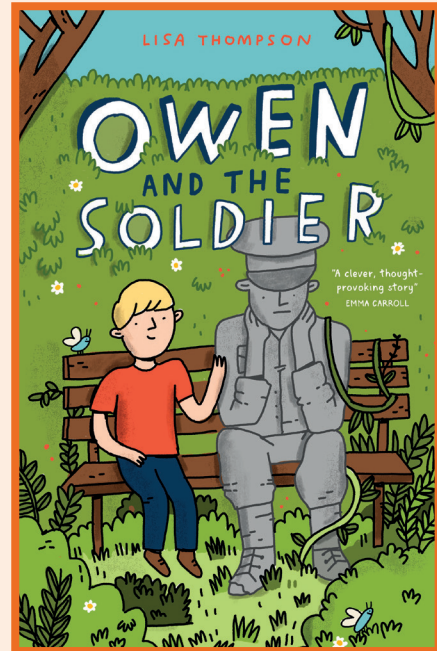




Barrington Stoke

CLASSROOM RESOURCES



OWEN AND THE SOLDIER

Lisa Thompson

- PART 1** Synopsis and Themes
- PART 2** Suggested Questions to Develop Reading Strategies
- PART 3** Creative Writing Exercises
- PART 4** About Lisa Thompson



PART I SYNOPSIS AND THEMES

SYNOPSIS AND THEMES



This guide has been produced to provide ideas for guiding young readers through Lisa Thompson's **Owen and the Soldier**, a brilliant short novel with powerful themes. The guide is written to be used after reading the full text in order to discuss the book and its overarching themes as a whole.

A synopsis is followed by quotes from the book with suggestions for discussion points designed to help young readers engage with the complex topics the book covers. The questions assigned to each quote are intended to further understanding of the text and provide opportunities for classroom discussion or written work. There are also suggestions for creative writing exercises and a brief author biography.

We hope you enjoy using these resources with your class.

Lisa Thompson's **Owen and the Soldier** is the story of Owen, who is having a difficult time at home and at school, and who finds comfort in talking to the statue of a stone soldier in the local park.

At home Owen and his mum are struggling. His dad isn't around anymore and his mum is not coping very well. Owen is having to act as a carer to both his mum and himself, and is having to look after the important things like food shopping and laundry. He is very worried about his mum and doesn't know how to ask for help.

At school Owen finds it difficult to make friends and speak up in class, most days the prospect of school brings him a lot of worries and anxieties. He particularly dislikes Mr Jennings' English class as he expects a lot of participation. When Mr Jennings asks Owen to write and read a poem for the opening of the new school library, the thought of doing it makes Owen feel sick with worry.

One day Owen discovers the sad looking statue of a soldier at the local war memorial. Owen likes the statue and finds that talking to him eases his worries and helps him feel less alone, even if the soldier can't talk back. When Owen discovers that the soldier is being removed, he is terrified that he is losing the one 'person' that he can really talk to.

Owen and the Soldier is written in a gentle, accessible style whilst remaining a powerful story that covers a wide array of serious and moving topics. This book is perfect for classroom discussions as it will help children to engage with and begin to understand the importance of remembrance and war memorials, the difficult lives of young carers, dealing with anxiety and grief, learning to express your own worries, and knowing how and when to ask for help.

PART 2 SUGGESTED QUESTIONS TO DEVELOP READING STRATEGIES

I heard the entire class groan. All the other teachers knew I didn't like talking in class, so they didn't bother asking me questions any more. But Mr Jennings was quite new and he wouldn't give up.

I knew my answer, but I could still feel my face burning. The words jumbled around in my head. I tried to get my brain to grab hold of them and put them in the right order. [page 9]

Explore Owen's worries and difficulties at school:

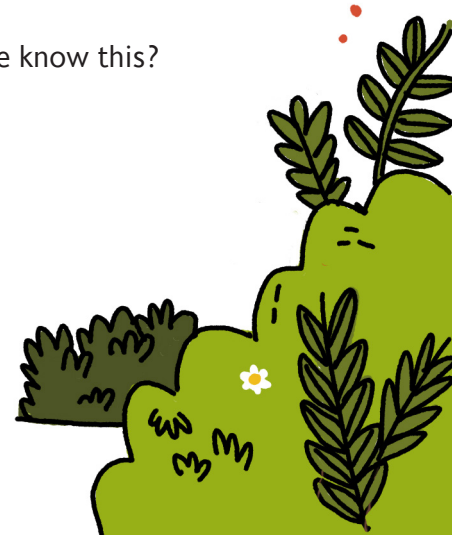
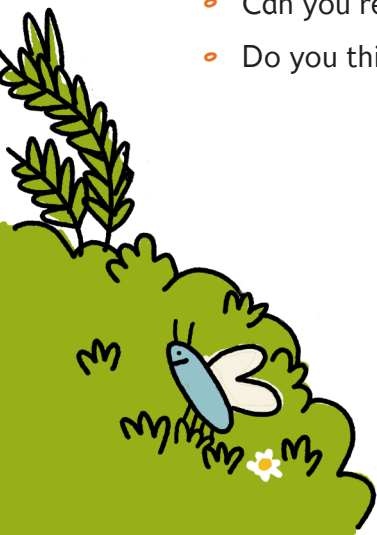
- How does Owen feel about school? Why do you think he feels like that?
- Why does Owen struggle with Mr Jennings' class?
- Do you ever feel like Owen does about school? Do you have a teacher like Mr Jennings?

