

HOPE AGAINST HOPE

Sheena Wilkinson

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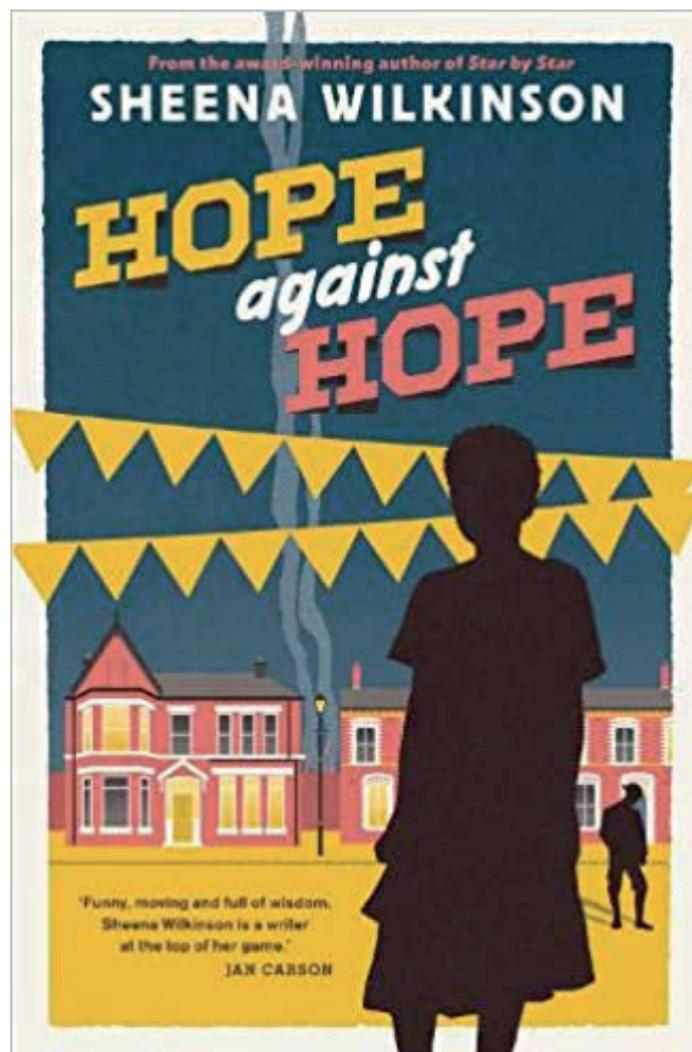
Suitable for 14+

Themes Community, gender roles, the aftermath of World War I, the 1921 partition of Ireland

Summary It is 1921. Ireland has been at war with Britain for two years. Communities are torn apart by bitter hatred and now a hard border splits the island. Polly runs away to Helen's Hope hostel in Belfast, a feminist space where young women live and work together – a haven of tolerance and diversity in a fractured city. But some people hate Helen's Hope and its progressive values. How can a few girls stand up to hatred when some of it comes from within their own walls? And when the hostel is violently attacked, how can Polly keep hope alive?

Judges' Comments This remarkable historical novel is the funny and moving story of Polly, who runs away to Helen's Hope hostel in Belfast and lives in a cross-community feminist space of tolerance and inclusion. Set in 1921, when Ireland is at war with Britain and a border is introduced on the island of Ireland, this is an original and expertly written exploration of an aspect of Irish history largely ignored in children's literature. Wilkinson's skilful prose captures the sense of the unknown as characters face prejudice and violence while struggling to remain hopeful for their future on a divided island.

About the Author Sheena Wilkinson is one of the most acclaimed Irish writers for young people. Since the publication of the multi-award-winning *Taking Flight* in 2010, she has published several novels, including *Grounded*, which won the 2013 Children's Books Ireland Book of the Year Award. Her first historical novel, *Name upon Name*, set during the 1916 Easter Rising, was chosen as Waterford City's One Community, One Book title; *Star by Star*, set at the time of the momentous 1918 general election, when women in Ireland voted for the first time, won the 2018 Children's Books Ireland Honour Award for Fiction and was selected as a BookTrust Future Classic. Sheena lives in County Down, where she spends her time writing, singing and walking in the forest thinking up more stories.



