



# The Case of the Secret Signal

ISBN 978-1-78849-521-9

eBook ISBN 978-1-78849-586-8

## Brian Gallagher

### Teaching Guide

By Nicola Heaney

#### RATIONALE

This guide has been designed to complement a class reading of the book in a way that brings the text alive whilst also enriching the students' critical abilities. The activities encourage young readers to question the characters' motivations and to consider the overall themes.

The guide aims to develop empathy skills, stimulate discussion and encourage readers to dissect literary techniques in fresh and engaging ways. There are also activities to hone communication, presentation and literacy skills.

This novel explores difficult topics such as inequality, trust and staying strong in the face of difficulty. Key themes include:

- Friendship
- Determination
- Trust
- Equality
- Dreams and ambitions.

#### SUMMARY

The story opens with Tim Kavanagh spotting an SOS signal from his aunt's farmhouse while on holiday there.

The story then jumps three days into the past where we find out why Tim is visiting his aunt. He and his twin sister Deirdre are on holiday with their friend Joe as a reward for helping the police solve a crime their father was falsely accused of committing.

We also meet Isobel Forsyth, a twelve-year-old girl from a wealthy background. She's headstrong and independent and has been kidnapped – both for a ransom but also because her kidnappers want her father, the country's Chief Prosecutor, to free a friend. We find out that Isobel sent the signal from the barn where she's being held.

The three friends decide to contact the police, but it becomes clear that if they want

to help whoever sent the signal, they're going to have to do it themselves. In an astonishing act of bravery, Joe finds himself a prisoner with Isobel and the two of them keep trying to escape, no matter what obstacles they face.

Meanwhile, the twins continue to seek help from the professionals, but their trust is betrayed. Despite this, they keep going – but will they be able to rescue their friend?

#### APPROACH

*The Case of the Secret Signal* covers serious issues like inequality, communication and friendship – while also being a tense, action-packed read.

There are many opportunities for discussion about class divisions and inequality. Many of the characters challenge stereotypes. There are also opportunities to discuss the importance of friendship, tenacity and the struggles of trying to grow up and find your way in the world.

This guide has divided the story into three sections and the activities offer suggestions on exploring the themes, developing an in-depth understanding of the difficulties in trying to follow your dreams and examining the writer's craft in building characters and plot.

## Part One: Gathering Pages 7 – 84

#### SUMMARY

Tim Kavanagh is studying strange lights across the hillside visible from his aunt's farmhouse. As he watches, it becomes clear that it's a signal. An SOS cry for help.

We're then taken three days into the past where we find out more about Tim. We're also introduced to Isobel Forsyth, a twelve-

year-old girl living in Dublin. Isobel's father is the country's Chief Prosecutor and therefore she has quite an elevated lifestyle. However, Isobel is independently-minded and we see her irritated by her classmates who poke fun at her for her beliefs that women should have more rights.

In the first chapter, we also meet Joe Martin as he readies himself for a trip to the fancy Dublin hotel, The Shelbourne. With his friends Tim and Deirdre Kavanagh, he is to be presented with a medal for solving a criminal case the previous year. We meet Tim and Deirdre at The Shelbourne, where they've arrived with their parents, determined to enjoy their fancy outing.

At the Forsyth dinner table, Isobel starts a debate with her father about rights for women and rights for workers. It's clear Isobel feels very strongly about the subject, but her father advises her not to rock the boat.

Across the city, the three friends are enjoying a delicious meal. Tim is very well-prepared for dining in company, having visited a library beforehand to learn about the correct way to use cutlery in such situations. Despite his enjoyment, he's also irritated by the lack of equality in the class system.

Joe gets a pleasant surprise when his father gives him permission to join Tim and Deirdre for a holiday at their aunt's farm in Carlingford.

Back at school, Deirdre is telling her friends about her wonderful evening when she encounters a bitter Sadie Nolan. In her usual cheery way, Deirdre manages to defuse the situation without taking the shine off her achievement. Isobel is also having some difficulties with her classmates and forces a vote on the issue of female doctors.

Joe and Tim debate their favourite Sherlock Holmes stories. Joe is excited about his trip to Carlingford, but Mrs Kavanagh warns him

not to expect too much – except for potato bread, which will be delicious.

Mrs Kavanagh is helping the twins prepare for their holiday, including Joe in the food she's putting together. Joe is getting ready too, equipped with a kind gift from his father. Isobel is alarmed to find her suspicions about being followed were real as she's bundled into the back of a van.

