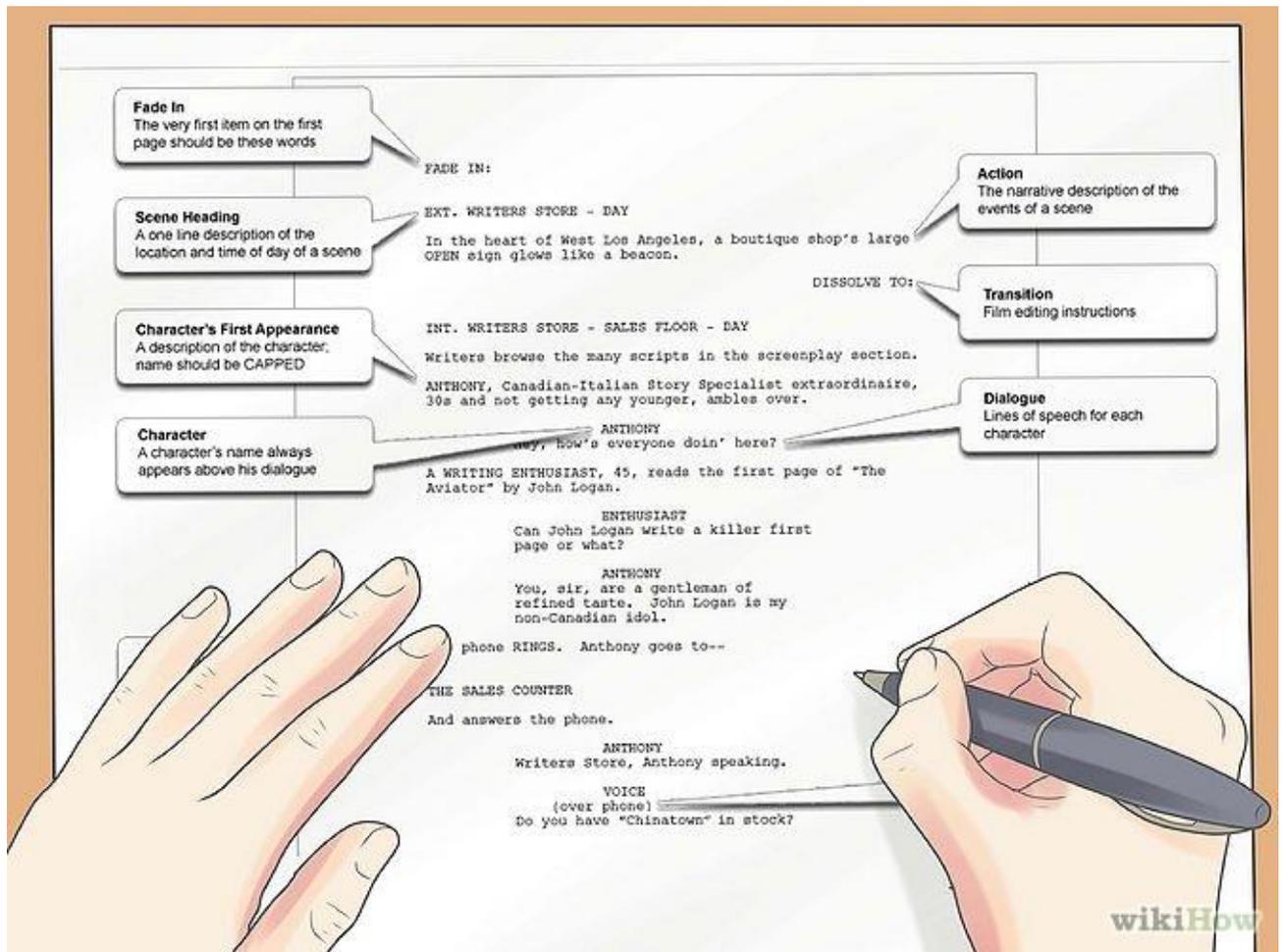
- First, read through the passage and picture it in your mind
- Mark up the passage. What scenes you are going to have? How they will link together? eg. dissolve or cut from one scene to the next.
- It's useful to sketch out a plan, with words and pictures
- Create brief scene headings and character descriptions.
- Identify the dialogue – you may want to add in more; and you may want to add in a voice-over for some of the main character's inner thoughts.