QUESTIONS

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

1. What can you guess about this book simply by looking at the front cover? Do you like the cover art? What might it hint at? What do you think of the title of this book? What could the figure on the front cover be hoping for?
2. Although this book is not part of a series, this story contains some characters that feature in the author's previous novels *Name upon Name* and *Star by Star*. Have you ever read any of these books? Why do you think an author might use recurring characters like this?
3. Read the blurb on the back cover. This book is set a hundred years ago – how different does it sound from life in 2021? Is there anything in the description that surprises you? Do you like historical books?
4. Read the author's historical note. Do you find this historical note useful for giving you a better sense of the context of this story? What did you know about the partition of Ireland before reading this? Do you think the historical events of 1921 have any influence on Ireland north or south of the border today?

AS YOU READ

Chapters 1–2

1. Polly's town of Mullankeen is on the border between Armagh and Monaghan, meaning that if Ireland is partitioned the town will be split between two countries. What different types of identities and political beliefs do the characters present in the first two chapters?
2. We learn that some people in Mullankeen boycott Polly's father's shop due to her brother Leo's decision to fight for the British army. How do you think Leo feels about returning home from World War I to this attitude? Polly references that Leo has 'spells', 'black moods' and often drinks alcohol excessively: why do you think this might be? Why do you think Polly finds it so hard to understand her brother?
3. Polly and Catherine are cousins but appear to be quite different. What sort of relationship do you think the two girls have? Why do you think Polly is so fearful of Catherine's mother seeing her as a bad influence?

Chapters 3–5

1. Although Flora and Catherine are going to Belfast to further their education, Polly is expected to stay home and care for her father and brother because her mother is dead. Why do you think all three girls have such different expectations for their futures? Why might Polly's father be so reluctant to let her help in the shop?

2. Leo attacks Polly when she says she wishes he never came home. Do you understand how Polly's anger has built up? Were you shocked by Leo's actions and that Polly's father does not defend her? Do you think Polly made the right choice to leave?
3. Polly has a whirlwind introduction to Belfast city. Was there anything that surprised you in the author's descriptions of Belfast at this time? The group is caught in an argument regarding a flag: why do you think tensions might be particularly high in relation to a symbol like a flag at this time? Why do you think the words Polly says 'feel strange in her mouth'?

Chapters 6–10

1. Cassie explains some of the rules of life at Helen's Hope: what are your first impressions of what life might be like for Polly there? What do you think of Polly's father's reaction to her leaving? Catherine thinks Polly is 'the kind of girl for Helen's Hope'. From what you have read so far, do you think Polly will succeed in fitting in?
2. In these chapters we get to know the stories of some of the girls that Polly meets, including Tessa, Ivy, Maggie and Brigid. How is life different for girls in 1921? Were you surprised by some of the working conditions that they have experienced? What kind of welcome do you think Polly has received from the other girls and why do you think this might be?
3. The girls mistakenly think that Polly has 'a pash' for Sandy. Why do you think Polly laughs and goes along with the jokes of the others rather than correcting them on this? What are your first impressions of Stella and how do you think Polly feels about her at this stage?

Chapters 11–13

1. In this chapter we learn more about the founding principles behind Helen's Hope and the importance of community cooperation and non-sectarianism. Do you get the impression from this chapter that identity is straightforward for all of the inhabitants? How easy or difficult do you think it is for the inhabitants of Helen's Hope to live peacefully together coming from such a variety of backgrounds and viewpoints?
2. A debate breaks out in Polly's first meeting about flags and emblems. Do you agree with Stella that all flags and emblems should be avoided for Helen's Hope to remain neutral? Do you agree with Ivy that this should also be extended to flags for trade unions and women's groups?
3. A brick is thrown at the garden greenhouse and it is mentioned that some neighbours do not approve of Helen's Hope because it is an all-female hostel and houses people of both Protestant and Catholic faiths. What do you think of this notion? Do you think that the inhabitants of Helen's Hope are safe in their neighbourhood?

4. Everyone is free to celebrate their faith however they wish at Helen's Hope, so Polly and some of the others attend mass. The girls are again targeted by an aggressive group of boys. Why do you think this group continues to target the girls?
5. Stella reprimands Polly for her actions and the choice of language she uses in the street when speaking about Protestants. Were you surprised by Polly's reaction and anger or can you empathise? Do you agree with Stella that Polly's language was also bigoted?

Chapters 14–16

1. Polly struggles with the rules at Helen's Hope and controlling her temper. Do you think she has felt 'on trial' for her behaviour before? Do you think that Stella is being unfair about Polly?
2. Stella and Sandy talk about whether or not Helen's Hope is an oasis of peace or just a mirage. At this stage what do you think? How do you think Stella could help to make Helen's Hope more accepted in the local community?
3. Sandy speaks about what has happened to returning soldiers who had joined the British army and the lack of employment prospects in Belfast. Are you surprised by the stories of the lives of former soldiers that Polly encounters?