After an enjoyable train journey, the friends arrive in Carlingford where they're taken to the farm in a pony and trap. Meanwhile, Isobel wakes in a dark room and sets her mind to making the best of her situation. She's soon moved to a farm somewhere and it becomes clear why her captors have taken her. However, she's determined to stay strong.

The twins and Joe are having a great time and spend a lovely day in Dundalk. Tim gets himself in trouble with a local over a badly treated dog, but his sister steps in to help. Back at the farmhouse, they're getting ready for bed when they spot a strange light in the distance. It's an SOS signal. Although they don't realise it yet, Isobel has used all the items at her disposal in the barn to light a candle and send a signal out into the night. But will the boys be able to help?

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Re-read page 10. Tim is able to decipher the meaning behind the flashing lights because he's studied Morse Code in a library book. Have you ever heard of Morse Code? Do you think it could be useful to know? Why do you think this? In addition to an SOS signal, what other pieces of code might be useful to know? Why do you think this?
- Re-read page 16. Isobel is annoyed by her classmates and thinks that 'being good at sport didn't give you the right to look down on others, or to make fun of their ambitions.' Do you agree with this statement? Why do you think this?
- Re-read pages 20-21. Deirdre is trying her best not to feel overawed by the grandeur of the hotel. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you felt out of place or that you didn't deserve to be there? What happened?
- Re-read page 25. Isobel's father advises her to 'be realistic about how the world works. And don't waste energy and make yourself unpopular by needlessly going against the current.' What do you think about this advice? Do you agree with it? Why do you think this?
- Re-read pages 27-28. 'Tim, however, had decided that while he would be polite,

he wouldn't be subservient.' What does this mean? Do you think this is the right approach? Why do you think this? How does this affect your impression of Tim?

- Re-read page 37. Isobel decides to ask for a vote. Why do you think she's doing this? Is it a risk to confront Harriet? What would you say about her?
- Re-read p. 41. Deirdre is reluctant to tell her parents about Sadie Nolan because she doesn't want to hurt their feelings. Do you think this is the right thing to do? Why do you think this? Have you ever kept the truth from someone to spare their feelings? What happened?
- Re-read p. 52. Deirdre proclaims that because they're on holiday, they are able to break the rules a little. Do you agree with this? Why do you think this? What sort of regular rules and routines do you break on holiday? Why do you think this is?
- Re-read p.55. The friends have a fun conversation with Aunt Helen about the sort of animal they'd be and why. If you had a choice, which animal would you be? Why?
- Read p.66. Should Tim have intervened? What does this tell us about him? Why do you think this? What would you have done?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Re-read pages 15-25 and note the way Isobel is presented. What are our first impressions of her? Think about what she says, how she behaves and how she interacts with others. Choose three or four examples from the text that prove your point. Write an analysis of her personality, explaining how the writer creates this impression by explaining how the quotes you've chosen prove the points you're making.

#### 2. WORKERS' RIGHTS

At the dinner table, Isobel's father argues that laws can't be changed because a certain group makes a fuss – but Isobel points out that that is exactly what happened with workers' rights that summer. In small groups, do some research into the 1911 Shops Act and the Dublin Lock-Out. Create a presentation explaining what happened and what these protests achieved. You could also draw up a list of changes you'd like to see for workers today.

#### 3. MISCOMMUNICATION

Tim has a conversation with Chief

Superintendent Leech and is pleasantly surprised when the police officer is able to take a joke in good spirit. Do you think he's right when he says 'It was rare to find someone in authority having a sense of humour when dealing with young people.' Why do you think this? Think about how sometimes words and gestures can be misunderstood. In small groups, draw up a guide for parents and teachers on how to communicate with young people, thinking about what words and phrases might actually mean.

### 4. WITNESS ACCOUNTS

Re-read the end of Chapter Four. Isobel is confronted and bundled into the back of a van. Imagine you are a police officer or a journalist writing about the event. You've been given the task of interviewing eyewitnesses and writing up their accounts. What did they see and hear? What did they think was happening at different points? How accurate do you think they were (bearing in mind that sometimes eyewitness memory can be very unreliable)?

Write up at least two different accounts of events – try to include contradiction across them. Extension: Choose an event that happened in real life. Write two different eyewitness accounts – one real and one full of falsehoods. Share with a partner – can they guess the fact from the fiction?

### 5. A WINTER WONDERLAND

Aunt Helen's farm is in a beautiful setting – made even more magical by the wintry weather. Think about what the phrase 'winter wonderland' means for you. Write a description of the scene. Including sensory detail can make it come alive, so include smells, sounds and the weather. Try to use devices like similes and metaphors and more advanced vocabulary.