Owen's difficulties at school are explored again when Mr Jennings asks him to write and read a poem:

I felt sick. There was no way I was going to read a poem out. Ever [...] "You know that feeling when you get up in the morning and have a lot you're worrying about?" I asked the soldier. "But then something happens and you wish you could go back to that morning, because the worries you thought were bad weren't that bad after all?" [page 26]

Pick out some examples from both quotes (or from other parts of the book) and explore how the author shows Owen is worried:

- What language does the author use to show Owen is worried?
- What images does the author create to show Owen is worried?
- How do we feel about Owen when reading these passages?
- Can you relate to how Owen is feeling?
- Do you think Owen has other worries outside of school? How do we know this?



I wasn't late because of my alarm clock. I was late because Mum was crying in the bathroom. I had to calm her down by sitting on the other side of the door and speaking to her. She came out eventually and said sorry to me and gave me a big hug. [page 17]

[...]

Mum hadn't always been like this [...] about a year ago, she'd begun to change. At first, she just seemed to forget to do stuff like brush her hair or make my packed lunch, but it got worse when she stopped working. [page 38]

Discuss Owen's home life and explore the above quotes:

- What do we know about Owen's mum? How do you feel about Owen's mum?
- Imagine you are Owen's friend.
 - Do you think you could help Owen?
 - How would you help him?
 - What advice would you give him about his mum?
- Do you think Owen is struggling to ask for help? Why?
- Why does Owen say everything is 'fine' or 'ok' even when it's not?
 - Have you ever done this?
 - Why do you think people do this?
- Who could Owen ask for help?



The soldier stared at the ground with his elbows fixed to his knees. I put my bag to one side and sat in exactly the same way. I focused on the ground and creased my forehead a bit, just like his. We sat there for a moment, our bodies mirroring each other. [page 26]

[...]

I looked across at the soldier in his uniform. He looked so anxious. His worries were far bigger than mine. I put my hand onto his cold arm and gave him a pat as I leaned back on the bench. [page 27]

Explore Owen's relationship with the stone soldier:

- Why do you think Owen talks to the stone soldier?
- What do you think the soldier represents to Owen?
- How does the statue relate to Owen's dad?
- Why do you think Owen talks to the soldier instead of to a real person?
- Can you relate to Owen's relationship with the statue?
- Do you have an object or place, like the stone soldier, that helps you?

Think about other inanimate objects that people may ‘talk’ to as a way to reflect, remember or ease their worries.

As a group list and discuss other examples. Some suggestions to explore may include:

- A diary or a journal
- Worry people or worry dolls
- Mirrors
- A beloved toy
- Places or items of religious/spiritual significance (prayer beads, statues, shrines)
- Other places of remembrance (memorial benches, plaques, graves)



He didn't look so brave to me – he just looked like a normal man who was made to go to war [...] The small area behind the hedge was known as the war memorial garden [...] There was just the stone soldier on the bench, the bin and a plaque with twenty-five names engraved on it. Those were the names of men from our town who died during the First World War. I once asked Dad which one the soldier was, but Dad said that he represents all of the soldiers who died and that he wasn't a real-life person. [page 4 &5]

Discuss remembrance and war memorials, and their place in the book:

- What is Remembrance Day? What does remembrance mean?
- Why do we have memorials? What do they represent?
- Do you think it's important to keep and take care of these memorials? Why?
- Do you know if there's a memorial in your town/city?

No

- Research online or at the library and find out if there's a memorial in your town or in a town close by. (Ask an adult, they might know without having to look it up!)
- Find out what the memorial represents. Is it for a specific group, or regiment of the army? A specific conflict? Or is it more general than that?
- Find out what the memorial looks like. Does it look like Owen's soldier?
- How does the memorial make you feel?





Yes

- Is the memorial in your town for something specific? A group of people or regiment? A specific conflict? Or is it more general than that?
 - What does your town memorial look like? Does it look like Owen's soldier?
 - How does the memorial make you feel?
 - Research online or at the library and find out about another war memorial. It could be in a town close to you or somewhere further away. In what ways is it different from your town memorial?
- o What does Owen's dad mean when he says that the stone soldier "represents all of the soldiers who died"?
 - o Owen takes great care in looking after the soldier and keeping him clean. Why do you think this is?
 - o Why might the stone soldier mean something more to Owen specifically?
-

"Just pretend, OK? Just pretend to be brave."

