



## Short Story Collections

Resources written by Scottish Book Trust

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## How to use these resources

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First of all, the important thing to say about these activities is that they don’t have to be done in the order they appear here, nor do you need to do them all! Pick and choose, modify as you see fit, and slot into other activities you’re doing around the book. We hope you find them useful, and always welcome feedback at [info@scottishbooktrust.com](mailto:info@scottishbooktrust.com).



Because of the nature of the final, 8-mark question, we have mostly grouped activities by broad theme, not individual stories. We hope this is more useful in encouraging pupils to think about overarching themes and techniques used in different stories, and encourage more active engagement with texts through comparison and contrast.

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# Short stories by Iain Crichton Smith

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## About the stories

The six stories featured in the list are written in beautifully simple prose, and are complex under the surface. Three of them are set during First World War, and explore soldiers' and civilians' experiences. Other stories are set in small villages, and explore the lives of characters living there. Common themes can be picked up throughout all the stories: here, to keep things simple, the activities will focus on the three war stories: *The Telegram*, *The Crater* and *In Church*.

## About the author

Iain Crichton Smith was born in Glasgow in 1928 and moved two years later to the Isle of Lewis, where he spent his formative years. Much of his work is influenced by his experience of a Presbyterian upbringing in the small island community (this can be seen in some of the stories, where villagers demand conformity and dramatise any small deviations from the norm). He worked as a teacher in Clydebank, Dumbarton and Oban up until 1977, when he retired to concentrate full time on writing. He was honoured with an OBE in 1980 and won several literary prizes, continuing to live and write in Oban until his death in 1998.

## PRE READING 1 – WHY GO TO WAR?

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Learning objectives:

- To form ideas about when it is right to go to war
- To investigate different perspectives about the rights and wrongs of going to war

The characters in the war stories generally see the war as a surreal experience devoid of sense or reason. Generally, they seem to be unsure about why they are there, why they should hate their enemies and what good the war will achieve. You can introduce these ideas through the activities below.

### Activity 1

Ask pupils to think, pair and share three possible reasons why a country might go to war with another. Answers might include the following:

- the other country is threatening us;
- we need a resource that the other country has;
- the other country is committing aggressive acts against a neighbouring country;
- the other country is treating its own people badly;
- the other country is beginning to develop dangerous weapons.

After pupils have come up with possible causes of war, ask them to

discuss which of these are justified. For instance, do they think that it is right to go to war with a country which is attacking its neighbour, even if the fight has nothing to do with us?

### Activity 2

Ask pupils to imagine that they are a government minister trying to rally the country to support a war. Ask them to quickly come up with three things they would say to help persuade the country to get behind the war.

### Activity 3

The following four texts show varying viewpoints of war:

Tom Waits – The Day After Tomorrow:

 [www.tomwaits.com/songs/#/songs/song/260/Day\\_After\\_Tomorrow/](http://www.tomwaits.com/songs/#/songs/song/260/Day_After_Tomorrow/)

W.B. Yeats, *An Irish Airman Foresees his Death* (the first eight lines are perhaps more accessible, so you may wish just to give pupils these:

 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An\\_Irish\\_Airman\\_Foresees\\_His\\_Death](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An_Irish_Airman_Foresees_His_Death)

 *War Girls* by Jessie Pope: <http://allpoetry.com/poem/8605783-War-Girls-by-Jessie-Pope>

*For All We Have and Are* by Rudyard Kipling

 [www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems\\_forallwehave.htm](http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems_forallwehave.htm)

The first two texts explore sentiments which can be found in *The Crater*, *In Church* and *The Telegram*, including a questioning of faith in God, a lack of certainty about the nobility of the cause, the spin of government propaganda.

Discuss the texts with your pupils and ask them to highlight any lines which seem to convey how the writer feels about the war they are fighting in. Ask them if they can find any messages which appear in more than one of the texts.

After this, you could ask pupils to do some research to see how many pro and anti war quotes they can find from political speeches, songs, poems, novels and other texts throughout the years. They could display these on the wall in a for and against table, including quotes from the four sources above.

As an alternative to the above activities, you could ask pupils to design a short survey for other pupils/staff/the community on reasons to go to war. They could generate a few questions, then come back and debate the ideas they have collected.