### 6. TACKLING A BULLY

Remind yourself of the twins' encounter with a local bully on pages 65-73. In groups of three, choose the three or four most important moments in the scene and freeze frame them. Think about how each character is thinking and feeling and how to reflect this in their body language, their position with each other and their facial expressions. Be prepared to explain your thinking to the rest of the group.

### 7. MULTIPURPOSE

Isobel's schoolbag is filled with things that are useful for her situation. She's used pen and paper to write notes and now she's

using her sharp dividers to create a listening hole. Look at your schoolbag. What's in there that you think would be useful if you found yourself in a situation like Isobel? In pairs, write a survivors' guide using only the items in your schoolbag. You can be as ridiculous and outlandish as you want, but you must write about at least five things. (E.g. you could stack textbooks to make a tiny stepladder)

## Part Two Investigating Pages 85 – 168

### SUMMARY

At breakfast, the boys tell Deirdre about the SOS signal they saw the night before. She is sceptical about their plans to sneak up, and suggests going to the police first.

While they're debating, Isobel is trying to keep her spirits up by listening in to the kidnappers' conversation and working out a plan of action.

The three friends decide that the best option is to speak to the police, so they head for the nearest station. However, the policeman doesn't seem convinced and the friends decide to head back to Aunt Helen's to see what he does. They watch from a distance as the policeman arrives at the farm; he appears to just have a conversation with a man and leaves without exploring any of the outbuildings.

As a result of his visit, Isobel gets some rough treatment from her kidnappers. Despite her distress, she has the presence of mind to keep a candle back for herself in case it's useful in future.

The friends revisit the police station and Deirdre believes the policeman to be lazy. He dismisses their concerns and after some discussion, they decide to investigate the farm themselves.

Joe sets the plan in motion, making his way to the farmhouse while Deirdre and Tim stay back and watch. However, Isobel is being moved and Joe is almost caught by the kidnappers, Ned and Ben. He takes the only available option and sneaks into the back of the van, hiding under the tarpaulin. Tim and Deirdre are shocked by his behaviour and race back towards the police station to get help.

In the van, Isobel is shocked to see Joe, but soon warms to him and together they come up with a plan. Meanwhile, the twins realise that the local policeman is not to be trusted

when they too find themselves prisoners.

The van makes its way deeper into the countryside and Isobel and Joe ready themselves, but things don't go as well as they'd hoped and they find themselves imprisoned together. But they're not beaten yet and come up with a more drastic plan of escape. In the police station, Tim and Deirdre put their heads together and come up with a clever way to free themselves. However, things don't always go according to plan and one of the pairs finds themselves in deep trouble.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Re-read pp.87-89. The boys are keen to check out the farmhouse, but Deirdre advises going to the police. Who do you think is correct? Why do you think this? What would you do in their situation?
- Re-read p.93. Joe suggests that because there would be three of them they may not be taken seriously by the police. Do you think there's a risk of this? Why do you think this? Have you ever been in a situation where you weren't taken as seriously as you should have been because of your age? What happened?
- Re-read p.108. Do you think Tim is right to be cautious and not push it with Constable Quigley? Why do you think this? Have you ever been in a situation where you had to bite your tongue like this even when you know you are right? What happened?
- Re-read pp.111-112. The friends discuss their next steps and decide to look into things further. Do you think this is the right thing to do? Why do you think this? What would you do in their situation?
- Re-read pp. 128-129. Joe suggests two plans of actions – stay hidden and act later or try to outsmart them with the element of surprise. Which do you think is the better option? Why do you think this?
- Re-read p.135. Joe thinks that 'it would be challenging enough to carry out their escape plan. He mustn't undermine his confidence by having doubts.' What do you think of this attitude? Why do you think this?
- Re-read p.145. Although his impulse is to go back to help Isobel, Joe keeps running to try to get away and get help. Do you think this is the right decision? Why do you think this?
- Re-read p.146. The twins agree that the next best action is to get help from an adult they trust. Is this the right thing to do? Why do you think this?
- Re-read pp.150-151. In his anxiety over

the key trick, Tim snaps at his sister. Do you think this is fair? Why do you think this? Have you ever snapped at someone because you were feeling tense? What happened?