I looked back at her and thought of the soldier on the bench. I thought about how brave he was. And then I stood up slowly to take my turn. [page 66]

Explore the theme of bravery in the book:

- o Do you think Owen is brave?
- o In what way is Owen brave? What situations require him to be brave?
 - Find specific examples in the book that highlight Owen's bravery.
- o What other characters in the book are brave?
- o Owen thinks the soldier would have been a very brave man. Do you agree? Why?
- o What do you think about Megan's advice?
 - Have you ever pretended to be brave even though you weren't?
 - Does pretending to be brave work?
 - How can pretending help you feel braver?
 - Do you think the soldiers in WWI ever pretended to be brave?



Owen and the soldiers that the statue represents are brave in different ways and for different reasons. Everyone can find the strength to be brave and bravery can mean many different things. Discuss as a group:

- o What does bravery mean to you?

There are many people, like soldiers, whose job requires them to be brave.

As a group list and discuss other examples. Some suggestions to explore may include:

- Emergency services
- Doctors and nurses
- Pilots
- Astronauts
- Performers (actors, musicians, dancers)
- Teachers
- Politicians
- Stunt performers



In what different ways are these people brave?

Something Simple by Owen Fletcher

*Something simple,
Can remind me of you.
A mug in a cupboard.
A stranger in blue.*

*An old stone soldier,
Making me smile.
He's crumbling now,
He's been there for a while.*

*My dad went to war
But he didn't come home.
He won't hear me laugh,
Like the soldier of stone.*

*One is now gone,
But the other must stay.
Save the stone soldier,
Don't take him away.*

Discuss Owen's poem:

- Do you like Owen's poem?
- How does the poem make you feel?
- What is Owen's poem about?
- What does the poem reveal about Owen?
- Does the poem have multiple meanings? What are they?
- Do you think Owen is brave for reading out his poem? Why?



PART 3 CREATIVE WRITING EXERCISES

Write a poem like Owen's.

It could be about something you're worried about, something else you are feeling or about an object or place that means something special to you.

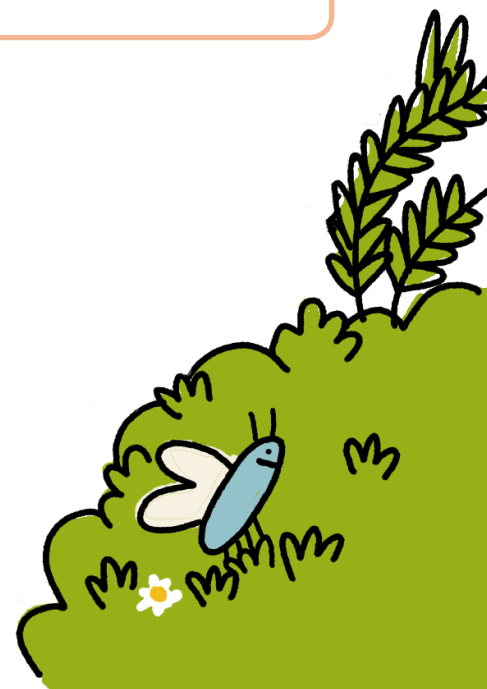
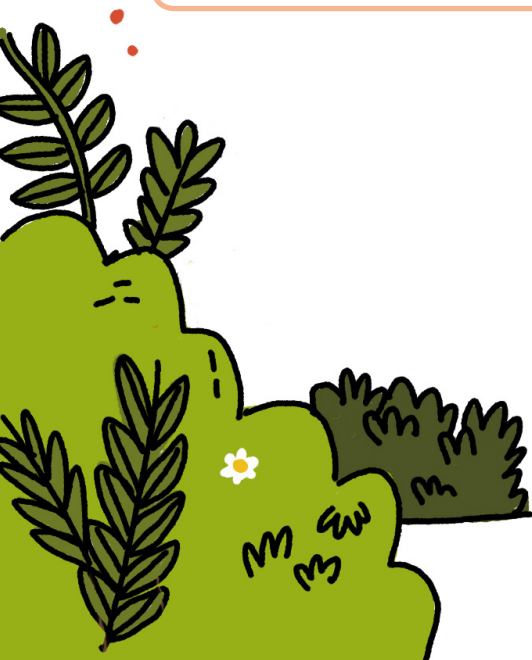
If you're studying the World Wars or thinking about remembrance, try writing a poem about this. Use examples of local or national memorials or remembrance celebrations to help with ideas.

Write about an object or a place that helps you or others to reflect, remember or feel less worried.

You can write this as a reflective piece that is personal to you or you could research a memorial like the stone soldier and write about that.

Write about Owen from the perspective of the stone soldier.

Imagine you're the soldier. What would you be thinking as Owen tells you all his worries? What do you wish you could say to Owen?



PART 4 ABOUT LISA THOMPSON



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Lisa Thompson is the bestselling author of *The Goldfish Boy* and *The Light Jar*. *The Goldfish Boy* was a Waterstones Children's Book of the Month and was nominated for the Carnegie Medal, the Branford Boase Award and the Waterstones Children's Book Prize. Before becoming a novelist, Lisa worked as a broadcast assistant for BBC Radio 2 and CPL Productions, where she says she made tea for lots of famous people. Lisa lives in Suffolk with her family and an adopted cat called Ziggy.



Illustration by Mike Lowery