## PRE READING 2 – WHAT WAS WAR ACTUALLY LIKE?

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Learning objectives:

- to find out what war was actually like, through the experience of the characters in the stories
- to identify the reasons why the characters cannot make sense of war

### Activity 1 – discussion

In *The Telegram* and *In Church*, the characters see war as a tragedy which hands out death indiscriminately to people who have no connection with the origins of the conflict. The bombardment comes from far away, and shells are launched by faceless enemies. The activity below can help your pupils understand the reasons why the characters find it difficult to make sense of war.

Show the images in Appendix 3 to your pupils, and discuss the following questions with them:

- What is different about the way each battle is being fought?
- What do these images suggest about the differences between First World War and wars from previous years?
- Why might the nature of warfare in First World War make the experience of war more surreal for soldiers?

### Activity 2 – write a speech and rebuttal

Ask pupils to imagine that they are a government minister giving a speech at the end of the war, attempting to convince the public that the war has been a good and worthwhile thing for the country. Ask them to imagine what the minister would say about the following:

- The characteristics of the enemy;
- The soldiers' attitudes towards the war and their attitude towards serving their country;
- The attitude of the population at large towards the war.

After this, ask them to write a refutation from a soldier who has served in the war.

## Alternative activity 2 – poetry writing

Ask pupils to write a poem from the point of view of a soldier based on their ideas stemming from previous activities (there is an excellent example of this activity from Lochend High School here:

 [www.scottishbooktrust.com/blog/teachers-librarians/2013/10/writing-poetry-based-on-war-photography](http://www.scottishbooktrust.com/blog/teachers-librarians/2013/10/writing-poetry-based-on-war-photography))

You could follow this structure for the poem:

- An introductory stanza, describing where you have found yourself, what you can hear, see and smell
- Describe what the experience of combat and warfare is like, based on the discussion in the previous activity
- Explore your attitudes towards the enemy
- Convey your understanding of the reasons you are fighting, if indeed you have any understanding of them at all
- explore your thoughts about whether the country's people are behind the war
- explore how the war is affecting your thoughts about loved ones back home.

## FINDING ORDER IN CHAOS – HOW CHARACTERS COPE

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Learning objectives:

- to understand how the characters try to seek order amid the chaos of war
- To understand the differing attitudes among soldiers to the chaos of war

*The Crater* and *In Church* feature characters who struggle to make sense of war, and crave a sense of order amid the chaos.

### Activity 1

Robert MacKinnon is an inexperienced leader who finds it difficult to accept the unreality of war, particularly the thought of leaving a man behind to die without dignity. However, Sergeant Smith is far more pragmatic and realistic, and realises the danger which MacKinnon has placed his men in, simply through his attempts to salvage some sense of order and dignity in the world of war.

After you have discussed each man's attitude and the reasons behind it, ask your pupils to imagine that a conversation is taking place between Smith and MacKinnon after the incident. Ask them to write down the conversation as a script, taking into account each man's justification for feeling the way that he does about the incident.

## Activity 2

Ask pupils to imagine they are veterans from the First World War being interviewed about their experiences. Ask them to imagine some rituals and values which helped them to get through. Then, ask them to write the interview as a magazine article.

## THE TREATMENT OF THE THEME OF WAR – CONSOLIDATING THE LEARNING

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Learning objective:

- To identify the common themes in the war stories

### Suggested activities

Imagine that *The Crater*, *In Church* and *The Telegram* are being grouped together as a small collection of short stories. Ask pupils to write the blurb, focusing on common motifs of the stories. You could ask pupils to work collaboratively for this task, each writing a blurb and then comparing notes to write a new one based on the strong points of each other's writing.

Ask pupils to come up with a design for the cover of this small collection, based on the common themes of the stories and the common experiences of characters. They could use pictures cut out from magazines or taken from the internet for this task.

Ask your pupils to choose their top six moments depicting the nature of war in the stories. They could display or record these in a storyboard, again using pictures cut out from magazines or taken from the internet, with related quotes underneath each image.

Ask pupils to imagine that they are an anti-war campaigner during First World War, writing an open letter to a newspaper in which they make the case against the war. Ask them to draw on the experiences of all the characters in the three stories, and to consider the ways in which the public have been duped with propaganda, comparing popular assumptions about war with the reality.