- Re-read pp.159-160. Joe is a little surprised when Isobel reveals her ambition to be a doctor, but bites back his comment. Why do you think he does that? Is it a good idea? Have you ever had to bite back a comment? What happened?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. DEBATE

It's clear that Isobel's kidnappers have a lot of resentment for her life of privilege. But do you think this is Isobel's fault? Why do you think this? In small groups, debate the question: Is Isobel to blame for the inequality between herself and Ned?

#### 2. DISTRACTION TECHNIQUES

Isobel distracts herself with old songs. Do you think it's a good idea or should she be worrying about her situation? The Roman playwright and philosopher Seneca said: 'We suffer more often in imagination than in reality.' What does this phrase mean? In pairs, draw up a list of guidance and ideas on how to help someone worry less.

#### 3. HOT SEATING

Isobel and Joe come face-to-face in Chapter 14. In groups, think about what Isobel and Joe must really make of each other at first sight. Do you think Isobel might be suspicious? Why do you think she trusts him so quickly? Take it in turns to play the roles of Isobel and Joe and answer questions from the rest of the group and what you're thinking and feeling in the situation.

#### 4. FREEZE FRAME

The twins find themselves in a very tricky situation at the police station. Re-read Chapter 14 and choose three key moments in the police station to freeze frame in groups. Think about what each character is thinking and feeling and how to reflect this in their body language, their position with each other and their facial expressions. Be prepared to explain your thinking to the rest of the group.

#### 5. SOCIAL MOBILITY

It becomes clear that despite how much they have in common, it's unlikely that Joe and Isobel would have been friends. Isobel thinks to herself that she thought

'it was a shame that people from differing backgrounds didn't mix more.' Do you think this is still an issue today? What do you think about this? Either on your own or in pairs, choose someone who is from a different background and talk to them to find some common ground. You might like the same foods or listen to the same music. Maybe you think the same way about certain things or have the same ambitions for when you're older. Prepare a short presentation for the rest of the group about the person you've spoken to and what you learned about your similarities.

## 6. TENSION BUILDING

Chapter Fifteen is filled with tension – the twins trying to escape and Joe and Isobel trying to trick their captors. But how does the writer Brian Gallagher make it so dramatic and engaging? Re-read the chapter and make a note of how punctuation is used to speed up speech or to pause conversation to build suspense. Think about the way the characters speak and act – are they acting in a way that builds suspense? Choose four examples from the text where you think the writer builds tension and suspense successfully. Write a short analysis explaining your reasoning, making sure you fully explain how each example creates tension for the reader.

## 7. PLEADING FOR HIS LIFE

Joe is worried that once the kidnappers realise he's not useful, they might cause him serious harm. Imagine you're Joe. You have an opportunity to persuade the men that this isn't a good idea. What sorts of reasons would you give them? Think about how you could use persuasive techniques and write a short speech Joe would give to persuade the men to keep him unharmed.

## 8. SORRY, MISTER

Deirdre and Tim are almost caught by the conductor when the train arrives in Dublin. How likely do you think it is that he'd believe them? In small groups, script a different end to the chapter – the train doors don't open in time and Tim and Deirdre are trapped by the conductor who has some questions. Can they persuade him to let them go? Will he believe them?

# Part Three Pursuit Pages 169 - 246

## SUMMARY

Joe and Isobel are ready to put their plan into action, but Joe has some doubts about how sensible it is, given the men are violent. In Dublin, the twins make their way to Dublin Castle to see Chief Superintendent Leech, but they have to get inside.

Isobel is reluctant to use violence against Ned, but does what she has to in order to help them escape. The twins speak with Leech, who takes their report seriously and is very keen to help.

Joe and Isobel put some distance between themselves and the kidnappers and find some shelter for the night. With some provisions and a good fire, they have a comfortable night in safety. The twins are also in the area, working with the police to try to rescue their friend.

After a good night's sleep in the cottage and back at Aunt Helen's, all four are ready to get moving. Their days start very differently, with the twins tucking into a hearty breakfast but Joe and Isobel back on the run – this time from dogs. A game of cat-and-mouse begins, but will the police and the twins find Isobel and Joe before the kidnappers?

## DISCUSSION POINTS

- Re-read p.171. Joe gives himself a pep talk, thinking 'Don't think about all the things that could go wrong. Picture yourself succeeding.' Do you think this is a good way to approach situations that make you nervous? Why do you think this? Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation? What happened?
- Re-read pp.177-178. Isobel struggles to stab Ned, as it goes against her belief that 'kindness was the best characteristic that anyone could have.' Do you agree it's the best characteristic? Why do you think this? What advice would you give her at this point?
- Re-read pp.181-182. Deirdre is very excited about the prospect of helping the police solve a crime. Why do you think this is – do you think it's exciting?
- Re-read p.197. Despite her hunger, Deirdre makes an effort not to wolf down her food as it would show bad table manners. Do you think table manners are important? Why do you think this?
- Re-read pp.202-203. Why do you think Cullen is reluctant to spill the beans on

Constable Quigley? Do you think he should tell Leech everything? Why do you think this? Have you ever been in a situation where you felt you might be betraying someone for the greater good? What happened?

