

The Truth About Riley, by Sinéad Moriarty, is the story of Riley and her mum, Alison. Following the death of her father, Riley and Alison find themselves to be homeless and living in their car. Riley is desperate to keep her circumstances secret and keep up appearances at school, especially in front of her best friend, Sophie. However, with help from some unexpected friends along the way, Riley's life could end up changing in ways she couldn't anticipate...

A note on engaging pupils with lived experience with the contents of this pack

There may be staff or pupils at school who are homeless or have experienced homelessness, family bereavement and debt. These topics need to be approached in a way that safeguards their wellbeing and self-esteem.

Themes and issues arising?

The novel contains themes of:

- * Empathy and Solidarity
- * Gratitude
- * Friendship
- * Secrecy
- * Strength
- * Love and Kindness
- * Prejudice
- * Shame

Before sharing as a class read you will want to read the whole text to ensure there aren't triggers for particular students.

This resource pack offers ways to engage with The Truth About Riley as a text for study in English lessons while also exploring and encouraging the students to engage with topics and concepts that are relevant to other school subjects, such as SPHE and CSPE. This is due to its subject matter being rooted in prominent human rights, socio-economic and political issues in Ireland today.

As emphasised by the book's epigraph, the author wants the text to remind students:

'A person is a person, whether they live in a house or a box.'

Whole text activity:

Character Analysis - Riley's Journey

Create a flip chart sheet tracking the below categories for Riley, divided into two sections: 'Old Riley' and 'New Riley':

- * Likes
- * Dislikes
- * Personality
- * Appearance
- * Wishes and dreams
- * What she worries about

* Her priorities

As you are reading the book, return to the flip chart and add or update your notes – invite students to reflect on how Riley has changed and how becoming homeless has impacted her as a character throughout the text. This will help **map out her journey** and **build empathy** among the students as you're going through the book. Encourage the students to consider that while Riley is facing difficult circumstances and changing a lot, she is also a child just like them with similar wishes, dreams and fears.

English class : reading resources

Before reading

- * Activity: Get into groups and look at the cover image...

A) Describe the image.

B) Make bullet points detailing what you think the book will be about.

- * Turn over and read the blurb - what are your expectations for the plot?

- * What themes do you expect to emerge? List three.

Chapter-by-chapter breakdown:

Following each chapter, get the students to answer the following questions in their copybooks.

Chapter 1

Q1. What is your first impression of Riley?

Q2. Describe how Riley deals with her feelings and emotions in this chapter. Comment on whether her approach is effective or ineffective.

Q3. Compare and contrast Riley's life before and after her father's death.

Chapter 2

- Q1. Comment on Riley's relationship with her maternal grandparents.
- Q2. What insights does this chapter give into Riley's parents' marriage?
- Q3. How do you think Alison feels about her parents abandoning her when she marries Riley's dad?

Chapter 3

- Q1. Describe Sophie as a character in three words.
- Q2. What is your first impression of Vanessa?
- Q3. Compare and contrast Sophie and Vanessa.
- Q4. Examine the dynamic between the three girls and describe it (two bullet points).
- Q5. In what ways is Sophie's life different from Riley's?

Chapter 4

- Q1. In your opinion, is Riley perceptive of her mother's emotions? Give examples from the chapter.
- Q2. Activity: Should Riley have asked Sophie and her mum to stay in their house for a few nights? Get into pairs and create a pros and cons list relating to this question. Take turns coming up to the whiteboard to share your findings with the class.

Chapter 5

- Q1. Identify two instances where Riley displays bravery in this chapter.
- Q2. How do you think Riley feels when hearing about Sophie's party? Why?
- Q3. Which one random act of kindness made Riley and her mum's day a bit easier?

Chapter 6

- Q1. What impact did the young Starbucks employee have on Riley and her mum? Do you think he was aware of this?
- Q2. List three emotions felt by Riley during this night.
- Q3. Compare the car and the café as settings for Riley and Alison.

Chapter 7

- Q1. In what ways is Sophie's family life different to Riley's?
- Q2. Give an example that illustrates that Sophie is a good friend.
- Q3. In your opinion, was what Riley did at the end of the chapter ethical?
- Q4. Since becoming homeless and living in their car, Riley has learned some lessons. Name one of these lessons as explored in this chapter.

