

WHY THE MOON TRAVELS

Oein DeBhairduin

Illustrated by Leanne McDonagh

Skein Press

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Suitable for 10–16

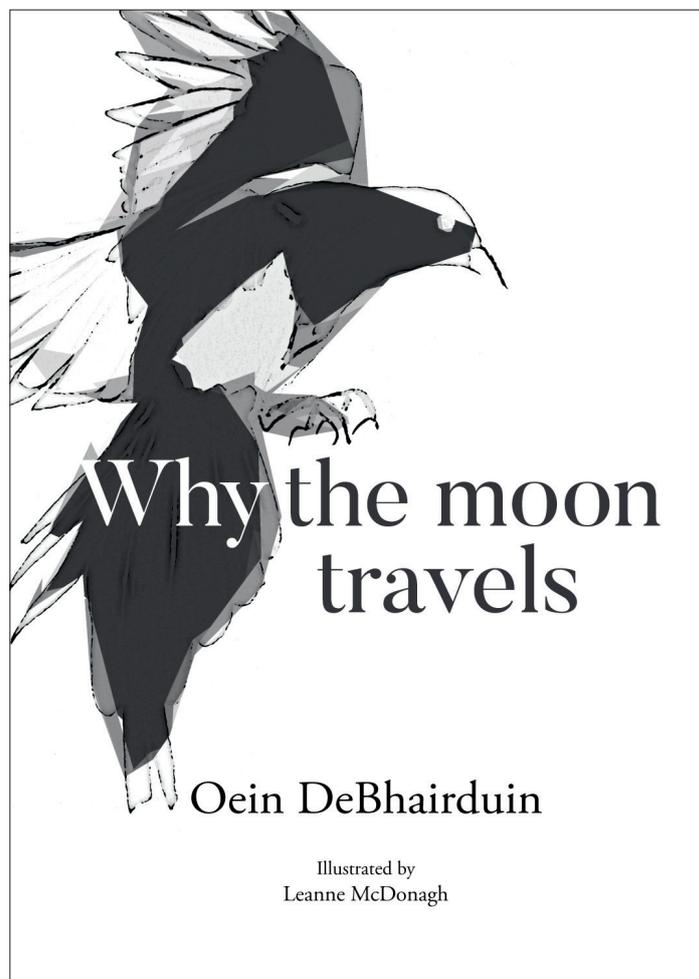
(primary pupils would benefit from reading with a teacher)

Themes Travellers, the natural world, family, kindness, community, folklore, storytelling, the supernatural

Summary This is the first collection of Traveller folk tales to be written and illustrated by Travellers. The twenty stories, honed by retelling down generations, recount how the rivers of Ireland were born, how bees learned to sting, how the first yew tree grew in a graveyard and other enchanting origin tales about the natural world. Every story begins with a personal recollection by the author that celebrates his childhood, family love and Traveller lore. The lavish, lyrical prose and beautiful black and white illustrations lead readers to the border between the real and supernatural worlds and to the heart of Traveller culture.

Judges' Comments The twenty stories in this extraordinary collection come from the Irish Traveller community, the Mincéirí, the Pavee. Collected by DeBhairduin and retold with passion and lyricism, these are tales of giants, foxes and owls, of friendship, love and hunger, of famine, heartache and loss. In these stories, this world and the otherworld are intertwined, the personal is often used to explore the universal, and storytelling becomes a means of making sense of our surroundings. This is a beautifully written and ground-breaking book, celebrating and sharing a rich tradition that may be unfamiliar to many readers.

About the Author Oein DeBhairduin is a creative soul with a passion for poetry, folk herbalism and preserving the beauty of Traveller tales, sayings, retellings and historic exchanges. He is the manager of an education centre and a long-time board member of several Mincéirí community groups, including having had the honour of being vice-chair of the Irish Traveller Movement and a council member of Mincéir Whidden. He seeks to pair community activism with cultural celebration, recalling old tales with fresh modern connections, and, most of all, he wishes to rekindle the hearth fires of a shared kinship.