- Re-read p.205. Isobel is a little shocked when Joe casually remarks that he doubts she's ever gone to bed hungry. Why is she surprised? Should she feel bad? Should Joe? Why do you think this?
- Re-read p.208. Aunt Helen has been living in the area for twenty years, but the sergeant says 'That doesn't make you a local in this place.' What does he mean by this? Do you think this is fair of the locals? How do you think Aunt Helen feels? Why do you think this?
- Re-read pp.216-217. Isobel is frustrated by the lack of opportunity given to her because she's a girl and she's frustrated by her mother's behaviour. What do you think of what she says to Joe here? Do you agree? Why do you think this?
- Re-read p.226. Are you surprised that they've been caught again by Ned and Ben? Why do you think this? What do you think they should have done differently? Why do you think this?
- Re-read pp.235-236. Joe refuses to abandon Isobel and throws himself back into danger. What do you think about his actions here? What do they tell us about him?
- Re-read p.243. Deirdre is very angry with what Constable Quigley did, telling Leech that 'When we looked for help, he stabbed us in the back. It was a horrible feeling. We didn't know where to go or who we could trust.' Do you agree with her? Have you ever been betrayed by someone in a position of trust? What happened?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. PAUSE AND ENJOY

Despite their fears and the need to get to the police station, Tim is still able to take a second to enjoy the beauty of the city on pages 172 and 173. Re-read the description of Dublin. Picture a scene from your own life that's beautiful – something you view regularly. How often do you actually stop to enjoy it? Write a description of the scene, bringing it alive with sensory detail (sounds, smells etc) and use similes, metaphors and other techniques.

### 2. DIFFERENT TREATMENT

Deirdre is annoyed that the Forsyth family are being treated with a sensitivity that

wasn't shown to her father when he was being interviewed by the police. Do you think she's right that class is an important factor in the way people are treated? In groups, debate whether or not class still plays a factor in the way people are treated in Ireland today. Extension: Draw up a charter of equality with at least eight rules on how people should be treated equally. For research you could read into the UN Declaration of Human Rights: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

### 3. SURVIVAL TACTICS

Joe and Isobel are faced with a night outside in the snowy woods. They're lucky enough to find shelter. But what advice would you give them? In pairs, draw up a guide for surviving outside on a cold night. What's the first thing you should do? You can either write a leaflet or script a vlog.

### 4. FEMALE POLICE OFFICERS

Deirdre is a bit annoyed by Leech's jokey tone as she doesn't see what would be so crazy about having female police officers. The twentieth century saw a lot of changes for women's rights in Ireland – women were able to vote, could be employed in certain jobs. In pairs, research how the rights of women have changed since the year 1900. Prepare your findings in a presentation. Your presentation should also cover what work still needs to be done to make sure women have fully equal rights in modern society.

### 5. GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Isobel suggests trying to get to know Joe in a way that highlights what they have in common. Do you think this is a good idea? What do you think of the questions they ask one another. Imagine you meet someone for the first time – what questions would you ask them to really get to know them? In groups, draw up a list of about ten questions. Be prepared to explain your choices.

### 6. CHANGE MUST HAPPEN

On page 212, Isobel is determined that things must change if the world is to improve. Do you think she is right? What sort of changes would you like to see in the world today? In small groups, think of a very local change, a change in your area and a change in your country that you would like to see that would improve the world. Think about how you could work to make each happen. Prepare a presentation – and maybe even set wheels in motion.

### 7. FREEZE FRAME

Chapter Twenty-Four sees everything come together in a tense showdown. Re-read the chapter and pick the six most dramatic parts of the story. In small groups, freeze frame what is happening in each scene. Think about how each character might be thinking or feeling and how to show that in their facial expressions and body language. Be prepared to explain your choice of scenes to the rest of the class.

### 8. READ ALL ABOUT IT

You've been asked to write a news report about the safe delivery of Isobel and Joe from the hands of the kidnappers. Think about what your readers will want to know. Structure your story with the most important facts at the beginning and then add in the detail. Include quotes from people involved such as Leech and the friends.