

THE BOMBS THAT BROUGHT US TOGETHER

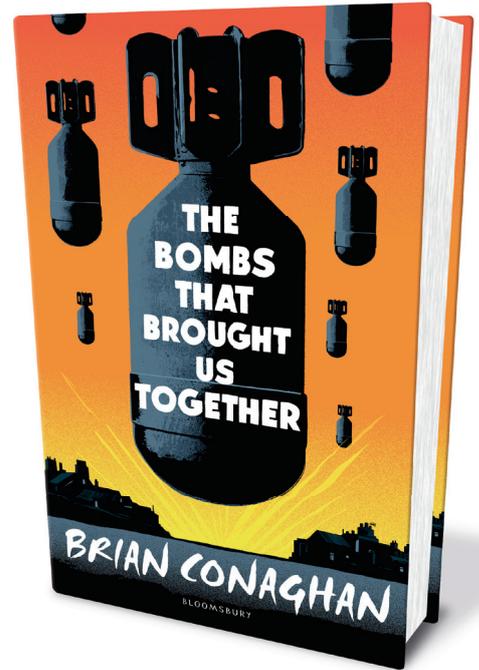
BRIAN CONAGHAN TEACHERS' NOTES

SYNOPSIS

Big-hearted, book-loving Charlie Law has lived in Little Town for all his fourteen years, but it's rumoured that life's better over the border in Old Country. Over there, you can get medicine, like the asthma inhalers Charlie's mum needs. And over there, they apparently *'didn't like how certain things were done here [in Little Town]... they thought it was all wrong, undemocratic (p.2)'*. But Charlie knows the rules of the Little Town regime, and no one wants to get on the wrong side of the Rascals who run it, especially not The Big Man. Then everything changes when Charlie meets Pavel Duda, a refugee from Old Country, and as the two boys strike up a friendship, so Old Country bombs begin to strike Little Town.

While Old Country soldiers step up their presence on the streets of Little Town, rendering Pav and his family subject to serious persecution from both sides, the friends get on with doing up their shed, but it's the shed that indebts them to The Big Man. It starts with the furniture he supplies, then there's the medication he obtains for Charlie's mum and, soon enough, Charlie's trapped in an unbearable life-and-death, Catch-22 dilemma, beholden to The Big Man who will stop at nothing to preserve Little Town, and who demands the same of Charlie.

Packed with big talking points about nationalism, refugees, trust and friendship, this is a powerful, thought-provoking novel about the lengths people will go to for those they love, and the very personal repercussions of political conflict.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1971, Brian Conaghan was raised in the Scottish town of Coatbridge. He has a Master of Letters in Creative Writing from the University of Glasgow, and his debut novel, *The Boy Who Made it Rain*, was published in 2011. *When Mr Dog Bites* was shortlisted for the 2015 Carnegie Medal and attracted both praise and controversy for its honest and moving depiction of a teenage boy with Tourette's syndrome. Conaghan has worked as a painter and decorator, barman, DJ, actor and teacher. He now lives in Dublin with his wife and daughter.

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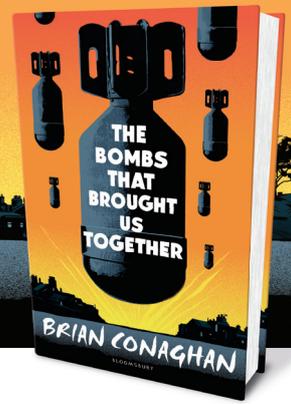


FOR DISCUSSION

1. What did you think of the title of the book? Considering its themes, think of three alternative titles.
2. *'It's OK, Charlie, everything's going to be all right,'* (p.1) says Charlie's mum near the beginning of the novel. From this opening paragraph, did you get the sense that everything really would be all right? Discuss how the author creates tension in the opening chapter.
3. *He didn't want to attract trouble; he wanted to do his job without any hassles. That's why he kept his mouth shut.* (p.9)
Say nothing, do nothing, pretend it didn't happen. Was this how things were going to roll in the Law household? (p.103)
Given the potential personal risk, do you think Charlie's parents were right to adopt this 'say nothing' attitude? Or do think people have a moral obligation to speak out against wrongs, regardless of personal risk?
4. *'I want them overthrown through democracy and diplomacy, Charlie. Not with bombs and bullets.'* (p.83)
'You fight fire with fire. It's the only lingo they know.' (p.187)
Consider these contrasting views. Do you think political recourse to 'bombs and bullets' can ever be justified? Is it acceptable to 'fight fire with fire' when diplomacy appears to have failed?
5. *'Can't they just live here with us ... in harmony ... or whatever?'* (p.84)
Do you think Charlie is naïve to ask this question? Or do you think it could be that simple for the people of Little Town and Old Country to co-exist? Is Charlie an *open book of a boy*, as his mum describes him? (p.141)
6. *'You can't escape from where you're from, or who you are, can you now?'* (p.134)
'He's only from there [...] That doesn't make him one of them.' (p.85)
Do you agree that where a person is from is an intrinsic part of their identity, or can a person transcend ('escape') their background and place of birth so they're 'only from' somewhere? How are both these views borne out in the novel?
7. What was your first impression of Pav? Did your opinion change during the course of the novel?
8. Why do you think Charlie and Pav became friends? Why do you think Charlie taught Pav the 'local lingo'?
9. How did you feel when Pav questioned The Big Man's henchman (p.136)?
What did this reveal about Pav's character? Why do you think it made Charlie want to hug Pav?
10. *'We'll sort something out later, eh?'* The Big Man winked. (p.62)
What was your first impression of The Big Man? What did you think he meant by 'sort something out later'?
The Big Man had Mum's last breath in his hands. (p.152) How did you feel when Charlie asked The Big Man for inhalers for his mum? Should he have *kept Mum out of this mess?* (p.149)

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11. Should Charlie have refused to conceal The Big Man's guns in the shed? Could he have refused? What would you have done in Charlie's position?