See <http://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Script>

And some tips for presentation:

- Use a clear font
- Make indentations so that it is clear which is dialogue
- Have a 'slug line' before each scene, saying what's important
- Put the characters' names in capitals
- Put instructions in brackets – eg: (Pause)

## An illustration of a page of screenplay...



## ...and some suggestions for starting your page:

FADE IN:

THE BACK OF A FILTHY OLD VAN

JOSIE, twelve, being tossed from side to side of the van. Very little light  
In the driver's cab are SCOWLER, bald-headed with square jaw, and  
MOUSTACHE, with a moustache

SCOWLER

How much d'yer fink 'e'll give us fer 'im?

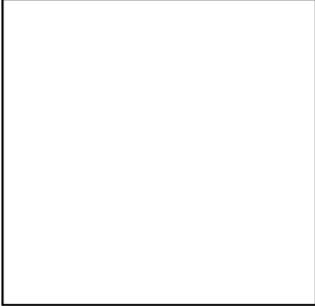
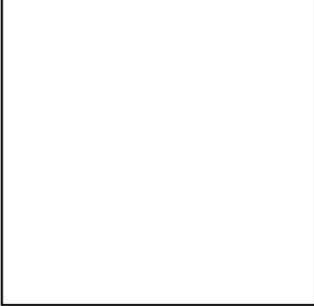
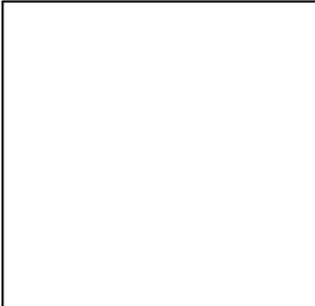
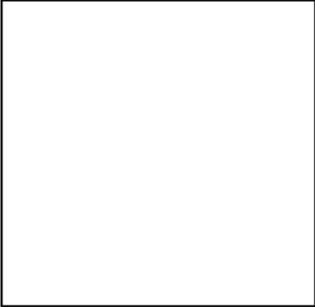
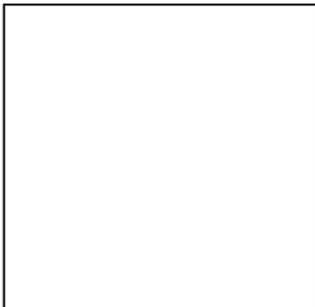
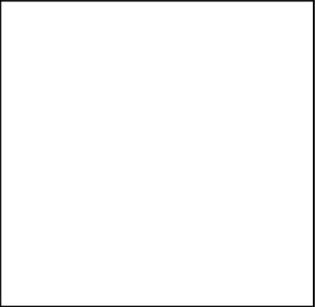
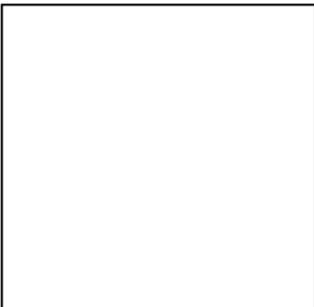
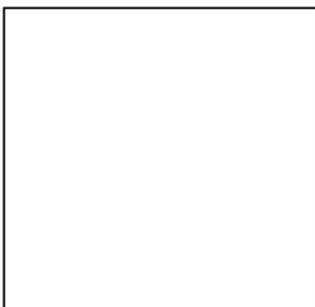
JOSIE (whisper)

Larry!

AUNTIE WIN (voiceover, as if in Josie's head)

You can identify them. You know too much.

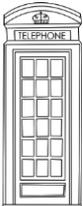
**... or you could storyboard your scene, using this template**

		
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**Then and now**

Here are some things from the story which were known and used in 1959 – some are still with us today.