Chapters 17–20

1. Cassie encourages Polly to stay better informed on the issues of the day. Do you agree with her that this is important? How interested are you in staying informed on politics? How easy do you find it? Later, Polly attempts to read the three newspapers in the sitting room and finds that the reports are conflicting. Why do you think this is?
2. Cassie votes in the 1921 election but many women are still not permitted to vote as they are not homeowners. What do you know about the restrictions on female voting at this time? Cassie explains about her past involvement with the suffragettes. What do you know about the movement for the female right to vote?
3. The Unionists win the election: what ramifications do you think this will have for Belfast and for Helen's Hope? As violence increases in the city, Miss Kennedy decides to close her shop and moves to the Falls Road where she will 'be among her own kind'. Do you think Miss Kennedy has made the right decision? Do you think it is a sensible or dangerous thing for only people who are 'a similar kind' to live in the same area? Do you think Polly's garden party is a good idea?

Chapters 21–24

1. Polly and Maggie hand out leaflets for their garden party among their neighbours. What do you think of the neighbourhood from the author's descriptions? Why do you think there is such a big contrast between certain houses? Were you surprised by any of the reactions of the neighbours towards the girls and their garden party? What do you think of how Maggie deals with Fraser? How is she different to Polly? Do you agree that the girls were right to extend an invitation to Fraser's gang?
2. We get to know Maggie a bit better during these chapters. What are your impressions of her as a character? How are Polly and Maggie different? How do you think their friendship is developing?
3. As Polly gets to know Corporal Neill at the garden party it makes her think of her brother, Leo. How is Polly's behaviour towards Corporal Neill different than towards Leo? Why do you think this might be? Do you think the way Polly looks at Leo is changing at all?
4. What are your thoughts on the garden party? Do you think the girls succeed in their mission to help Helen's Hope to become more accepted in the community? What do you think of the behaviour of Fraser's gang who attend without him? Does this scene make you feel hopeful or apprehensive?

Chapters 25–26

1. Ivy's secret is discovered. Why do you think Ivy is so determined to complete the flag? Polly recognises that Ivy is perhaps living in fear, something she can empathise with from her life at home. Do you think Polly and Ivy have more in common than they think? Are you surprised by the action Polly takes with the flag?
2. In these chapters we see some more of Fraser's home life. Does this change how you look at Fraser as a character? Are you surprised by Fraser's strong reaction to seeing the slashed flag? Do you agree with him that Polly's actions are disrespectful to the men who fought and died in World War I? Stella remarks that she doesn't think this is the end of the incident. Do you agree with her? Do you think Stella and Polly's actions have helped Ivy?

Chapters 27–28

1. Polly spots Flora Galbraith in the park. How have her feelings changed towards her and why do you think this is? Do you think Polly has matured since coming to Helen's Hope? Was giving Corporal Neill the spare key the right thing to do?
2. Stella tells Polly about Ivy's past. Were you shocked by what happened to Ivy? Does this change your opinion on Ivy or explain some of her actions? Polly envisions how talking with Ivy will go and likens it to her beloved school stories.

- How do things work out differently in reality? What do you think of the way Polly speaks to Ivy? Do you think Ivy is justified in being concerned about what will happen next and in warning Polly?

Chapters 29–30

- The factory workshop is set on fire. Why do you think this has happened and who do you think is responsible? Do you agree with Stella that it was necessary for them to stand up to Fraser? How does the community react to the burning and was there anything about this that you didn't expect? What do you think the future holds for Helen's Hope?
- Stella reveals she has feelings for Edith and not Sandy. How do you think Polly feels about this? Why do you think Polly doesn't realise that having feelings for people of the same gender is a possibility in real life?

Chapters 31–32

- Polly struggles to push past her feelings of guilt after the death of Corporal Neill. What do you think of the ways in which Maggie and Stella try to help Polly? How do these events help Polly to better understand her brother, Leo? Are you surprised when Polly decides to reach out to Leo? Leo comes to visit Polly. Why do you think the author chooses to end the story on this note? Polly says he 'seems familiar': do you think this could hint at a hopeful reunion between brother and sister?
- The lady with the mauve hat from the garden party is revealed to be the headmistress of Ellis House. Do you agree with her that there are a lot of things the students of Ellis House could learn from the inhabitants of Helen's Hope? What kinds of skills could they share? Do you think Stella will make a good teacher? What do you think of the plans to reach out to the local community? Does the author leave you with a sense of hope for the future of Polly and the girls of Helen's Hope?