12. *'See, those bastards terrorise and hound everyone that comes into their path, Charlie.'*

AND YOU DON'T?

Terrorise and hound, was it? Probably wasn't the time to teach The Big Man about the wonderful world of irony, or throw the words pot and kettle at him. (p.272).

What does Charlie mean by this? Why might The Big Man's opinion of Old Country people be considered ironic?

13. Which character did you most empathise with? Which character would you like to have known more about and why?

14. How did you feel when Max and Bones described Pav as the 'enemy' (p.227) and attacked him? Can you understand why they did it? Why do you think some Little Towners treated Old Country refugees with such hostility?

15. Discuss the effect of political conflict on personal relationships with reference to Charlie or Pavel's family.

16. *It was agony not knowing what to do. (p.279)*

What would you have decided to do? Would you have told anyone what you'd promised The Big Man?

17. Do you think Charlie has *good cause* to hate Old Country people (p.293)? In his position, would you hate them? Or, like Mercy, do you think that hating them *'blurs the real issues and distorts an understanding of the possibility of progress'* (p.294)?

18. In your opinion, did the Old Country invasion bring *progress* to Little Town, as Mercy discusses in Chapter 29?

19. Old Country *don't like how certain things are done here [...] They think it's all wrong, undemocratic. Inhumane [...] Funny thing is, we've heard that things over there aren't much better [...]* (p.2)

Consider the role of propaganda in the conflict between Old Country and Little Town. How did you feel when you learned that Erin's mum had been airlifted to a hospital in Old Country? Did this change your opinion of the Old Country regime?

Discuss the role of propaganda in a real-world conflict.

20. Did any moments in the novel make you laugh?

21. How satisfying was the novel's conclusion? Did anything surprise you?

22. Can this novel be considered a coming-of-age story? What does Charlie learn about himself and human nature during the course of the novel? What have you learned from reading Charlie's story? Do you think Charlie's story and the situation between Old Country and Little Town have any parallels in contemporary world events?

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BEYOND THE BOOK: CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

Writing from different viewpoints: write a news report

- Imagine you're a journalist for a Little Town newspaper. Write a 300-word report about the night of the first bombing. Give your piece an arresting headline.
- Imagine you're a journalist for an Old Country newspaper and write a 300-word report about the same incident.

Writing from different viewpoints:

Mentioning the following points, write a chapter from Max's point of view set just after he and Bones have attacked Pav:

- why you attacked Pav
- your opinions of Old Country
- what you feel about Pav and his family as Old Country refugees
- how you feel after attacking Pav

Writing from different viewpoints:

Write a chapter from Captain Duda's view describing how she felt when Pav came to her with the notes. Think about how conflicted she might have felt between her duty to serve Old Country and her family.

Descriptive detail

Throughout the novel, Charlie and Pav colour their descriptions with some unique metaphors and similes, for example:

- *You could feel the pressure on the streets; it hugged your body and kissed your face.* (Charlie, p.132)
- *That's when my sphincter opened and closed again and again like a camera shutter.* (Charlie p.147)
- *'Her head is the spaghetti plate'* (Pav p.164)
- *'The shirt collar made his neck appear like a toothpick in a Polo mint.'* (p.201)

Write your own metaphors or similes to describe these conditions:

- Pressure
- Terror
- Confusion
- Skinniness

What happens next?

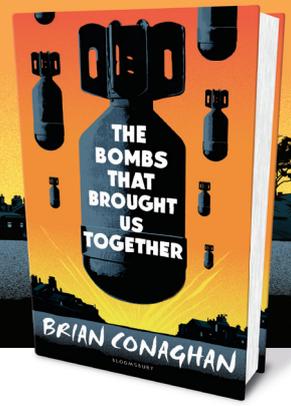
Write an additional chapter to the novel set one year later. Imagine what might have changed politically between Little Town and Old Country. Has life changed for Pav's family and other refugees like them? Has life changed for the Little Towners? Imagine how Charlie's relationships with Erin and Pav might have developed. Have Pav and Mercy become close?

Back cover blurb

Write your own back cover copy for *The Bombs That Brought Us Together*. Think about which elements of the story potential readers should know about. Think about the style and tone of your copy – it needs to grab the attention of potential readers and give a flavour of the book, without giving too much away. You might like to consider selecting an excerpt to include.

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BEYOND THE BOOK: FURTHER READING

Noughts and Crosses trilogy, Malorie Blackman

Chaos Walking trilogy, Patrick Ness

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas; *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain*, John Boyne

Boy in the Tower, Polly Ho-Yen

By the same author:

When Mr Dog Bites

The Boy Who Made it Rain