Use this template for finding out more about each item – and suggest what people are more likely to use in their place today

1959 description.....	2015 – still used? Or something else?
<p><b>Gramophone (p9)</b></p> 	
<p><b>Formica laminate (p20)</b></p> 	
<p><b>Premium Bonds</b></p> <p>££££££££££</p>	
<p><b>Matchbox cars</b></p> 	
<p><b>'Sooty' puppet</b></p> 	
<p><b>Telephone boxes</b></p> 	

## Girl Guide activities

*Being a Girl Guide was the only way she would be able to find out what it was like to sleep under canvas and cook out in the open, and if she passed certain tests as a Guide, she could be a Sea Ranger when she was older, and learn to sail. (p29)*

Josie very much enjoys being a Girl Guide and learns many skills which prove really useful to her in her adventures and in the danger she gets into. Here are some of them, for students to have a go at for themselves:

### Kim's Game (p91 & 184)

This game trains you to observe carefully so that you can remember the things you have seen. *Impossible!* Gives a very detailed description of how the game works.

*'You need to remember at least nine of the twelve objects...I'm starting you with twelve so you can gradually work up to thirty.'* (p91)

### Semaphore (p156)

*'...for signalling long distances there's also semaphore'*

Semaphore comes in handy when Josie needs a code for a secret message to her friend. Find out more about this signalling code and the semaphore alphabet – have a go at decoding the word below, then make up your own secret message.



### Stalking (p149)

*...she studied her notebook with the stalking information she had written down at the last Guide meeting...'Invisibility,' she read. 'Blending with your background.'*

Josie practises stalking by following Mr Lovatt-Pendlebury in the station. Here are two games where people can practise their stalking skills.

- *Grandma's Footsteps/Statues* – one person faces the wall and the rest start a distance away and try to sneak up on them – they have to 'freeze' as soon as the person at the wall turns round to look at them. If they are seen moving they are 'out'. The winner is the first to get right up to the wall without being spotted.
- *Lurking in the Library/or Classroom* - in pairs one person shadows another round the room. The person being followed might stop or

turn round, or change direction - and so the shadower has to hide, or look as if they're not following at all

### Tying knots (p47)

Look up these knots – and try tying them! What is each knot best for?

- Reef knot
- Double overknot
- Round turn and two half hitches

### More reading

More books by Michelle Magorian	Title	Publisher	ISBN
	<i>A Little Love Song</i>	Egmont	978-1405276962
	<i>A Spoonful of Jam</i>	Egmont	978-1405239561
	<i>Back Home</i>	Puffin	978-0141332260
	<i>Cuckoo in the Nest</i>	Egmont	978-1405277020
	<i>Goodnight Mr Tom</i>	Puffin Classics	978-0141354804
	<i>Just Henry</i>	Egmont	978-1405276955
<b>DVDs</b>			
	<i>Back Home</i>	Acorn	<b>ASIN:</b> B00005RZSZ
	<i>Goodnight Mr Tom</i>	ITV Studios	<b>ASIN:</b> B00004CYY4
	<i>Just Henry</i>	ITV Studios	<b>ASIN:</b> B005JXHKN8
<b>Stories about acting and the theatre</b>			
Pamela Brown	<i>The Swish of the Curtain</i>	Longwater	978-0955242809
Lorna Hill	<i>A Dream of Sadlers Wells</i>	Girls Gone By	978-1847451484
Catherine Johnson	<i>Brave New Girl</i>	Frances Lincoln	978-1847802545
Helen Peters	<i>The Secret Henhouse Theatre</i>	Nosy Crow	978-0857630650
Arlene Phillips	<i>Alana Dancing Star: Stage Sensation</i>	Faber	978-0571260768
Holly Smale	<i>Geek Drama</i>	HarperCollins	978-0008113476
Noel Streatfeild	<i>Ballet Shoes</i>	Puffin	978-0141334424
Jacqueline Wilson	<i>Diamond</i>	Yearling	978-0440869863