About the Illustrator Leanne McDonagh is an artist and an educator. She is also a Traveller woman who grew up on a halting site, with first-hand experience of the prejudices and misconceptions that society has about Travellers. As an artist she feels she has a unique opportunity to represent and record her community from within. She is employed by Cork Institute of Technology as the Traveller Education Coordinator, while she also develops her practice as an artist. She is currently working on a public sculpture funded by the Per Cent for Art Scheme.



QUESTIONS

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

1. What do you think of the black and white cover? Is it more or less effective than using colour? Why or why not?
2. What associations do you have with magpies?
3. Does the title make you want to read the book? Why or why not?
4. Before you start reading, invent your own story to answer why the moon travels.
5. Do the blurb and reviews on the back cover make you want to read the book? Why or why not?

AS YOU READ

'The yew tree' (page 1)

1. The author writes on page 1 of remembering those who have passed and 'keeping them alive in stories of how they were and where they exist on the wiry brambles of ancestry'. Why do you think he has used 'wiry brambles' as an image for ancestry rather than the more common 'family tree'?
2. On page 2 the author describes the walls and gates of the graveyard as 'the boundary lines between the place of the dead and that of the living'. He also writes that 'Travellers have lived on the edges of society' (page vii). Write about a boundary place for you. It could be physical (e.g. a beach, a wall) or psychological (the boundary between childhood and teens, the line between fear and excitement) or any other kind of boundary.
3. In the first paragraph on page 4 (and throughout the book) the author uses wonderful similes and metaphors of nature to describe appearances, feelings and many other features. Think of an emotion – for example, happiness or anxiety – and describe it using both a simile ('happiness feels like ...') and a metaphor ('happiness is ...').
4. On page 6 the author compares the yew tree's rigidity to grief and notes how we need community to enjoy life fully. Describe a time when, and how, somebody helped you through a difficult time.

'Why dandelions grow' (page 7)

1. The author describes the garden as a 'living confidante' for his mother. Where is a place (outside or inside) that makes you feel safe and comfortable?
2. This could be a story about climate change today. Find features of the story that parallel the causes and effects of climate change.

3. The picture of the girl-plant on page 11 shows accurate, detailed observation by the illustrator. Find a common natural item (e.g. a leaf, a branch, a stone), observe it closely and then either draw or describe it in words as accurately as you can.
4. Before you read the final author's note in italics (page 12), write down the parts of a dandelion you think could form the 'sun, star and moon'.

'The birth of the rivers' (page 13)

1. The River Suleen is described as 'she' on page 13. What effect does the gender have on you as a reader? Does it strengthen or weaken the story for you, and why?
2. 'Even the stones knew' (page 16): with this phrase, inanimate stones are given minds. Again, how does this add power to the story for you (or not)?
3. Page 17 refers to 'wit' and 'arrogance'. What other qualities are demonstrated by the kunia? What qualities are demonstrated by the spirit?

'Where stars come from' (page 19)

1. The author feels 'small and inconsequential ... and a special rarity' when stargazing. How does looking up at the stars make you feel?
2. Also on page 19, he describes his mother's stance. Describe in detail a characteristic stance of someone you know well.
3. Page 21: after reading the paragraph 'The next morning ... to the lake', draw the fishing rod as accurately as you can.
4. Look up another culture's origin tale of how the stars formed, and tell it (orally) to a friend or family member.

'Airmid's voice' (page 27)

1. The author describes the pain of a horsefly bite. Describe a pain (bite, sting, burn etc.) that you have experienced as accurately as you can. Similes and metaphors may help.
2. Airmid stops speaking and her 'voice' comes through her healing. One dictionary definition of 'voice' is 'a particular opinion or attitude expressed'. Write about a way you love to use your voice – express yourself – without speaking (e.g. writing, painting, dancing, cooking).

'Why the moon travels' (page 33)

1. 'The gift of a story comes with the responsibility to retell it'. Do you agree? Why or why not? Retell one of these stories to a family member or friend.
2. The moon would visit in 'the form of a beautiful lady' (page 33). Pages 34 and 35 describe her in detail. Imagine the sun visiting as a person and describe them in detail.