AFTER YOU HAVE READ

- Throughout this story Polly is described as 'impulsive', 'a bad influence', 'never thinking before she speaks', 'a firebrand' and 'likely to go to the bad'. Having read the full story, do you agree with any of these descriptions? Do you think Polly changes as a person over the course of the book? How and why do you think this happens? How do Polly's relationships with those around her change her as a person?
- Although this book is set in 1921, the effects of World War I are still being felt. How do the experiences of Sandy, Leo and Corporal Neill differ when they return from the war? Were you surprised by the treatment of former British servicemen at this time in Ireland? In your opinion, has Leo really 'come home without a scratch'?
- Polly describes 'having a pash' for Flora Galbraith and later Stella. Would you classify this as an LGBT+ story? Why do you think Polly does not seem to understand or have the language to describe her feelings? Why do you think she believes these feelings are not 'real'?
- This story takes place in Northern Ireland in counties Monaghan and Armagh and in Belfast city. As a result of this, the characters use a lot of different slang and local pronunciation of certain words. What did you think of the author's use of the characters' own accents? Were there any words or expressions you were surprised by? Did you think that the author's use of language added to the story?
- The issue of the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State is debated in this story, and some characters insult or discriminate against others based on their religion. Considering current issues surrounding Brexit, how do you think these topics are still relevant in 2021?
- Community is a big theme in this story: the community within Helen's Hope, the wider community of their neighbourhood and the conflict between different religious communities. As Helen's Hope is founded on the principles of non-sectarianism and cooperation, how successful do you think the girls and women are in creating a cooperative and supportive community? How does their role in their neighbourhood change? Do you agree with the Helen's Hope ideology? Do you think this is something that would work in reality or somewhere you would like to live?
- A lot of people object to Helen's Hope simply because all of the women and girls living there are doing so without a male presence. How does the author portray gender roles in this story? What do you think of the expectations placed upon women at this time, and do you think there were a lot of prospects for girls like Polly? How do class and religion affect the futures of the girls and women in this story?

ACTIVITIES

- Research some of the following topics – the 1921 general election; the suffragettes; attitudes to returning ex-British soldiers in Ireland; the boundary between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland – and present some further background information to your class or reading group.
- Create your own Helen's Hope. Examine the ethos and founding principles of Helen's Hope. Now imagine you are opening your own similar community: what would be the rules and the guiding principles, and how would it function on a day-to-day basis?
- When Cassie encourages Polly to become informed on current affairs she is confused by the different and conflicting reports on the same events in newspapers. Choose a current news story and find examples using either print newspapers or online news sources of the ways in which different news sources shape the same story. What conclusions can you come to based on your investigations? Considering the idea of 'fake news', what do you think is important to keep in mind when reading about current affairs and issues?
- Polly loves girls' school stories and references them throughout the book. Have you ever read any similar sounding stories? If you have access to your local library or school library, can you find any examples of girls' school stories? What do you think of these stories and how are they different or similar to modern stories about the lives of girls?
- **Community baking:** Catherine's delicious cakes help to bring everyone in the community together at the garden party. Why not bake your own cakes or biscuits in your home and, if it is safe to do so, distribute them on your neighbours' doorsteps as a random act of kindness
- **Time capsule:** *Hope against Hope* takes place a hundred years ago. Although much has changed, some things have surprisingly remained the same or are being debated and talked about once again. What do you think the world will be like in a hundred years? Make a predictions list, write a letter to your future self and seal it never to be opened for fifty years, or create a time capsule with your class or family capturing what life is like in 2021, and bury it to be opened in a hundred years' time in 2121.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- Sheena Wilkinson is the author of two other stories linked to *Hope against Hope*. Check out her publisher, Little Island Books, for more information and activity guides on her novels *Name upon Name* and *Star by Star*: <https://littleisland.ie/book-guides/>
- Sheena Wilkinson's title *Star by Star* was previously shortlisted for these awards. A resource guide for it can also be found on the Children's Books Ireland website: https://cbi-school-resources.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/excellent_books_for_the_classroom_secondary_schools.pdf
- Explore this online exhibition from the National Library of Ireland on World War I in Ireland: <http://www.nli.ie/wwi/>
- Visit the RTÉ Archives for more information on government formation in Ireland 1919–1921: <https://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/920-first-dail-eireann-1919/>