Ask pupils to put together a presentation on the theme What does War Mean to You? There is a great example on another topic from a teacher in



Perth Academy here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ly2vp2tLH8s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ly2vp2tLH8s)

## TENSION IN THE WAR STORIES

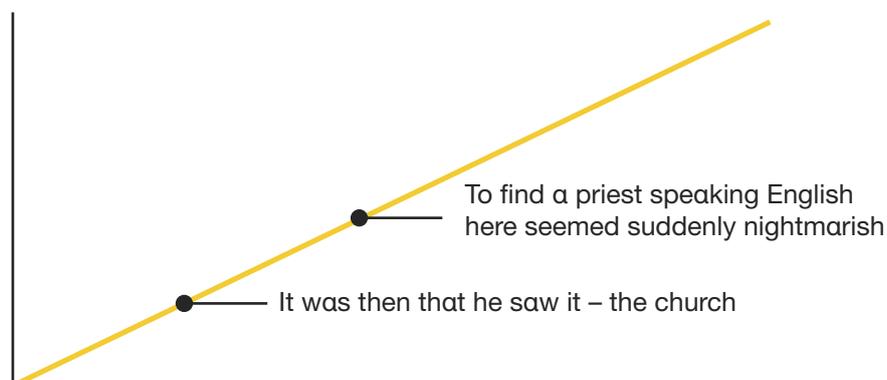
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Learning objectives:

- to identify points where tension increases in *The Telegram* and *In Church*
- to understand how Iain Crichton Smith builds up tension effectively in *The Telegram* and *In Church*

In these stories, tension is built gradually throughout the narrative. The following activity might be helpful in identifying points where tension is built.

Ask pupils to draw two axes of a graph, and label the vertical axis Tension. Ask them to draw a diagonal line going upwards from left to right. On this line, they should plot all the points where tension increases in the story, as shown below for *In Church*:



Pupils may find that they have different opinions about where tension increases in the story, but the following points can serve as a rough guide:

- The point where the priest finds out that Colin has come alone;
- Colin's discovery of the bloody animal bones;
- Where the priest says, "I said please sit down.";
- Colin's realisation that the priest is insane, as he begins to preach;
- The priest's 'sermon', which becomes more vitriolic as it goes on.

This activity can also be done for *The Telegram*. Mostly, the increasing tension is conveyed through the reactions of the 'fat woman'. Again, the following points can serve as a rough guide:

- The two women see the church elder at the bottom of the street with the yellow telegram;
- The fat woman repeats the phrase, "You don't know";
- The fat woman realises that she had hoped the elder would stop at Bessie's house;
- The women realise there are only three houses before their own;
- The fat woman's heart begins to beat faster;
- She tries to distract herself through mindless gossip and chatter;
- She begins to speak badly of the elder;
- She tries to convince herself that God wouldn't let her son die, and begins to pray, repeating the phrase, "O God";
- In her hysterical state, she takes comfort in the thin woman's gesture of affection.

You will find a printable worksheet for each story in Appendix 1 of this resource.

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# Short stories by George MacKay Brown

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## About the stories

The six stories taken from *A Time to Keep* highlight the harshness of the lives of crofters and seamen in the Scottish islands. Generally, they highlight islanders' resilience and pragmatism in the face of hardship, and indeed, tragedy.

## About the author

George MacKay Brown was born in Stromness on the Orkney mainland in 1921, the son of a tailor and postman. He attended Stromness Academy, and remained in education until 1940, a year in which his father died suddenly. He began writing poetry around this time, and also began writing for the Orkney Herald. In 1950 Brown met Edwin Muir, the renowned Scottish poet, who recognised his talent and became his mentor during his studies in Edinburgh.

Brown returned to Orkney in 1961, and rarely left thereafter. His work is seen as an exploration of island life, concerned in part with preserving the cultural heritage of Orkney in the face of progress.

## THE LACK OF SENTIMENTALITY IN DEPICTING ISLAND LIFE

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Learning objectives:

- to identify the lack of sentimentality in the islanders' reactions to trauma
- To understand why the islanders take this attitude to traumatic events.

George MacKay Brown's characters often adopt unsentimental, matter of fact attitudes towards the harsh conditions and upsetting events they have to face.

Ask your pupils to go through the stories *The Wireless Set*, *A Time to Keep*, *Tartan* and *The Bright Spade* and find points where dramatic or tragic events happen. These could include:

- Betsy and Hugh finding out that their son is dead in *The Wireless Set*;
- The destruction of the radio in *The Wireless Set*;
- Ingie's death in *A Time to Keep*;
- The brutal death of the dog in *Tartan*;
- The deaths of the laird's son and Kirstie and Amos' daughter in *The Bright Spade*.