3. 'Mortal men are not meant to have love affairs with those of eternity' (page 35). Would you like to live for ever? Give all your reasons why or why not.
4. 'The fragility of trust and the innate desire to love in all people' (page 37): write about someone you trust and why.

'The old man of the mountain' (page 39)

1. Which senses does the author use to describe the forest scene in the first paragraph on page 39? Go outside somewhere and describe the scene using as many senses as you can (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch).
2. Think of an activity you dislike that you have to do regularly (e.g. putting out the rubbish, clearing up after dinner) and describe the activity in a way that conveys your attitude towards it.
3. On page 41 the author describes how his father distracted them, 'easing the moment with a story'. When did a story ease a difficult task or time for you?
4. 'Life in that wild lonely place had battered his heart' (page 42). How do your physical surroundings affect your mood and outlook?
5. On page 44 the visit from Gidge reminds the old man 'how nice it could be'. When she leaves, however, he breathes 'a sigh of relief'. How could he feel both things? When do you prefer solitude? When do you prefer company?

'The women who gather' (page 49)

1. 'A subtle joy and a loud excitement': how do you feel telling stories out loud – excited, shy, nervous, confident or what? What about talking in front of an audience/public speaking? Describe as accurately as you can what happens physically in different parts of your body (e.g. your throat, chest, hands) when you talk in front of people.
2. 'Once there were old women who would travel the land' (page 50). The author doesn't write 'two old women' or 'seven old women'. What difference does the absence of a number make to you as a reader – how does it affect the feel of the story for you?
3. Why is flax described as growing 'brazenly'? (It may help to look up a picture of flax and the dictionary definition of 'brazen'.)
4. Which features and habits of the women are literally 'woven' with the features and habits of spiders in this story?

'Bees and giants' (page 55)

1. Do you remember a time when you felt exposed to the 'very real dangers of the wilder world' (page 55)? Recount or write about it.
2. Describe, in writing or orally, a childhood or family tradition you will carry with you all your life (e.g. a particular meal, song, game).
3. Write about an occasion when you felt 'minded, protected and cared for' (page 57).
4. On page 58, how has the artist conveyed strength in the picture? List the specific details.
5. The bees move from asking to begging to demanding to fighting. Do you think this is a sensible, fair progression? Can you think of any historical events where humans have done the same?

'The hedgehog and its coat' (page 63)

1. Stop reading at the bottom of page 65 (don't turn the page). From the introduction and description of the creature, and from the stories you've read so far in this book, see if you can guess what happens in the story to follow. What do you think the gráinneog's 'great kindness with no expectation of thanks' will be?
2. On page 67 the author writes 'a deep hunger had begun to crawl and inch itself across the land'. This metaphor represents the Famine as an animal. Describe and draw that animal in detail (does it have fur or scales, what colour is it, how big is it, what sound does it make, etc.?)

'The three sisters and the crow' (page 71)

1. Look at a photo of yourself when you were little. What surprises you afresh about it? What do you remember differently from the picture? What in the picture do you not remember at all?
2. 'We were beyond rich in all the ways that matter to a child' writes the author on page 72. From what you've read in the book so far, and from your own experience, what riches is the author talking about? What are the treasures of childhood for you?
3. Name a present that you have longed for in your life. Can you describe that yearning feeling using physical descriptions, similes, metaphors? How did you feel when you did or didn't receive the present?
4. Why do you think people are often frightened of those who are different, as suggested on page 74 ('fearful of being named witches')?
5. From the vivid descriptions on page 75, try drawing the three sisters.
6. On page 76 the darkness brings a sadness. Why is the physical absence of light a good metaphor for sadness? What do they have in common?

'How the badger got her stripes' (page 81)

1. The first sentence describes 'a world that can at times be unkind'. What specific unkindnesses have Travellers had to face from others?
2. The story begins in the woods on page 82. From the first paragraph, what details bring the woods to life for you?
3. Also on page 82: 'She had stern black eyes that hinted at a curious mind and always seemed to catch the glare of the noonday sun.' Such detail shows deep attention and acute observation. Find a living thing – a person, an animal or bird – and describe their eyes in detail.
4. What qualities does the badger model that are useful for our lives?