Chapter 8

- Q1. What is your first impression of Maja?
- Q2. Do you think Maja's view of Ireland is accurate?
- Q3. Compare Riley's and her mum's situation while sleeping

in the car vs. in the restaurant.

- Q4. Examine how Riley's mum's interaction with the first landlord reaffirmed Maja's view.

Chapter 9

- Q1. Comment on Riley's mother's wellbeing as described early on in the chapter.
- Q2. Why is Riley dreading her best friend's birthday party?
- Q3. Do you think Riley is right for feeling guilty? Explain your answer.

Chapter 10

- Q1. Explain why Sophie and Trish are jealous of Riley. Why is this ironic?
- Q2. Give an example of where Riley is a good friend to Sophie during the party.
- Q3. In your opinion, why did Riley feel uncomfortable about getting her nails done by the ladies of similar age as her mum?
- Q4. Vanessa and Riley are both only children. Compare and contrast them as characters.
- Q5. Activity: Elaborate on the phrase 'the grass is always greener on the other side' with reference to what has happened in the book so far (one paragraph).

Chapter 11

- Q1. In this chapter, Riley spends her first night away from the car since losing her home. What does she appreciate most about the amenities in Sophie's house?
- Q2. Why, in your opinion, does Riley insist on keeping her homelessness situation secret even when her friend is in trouble?

Chapter 12

- Q1. Why does Riley feel pressure to do well in school?
- Q2. In your opinion, would Riley's life and circumstances be different if her mum had been more independent in her marriage? Explain.
- Q3. Why do you think Riley felt comfortable opening up the Oleg?

Chapter 13

- Q1. List two things that reveal that Riley is anxious in this chapter.
- Q2. Riley has to tell a lot of lies to keep her life secret. Identify three.
- Q3. Activity: What 'bad' words do you think Riley would use to describe Vanessa at the end of this chapter? Split into groups and create mind maps and think of as many negative words as possible that accurately describe the character of Vanessa (no cursing!).

Chapter 14

- Q1. 'It was like the light had gone out in her. She had no more fight. Work was sucking her energy dry and there was

nothing left to give.’

How do you think this makes Riley feel?

Q2. In what way does this chapter illustrate how much Riley has changed?

Q3. Do you agree that ‘family is everything’? Discuss this statement.

Chapter 15

Q1. ‘How were the numbers so high?’ (Regarding homelessness statistics). List two to three reasons why you think this is the case.

Q2. Vanessa is causing trouble for Riley. In your opinion, are her intentions good?

Q3. Comment on whether Riley should have stolen the gift for Sophie. Was there an alternative option? Give examples.

Chapter 16

Q1. Compare Maja’s interaction with the first and second landlord with the third. Why do you think the latter was so different?

Q2. Explore the theme of ‘strength’ as illustrated in this chapter (two paragraphs).

Chapter 17

Q1. Prejudice is a prominent feature of not only this chapter, but also previous chapters. Give two examples from the text using quotes.

Q2. In your opinion, did Riley handle the situation with Vanessa well? Why?

Q3. At the end of the chapter, Riley reveals some truth about her current circumstances. Was the outcome good or bad? Expand.

Chapter 18

Q1. What advice would you give Riley about dealing with bad friends?

Q2. Why does Riley feel anxious? And what makes her feel better?

Q3. Describe Riley’s relationship with Oleg (two bullet points).

Q4. ‘The world was a very different place to the way Riley had thought it was.’

Expand on this quote within the broader context of the story and Riley’s journey up to this point (two paragraphs).

Chapter 19

Q1. Identify two acts of kindness that helped Riley through this stressful situation.

Q2. Towards the end of the chapter, Alison says: ‘You shouldn’t be looking after me, I should be looking after you.’ Comment on this statement.

Q3. Describe the atmosphere in the hospital.

Chapter 20

Q1. Detail what happened between the social worker, Riley,

Maja and Oleg in your own words.

Q2. What do you expect to happen next and why? And what is the ideal outcome?

Q3. Are Maja and Oleg good to Riley? (Y/N)

How does this chapter illustrate this?

Chapter 21

Q1. Information about Maja’s past is revealed in this chapter. How does this provide context for:

Her character/personality/approach to life?

Her relationship with Riley?