Ask pupils to note down a few words about how each character reacts to events. After this, discuss these reactions. Do pupils think the characters aren't sad about what happens to them? Or is there another reason for their lack of reaction?

Ask pupils to match up these events with a quote which illustrates the lack of sentimentality in MacKay Brown's descriptions.

## TAKING COMFORT IN THE LAND AND SEA

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Learning objective:

- to understand why the islanders place value in hard work
- to understand how hard work provides consolation to the islanders

### Activity 1

The islanders in these stories often view the land and sea, and the hard work associated with each, as a positive anchor in their lives, even when the toil associated with it is unpleasant. They rarely if ever complain about the work they have to do, even when it doesn't yield what they need to survive.

Ask your pupils to look at the following quote below from *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. In this quote, the main character Marlow is explaining his attitude towards his work at sea:

“I don't like work--no man does--but I like what is in the work--the chance to find yourself.”

Ask pupils to answer the following questions:

- Can you think of things which you don't enjoy doing but which you know are ultimately beneficial to you?
- What do you think Marlow means by 'finding yourself?' What can you find out about yourself through hard work?

After this, ask pupils to look at the quote below:

“Hurt and dazed, she turned to the land, close to it, and the smell of it, kind and kind it was, it didn't rise up and torment your heart, you could keep peace with the land.”

(Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *Sunset Song*. Quote relates to a young woman's reaction to her husband being drafted into First World War)

Ask pupils to answer the following questions:

- What can hard work offer us in times of trouble?
- Ask your pupils to discuss whether they agree with the above viewpoints, particularly with reference to the modern world of school and work, but also to the world of the islanders. Do we need to take this attitude to our work?
- Ask your pupils to imagine that they are an employer on the islands, looking for an employee who will work either on the land or sea (or both, as Billy initially decides to do in *A Time to Keep*). Ask them to think about the qualities, abilities and attitudes required for someone to fit in to the world of work on the islands.

## **THE ROUTINE, INEVITABILITY OF HARD WORK, AND THE LACK OF CHOICES AVAILABLE IN THE ISLANDERS' LIVES**

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Learning objective: to understand the pragmatism of the islanders

The islanders in these stories experience sudden tragedy and emotional turmoil, but the predictable factor in their lives is always the work they need to do to survive, and they accept whatever they need to do to get through.

Ask your pupils to read the story *A Time to Keep*. Point out that after all he has been through, Bill arranges for Anna to stay in the house and look after his child, despite the fact that neither of them like or respect each other. Also, Bill goes back to work, looking for his fishing equipment.

Ask pupils to imagine that neither of these things happen. They should then mind map all their ideas about what might happen to Bill if this were to be the case. They should take into account the kind of person Bill is, and how he has reacted to offers of help in the past, as well as his drinking habits.

After this, ask them to write a short alternative ending for the story. They should reflect the unsentimental nature of George Mackay Brown's prose in their own writing.

## **CONSOLIDATING THE LEARNING – HOT SEATING**

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Learning objective: To demonstrate understanding of each character in the stories

Taking into account all they have learned from these activities, pupils should be able to confidently describe character motivations. Ask different pupils to take different character roles, and to prepare interview questions for each other. Questions could include:

1. Can you describe what happened to you?
2. How exactly did you react to this?
3. Why did you decide to return to your work so quickly after experiencing this trauma?
4. Did you resent having to go back to work so soon?
5. Can you give a reason for the answer to question 4?

You can record transcripts of the interviews as a learning resource for all pupils in the class.

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# Short stories by Anne Donovan

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## About the stories

*Hieroglyphics* is a wonderful collection of short stories, full of charm and life amidst challenging circumstances. Anne Donovan often shows us characters who experience moments of realisation and liberation, and the humour of their dialogue and exploits is likely to appeal to teen readers.

## About the author

Anne Donovan worked as an English teacher before publishing her first novel, *Buddha Da*, in 2003. *Buddha Da* is the story of Jimmy, a Glaswegian painter who becomes attracted to Buddhism. The novel has won widespread critical acclaim and has been described as an 'affectionate portrait of a normal family life running up against the ridiculous.' (Katy Guest, [www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/buddha-da-by-anne-donovan-1649092.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/buddha-da-by-anne-donovan-1649092.html), 21 March 2014) *Buddha Da* was shortlisted for the 2003 Orange Prize and the Whitbread Book Award for a first novel. Since then, Anne has published two novels: *Being Emily* and *Gone are the Leaves*.