'The screech of the owl' (page 87)

1. 'Lately the road through the vale is one we [Travellers] journey at a far greater pace than those about us.' This is a poetic way of comparing what statistic between Travellers and other members of society?
2. Death is a hard issue to think about. But what clues on page 89 suggest that thinking about it could prompt us to live kinder, more loving lives?
3. On page 91, what is 'death's rarer companion', already mentioned in the introduction to this story?

'The magpie thief' (page 93)

1. The author describes two attitudes to storms: one fearful, one hopeful. Which common weather in Ireland do you love and which do you dislike most, and why?
2. On page 94, the man is described as 'handsome, but it was difficult to say why exactly'. The author then gives three examples of his attractiveness. What are they? Write down three attributes, apart from looks, that you think make a person attractive.
3. On page 96 the author describes a 'heavy cloak of loneliness'. In what ways is a heavy cloak a good metaphor for loneliness? Find pieces of clothing to represent tiredness, kindness and jealousy (describe the colour, material, size, shape etc.).
4. On page 97 the swindler turns into a magpie. What details on page 94 foreshadow this transformation?

'Where the fish get their scales' (page 99)

1. 'My heart ... never took to fishing' writes the author on page 99. Have you ever fished? Whether you have or not, does it appeal? Why or why not?
2. 'The wandering whids' on page 99: before looking at the glossary at the back, can you guess what 'whids' are in this wonderful phrase?
3. Page 100, 'The river's hair': in what ways is hair a good image for a river?

4. 'Like a fearsome dragon, coiling and uncoiling without rest' (page 101): this powerful simile describes the king's avarice. Think of a simile for the queen's generosity by completing this sentence: 'her delight in sharing her wealth [verb] inside her like a [noun or phrase]'.
5. On page 104, Skai 'felt most like herself' in the sea. In what landscape do you feel most like yourself: the mountains, the city, the beach, the forest or somewhere else?

'The fox's cry' (page 109)

1. What are the night sounds of your home? What qualities do they carry, and what emotions do they stir in you?
2. Describe your feelings when you see a dead animal on the road.
3. 'After a moment that felt like seven years, the bini gawlya squalled loudly into the woods' (page 113). The author could have written 'small child' instead of 'bini gawlya'. Why do you think he sprinkles phrases from the Traveller language of Gammon through the book? What effect does it have on you as a reader?
4. This is a compassionate portrayal of the fox who, in many cultures, is viewed as wily and untrustworthy. Which portrayal do you prefer and why?

'The good horse' (page 115)

1. The author admits his fear of horses. What emotions do you feel towards them?
2. 'The trodden roads between what is here and what is the hereafter become hazy and less understood' (page 116). Do you find darkness comforting, scary, exciting or something else?
3. Cóiiste Bodhar has no translation in the glossary. Why could that be, do you think? If you don't know what it is, guess your own translation then check (on Wikipedia). If you already know, describe its appearance in your mind.
4. The Sacking of Tuam (page 118). Look up this story: <https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/tuam-sacked-by-ric-as-reprisal-for-murdered-constables>. Imagine you're one of the children and write an account of what you've seen.
5. List five qualities displayed by Darp in this story.

'The well of lost wishes' (page 121)

1. Amid the largely positive descriptions of the husband's appearance on page 122, what one phrase hints at negativity?
2. 'The shawl about her shoulders was crimson with splashes of cerise, the colour of squeezed raspberries, and a weave that held the tone of red summer wine' (page 123). Find something that has a striking colour and try to describe it as vividly as the author paints the reds of this shawl.
3. On page 124 the paragraph 'Stopping ... waiting waters' is written mostly from the man's point of view. What one phrase comes from a different viewpoint, and whose?
4. What message does the story give about what it is wise to wish for in life?