Q2. In your opinion, what should Riley do? What would you do if you were in Riley’s position?

Chapter 22

Q1. Describe Maja and Oleg’s interaction in the car.

Q2. List two ways in which Maja and Oleg are different.

Q3. What do you expect Riley’s grandmother to be like?

Chapter 23

Q1. What is your first impression of Florence?

Q2. Describe the mood in Florence’s office during the big reveal.

Q3. Do you think Alison will let her mum take care of them? Why?

Chapter 24

Q1. In what ways does this chapter reinforce the concept of family being the most important thing?

Q2. How has Riley’s perception of her father changed since the start of the book?

Chapter 25

Q1. Some time has passed. Describe how much things have changed for Alison and Riley. (three bullet points)

Q2. In what way is Riley different compared to earlier in the book?

Q3. ‘This is what life is about: love and kindness.’

Discuss this statement in light of the events of the book.

Chapter 26

Q1. ‘I’ve realised that friends come in all forms, some your own age, but also adults and people from all over the world.

In fact, it’s the people who have suffered themselves who seem more likely to notice when someone else is in trouble.’

Do you believe this to be true? Discuss this with reference to instances from previous chapters.

Q2. In your opinion, should Riley have told Sophie the truth sooner?

Q3. Everything in Riley’s life seems to have fallen back into place. Comment on what you think comes next for her.

Reflection activities

Essay

* Do research into child and adolescent homelessness in Ireland. Write a short essay on this issue, presenting your findings and proposing some potential solutions at both an individual and a government level. (Two copybook pages)

Little acts of kindness

- * Create a mindmap with Riley in the middle and, with the help of the class, branch off to various circles with the names of everyone who has helped her along the way.
- * Ask students to think about the ways, big and small, that people have helped Riley throughout the text, in chronological order. Add their suggestions to the mindmap as you go.
- * Invite students to think about a person whose life they would like to make easier – can they list three things that are easy to do, don't cost anything (except thought and time) and would make things better for that person? Work in groups of three.
- * Think about a time when a random act of kindness had an impact on you. Write about it. (Three paragraphs)

SPHE/CSPE lens:

Action Project on homelessness in Ireland

Working on this book during English lessons could also be an opportunity to go a step further and organise group SPHE/CSPE action projects linked to the issues explored *The Truth About Riley*. This can help the students to take what they've learned and the empathy they've built out into the community and help those directly affected

1. Start by inviting speakers from Irish charities and organisations such as:

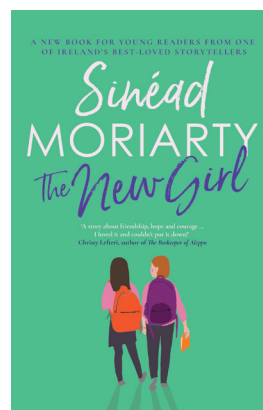
- * The Peter McVerry Trust (as mentioned in the book)
<https://pmvtrust.ie/>
- * Focus Ireland
<https://www.focusireland.ie/>
- * Simon Community
<https://www.simon.ie/>
- * Daisyhouse
<https://daisyhouse.org/>
- * Capuchin Day Centre
<https://www.capuchindaycentre.ie/>
- * Crosscare
<https://crosscare.ie/>

2. Divide the class into groups and assign each group an organisation.

- * Each group is tasked with researching the organisation, visiting them (if not feasible, conducting virtual meetings with their rep).
- * Following researching and meeting with their assigned organisation, each group can organise an action (fundraiser, event, etc.) with the support of the teacher and the organisation's chosen representative.
- * Once the action has been completed, a group presentation and report will be completed, compiling all of the research conducted by the students, the process of planning and hosting the action and a list of reflections on the project/learning outcomes on the issue of homelessness in Ireland.

About the Author

SINÉAD MORIARTY is the much-loved author of 17 novels, and her books have been translated into 25 languages. Sinéad has won over readers and critics by telling stories that are humane, moving and relevant, and her children's books are now inspiring a new generation of readers.



The New Girl, her debut children's novel, won the An Post Irish Book Award for Teen and Young Adult Book of the Year in 2021. *The Truth About Riley* is her second children's title for Gill Books.

For more information about *The New Girl* go to:
<https://www.gillbooks.ie/childrens/the-new-girl-pb>