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## MOMENTS OF REALISATION

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Learning objectives:

- To identify the ways in which characters change throughout *A Chitterin' Bite*, *Zimmerobics* and *Virtual Pals*
- To identify the reasons for the changes in these characters throughout the stories

The characters in all three stories experience a shift in perspective throughout the stories. This change is brought on by events in the stories. For example, Mary becomes more independent and self assured in *A Chitterin' Bite*: we can see this through her ending of the affair as an adult, which mirrors her discarding of the friendship with Agnes when it turns out not to be on her terms. Others may view this change differently, perhaps as a lesson in asserting herself in order not to be hurt, but there is no doubt a change has come about as a result of the childhood event.

Ask pupils to imagine that each character has the opportunity to give advice to their previous self (in *Zimmerobics* and *Virtual Pals*, the timeframe will obviously be shorter than *A Chitterin' Bite*!). Ask them to write down what each character might say, focusing on the events which brought about the changes in them, and what they learned from these events.

Alternatively, ask pupils to compose short character descriptions for a game of *Guess Who*. For their short descriptions, they should focus on describing the reasons why the character has changed, rather than simply

describing who the character is and what they do in the text. What have they realised about life and about themselves?

After this, pupils can read their descriptions to each other and ask each other to guess which character they have described.

## THE THEME OF GROWING UP

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Learning objectives:

- To investigate how childhood innocence makes way for adult realisation in some of the stories
- To explore how children and adults sometimes see things differently

Growing up is a wide theme in these stories: other themes which are closely related are the loss of innocence, acts of defiance and trying to find one's identity.

Children often see things naively, but equally, some of the children show an inquisitive spirit and a refusal to take things for granted without questioning them, while adults simply do things because they are used to them being done that way.

Show pupils the photographs in Appendix 2. The photographs show locations and events. Ask pupils to imagine that a child and their parents are at the scene of each photograph. Ask them to write down thought bubbles showing the difference between the adult's thoughts and the child's. One example has been completed.

The next activity, which covers narrative style, should follow on well from this one, as you explore how Donovan conveys the characters' childish perceptions through her use of narrative devices.

## NARRATIVE STYLE

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Learning objective:

- To analyse the effectiveness of Donovan's narrative style

The characters in these stories are mostly children, and Donovan has chosen her narrative style to reflect this:

- The use of first person narrative means that the story is told from the perspective of a child, showing us the innocent way they view things;
- In *A Chitterin' Bite* and *Dear Santa*, the use of present tense means the character is caught up in the moment and there is no hindsight or reflection: the maturity and perspective which comes from reflection isn't present.

If you do the previous activity, perhaps pupils will already have a clear idea of how children and adults see things differently in the stories, so you can mainly concentrate on the use of present tense in this activity.

Make sure you don't tell pupils the purpose of this activity before you ask them to do it!

- Ask pupils to pick one of the following passages and rewrite it, using the past tense instead of the present:
- The passage from, "We go tae the pictures..." to "...plastered on his baby cheeks," in *A Chitterin' Bite*;
- The passage from, "Christmas Eve..." to "A cannae see her face," in *Dear Santa*.

Once they are finished, ask pupils if they feel anything has been lost due to the use of the past tense. The purpose of the activity is to allow them to appreciate the immediacy lent to the story by the use of the present tense. The following questions may help:

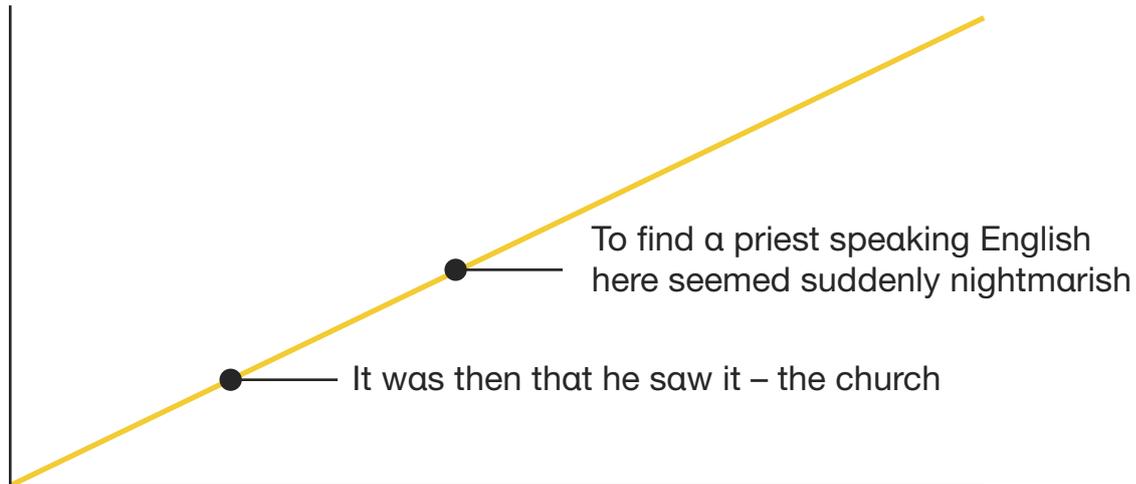
- How do you think the character feels in each situation?
- Does the use of present tense have a different effect on you as a reader than if the past tense if used?
- Does the use of present tense give us a greater sense of how the character feels?

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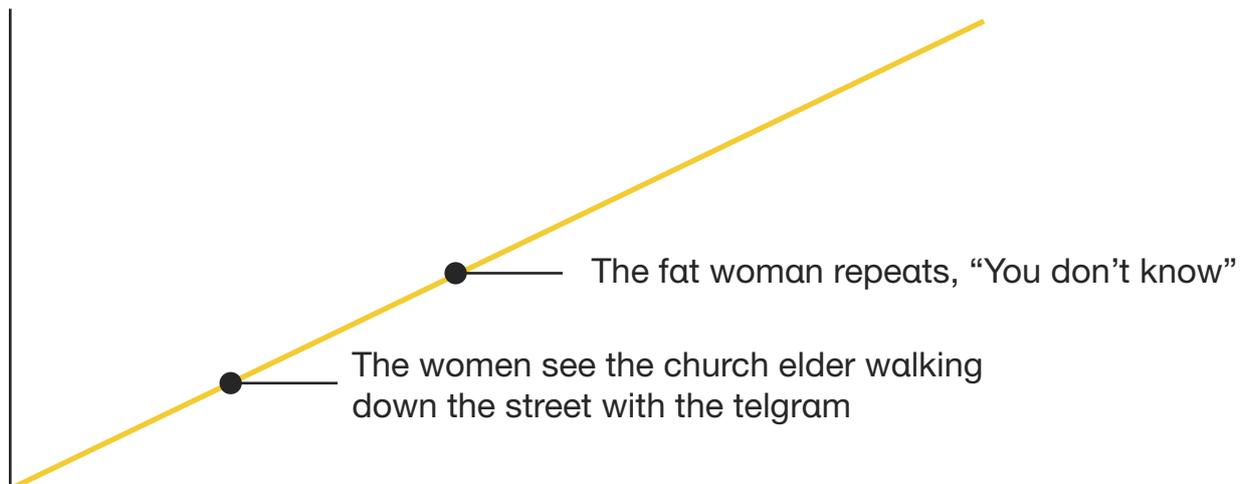
## Appendix 1

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Plot the points where tension increases in *In Church*.



Plot the points where tension increases in *The Telegram*.



## Appendix 2



Image courtesy of dickhuhne on Flickr: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/>

<b>Child's thoughts and feelings</b>	<b>Adult's thoughts and feelings</b>
Excited	Snow is an irritation
Will want to go out and play with friends: sledging, snowball fights, etc.	Will be difficult to get to work
Associate snow with Christmas: looking forward to getting presents	A reminder that Christmas is coming, which will be expensive
Snow on cars looks funny and is a novelty, something you don't see every day	Will need to arrange childcare if children are off school
Might get a day off school!	Will be difficult to get to work
	A reminder that Christmas is coming, which will be expensive
	Will need to arrange childcare if children are off school



Resized image courtesy of diamond-mind on Flickr:  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/>

<b>Child's thoughts and feelings</b>	<b>Adult's thoughts and feelings</b>



Resized image courtesy of theirhistory on Flickr: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/>

<p><b>Child's thoughts and feelings</b> (imagine you are one of the children fighting)</p>	<p><b>Adult's thoughts and feelings</b> (imagine you are breaking up the fight and punishing those responsible)</p>
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## Appendix 3