'The screaming children' (page 129)

1. Unlike the other stories, this is recounted as a real experience of the author's grandmother. What strange happening in your or a family member's life could become a traditional story to be passed down?
2. What would you have done if you'd come upon the sight of the 'children' jumping in and out of the well? Would you have stayed to watch, run away, called to them or approached them – or what?
3. What emotions do you think Teresa felt when the 'children' turned towards her, revealing themselves to be 'old, worn and wrinkled'?
4. What details of the story suggest to you that it is true? What details suggest not?

'The dance of smoke and midges' (page 135)

1. Stop after reading the first paragraph in italics. Do you agree with the author about the purpose of stories? Write a paragraph summarising what stories mean to you – their use, their value, their importance in your life.
2. 'His heart, however, his heart was another thing' writes the author on page 137. Why do you think he has chosen to repeat 'his heart' in this sentence? What effect does it have on you as a reader?
3. The mother risks her life for her children. Sacrifice is a common theme in stories. Think of two other stories you know where someone risks their life for someone else.
4. This is a frightening story, especially for young children. Why do you think, in many cultures, there are stories designed to frighten children?
5. Do you like being frightened by stories? Why or why not?

AFTER YOU HAVE READ

1. Which of the twenty stories is your favourite and why? Give as much detail as you can (discuss or write).
2. Some of the stories are adapted to the location in which they were told to the author (e.g. 'The dance of smoke and midges', page 135; 'The well of lost wishes', page 121). Why do you think the storyteller did this for the young Oein? What power does it add to the story?
3. 'We are all made of stories' writes the author on page vii. Write one story that has 'made' you, that has helped shape your life so far. It could be a true story or experience, or something you read or were told that had a huge impact.
4. 'Travellers have lived on the edges of society' writes the author on page vii. What could be some advantages and disadvantages of this? Discuss.
5. 'This is, as far as we know, the first collection of folktales written by a Traveller about Travellers and illustrated by a Traveller' (page ix). Why is it so important that this book is by Travellers, and not a collection of Traveller stories gathered, written and illustrated by a non-Traveller? Discuss.

ACTIVITIES

- Choose one of these stories, or a favourite fairy tale, and rewrite it set in modern-day Ireland. Decide which elements you can change and which you must keep to preserve the essence of the story.
- Choose one of following and write its origins as your own folk tale:
 - The Cliffs of Moher
 - The acorn
 - The River Shannon
 - The Beara Peninsula
 - The robin's red breast
- On page 12 the author writes about picking dandelions: 'If you are lucky and pick it carefully from the ground with a song, you might find that the roots are in the form of the young lackeen.' Find another plant/weed in your garden or along the road and create a story around it based on its appearance, where it grows, what it is used for and so on.
- Interview an adult (e.g. parent, guardian, relative, teacher) about a favourite folk or fairy tale of theirs. Ask questions such as why they love it, where they first heard or read it, who told or read it to them, the memories associated with the story, what it taught them, whether it had illustrations and what impact they had.
- 'Many who speak about us do not know us' (page viii). Travellers have long faced prejudice in Ireland. If you are not from the Traveller community, discuss with family, friends, teachers and so on three ways that you can help overcome that prejudice – and put them into practice. If you are from the Traveller community, suggest three ways that non-Travellers can help overcome prejudice.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- At Home with Irish Arts Center – *Why the Moon Travels* by Oein DeBhairduin: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEIQnDf_93I
- Watch Oein DeBhairduin's 'Storytelling' video as part of Children's Books Ireland's Mind Yourself project: <https://childrensbooksireland.ie/mindyourself/>
- Oein DeBhairduin and Leanne McDonagh in conversation with writer, poet and filmmaker Damian Le Bas: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=196601045248304>
- Review of *Why the Moon Travels*: <https://childrensbooksireland.ie/review/why-the-moon-travels/>
- Irish Traveller Movement: <https://itmtrav.ie/what-is-itm/>
- The Sacking of Tuam (page 118): <https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/tuam-sacked-by-ric-as-reprisal-for-murdered-constables>