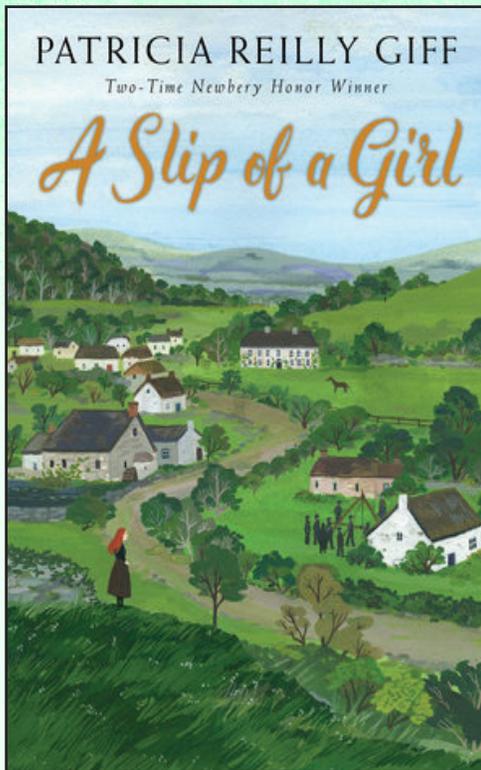


# HOLIDAY HOUSE EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



Grades  
5–9

HC: 978-0-8234-3955-3 • E-book: 978-0-8234-4308-6



## *A Slip of a Girl* by Patricia Reilly Giff

**A Bank Street Best Book of the Year**

★ “A vivid, involving historical novel . . . written in free verse.” —*Booklist*, Starred Review

★ “Giff has the rare gift of using few words—but exactly the right ones—to evoke strong and varied images and feelings. Readers will be riveted . . . Lovely.” —*Kirkus Reviews*, Starred Review

### ABOUT THE BOOK

**A heart-wrenching novel in verse about a poor girl surviving the Irish Land War, by a two-time Newbery Honor-winning author.**

It's nineteenth-century Ireland and Anna Mallon, called a slip of a girl by Da, promised her dying mother that she would take care of her little sister, Nuala, and protect the family home. The rains threaten the potato crops, and the English raise the rents on Irish farms. Many families are evicted, and the Mallons are facing a similar fate.

In a fit of anger, Anna breaks a window in the earl's home, and she and Da are arrested and thrown in prison. She manages to escape, collect Nuala from a helpful neighbor, and take off in search of an aunt she has never met. The old woman is poor but makes a meager income by weaving shawls and blankets for the English. Her name is Ethna, but Anna simply calls her “the Aunt.” It is clear that the Aunt and Nuala are fond of each other, but Anna thinks the old woman mean and disagreeable. Still, Anna grows to love the woman, and she leaves Nuala in her care. This fulfills Anna's first promise to Mam, but she must return home and find the strength to save the farm.

### PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Ask students to use books in the library or sites on the Internet to read about the Irish Land War in the nineteenth-century. The following website is helpful: [irishcentral.com/roots/history/irish-people-threw-boiling-water-cow-dung-at-police-who-came-to-evict-them-in-the-land-war](http://irishcentral.com/roots/history/irish-people-threw-boiling-water-cow-dung-at-police-who-came-to-evict-them-in-the-land-war). Discuss the term *war*. How might *war* have different connotations for different people? Then have them write a short paper that explains why this civil unrest in Ireland was called a “war.”

*Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-6.1; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 4-6.7; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 4-6.1, L. 4-6.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-6.3.*



## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

- *Setting* is when and where a novel takes place. Giff uses the five senses to vividly describe the setting. For example, Anna says that she can “smell the cold.” Find examples of how Giff uses sight, smell, touch, and taste to describe the setting. How does this add to the literary quality of the novel?
- The novel is written in free verse and is told from Anna Mallon’s point of view. What does Anna reveal about herself, her family, and her neighbors in the first poem? Why is “The Hill” so important to Anna? Think of the many times she goes to “The Hill.” Explain how she uses it as a place of solace.
- Describe Anna’s family. Da calls her “a slip of a girl.” Explain what Mam means when she says, “She’s more than that. Much more” (p.23). How does Anna prove that Mam is correct? Da says, “Ah, Anna. You’re the heart of the family” (p. 55). How does the fate of the family rest with her?
- How does the eviction of the neighbors with five girls cause Anna to question her own family’s security? Liam, Anna’s best friend, and his mam are evicted. Explain how these evictions make the Land War very real for Anna. Describe the shame that people feel when they are evicted. How does Liam’s mam display shame?
- Describe how neighbors help one another when someone is in need. How does Mae Donnelly help when Anna’s mother dies? What does Anna later give Mae in return? How would Mam be proud of her for her deeds? Explain how complete strangers help Anna when she and Nuala run away to the Aunt’s house. What is the role of the church in helping people save their land? The priest tells Anna to listen to the church bells. What do the bells symbolize?
- Anna’s brothers go to America in search of work. Explain what Anna means when she says, “I belong to this country. If only it belonged to me” (p. 17). How does her loyalty to Ireland and the family land give her courage to try and save what little they have? Discuss the hope at the end of the novel. Debate whether Anna finally feels that Ireland belongs to her.
- Anna goes to Patrick’s Well to offer prayers after Mam dies. She prays to keep her promise to Mam. What is the promise? At what point does she fear that she may not be able to keep her promise? How does Anna fulfill the promise? What prayers might Anna offer at Patrick’s Well when she and Da are reunited at the end of the novel? What item might she tie to the tree?
- Anna has never been inside the schoolhouse because she is needed at home. What is the role of Liam and the schoolmaster in helping her learn to read? How does she continue reading when they are no longer by her side? Discuss how this reveals Anna’s perseverance and need to achieve. How does Anna yearn for Liam to see her achievement?
- Anna finds a book about a horse on “The Hill.” What does this book symbolize? Later, the earl’s aide throws a book Anna is reading into the water. She retrieves a page and keeps it close when she returns home. Explain how the page from the book gives her courage and purpose.
- Anna often speaks of fear. Why do the people fear the English earl? Anna says that she can feel her father’s fear. When is this most evident? How does fear give Anna the courage to take Nuala and go to the Aunt’s house? At what point does Anna realize that she will not let fear control her? What gives her the courage to return home?
- In anger, Anna breaks a window at the English earl’s house. The constable asks, “Did you think with that red hair, you’d get away with it?” (p. 86) What is the constable’s view of redheads? Some people think that redheads have fiery tempers. At times, Anna does let her temper get out of control. How does her temperament also give her the will to survive? At what point does she learn to control her anger?
- Describe the Aunt. Explain Nuala’s reaction to her. How does Nuala bring out the Aunt’s softer side? What does the Aunt see in Anna that Anna may not see in herself? At first, Anna doesn’t like the old woman. At what point does she realize that she loves the Aunt? How does she know that she can trust the Aunt to care for Nuala?



- Explain Anna’s reaction when she learns that the Aunt is weaving for an Englishman. Discuss the Aunt’s reasoning. How does Martin help Anna understand that it’s about survival? Why is the Aunt interested in teaching Anna to weave? Explain how the Aunt is ultimately responsible for saving Anna and Da, and their land.
- Describe Martin. How is his relationship with the Aunt similar to Nuala’s? Discuss the friendship between Anna and Martin. What is his contribution to Anna’s success at the end of the novel?
- Discuss how the historical photographs contribute to the mood and tone of the book. How do they enhance readers’ understanding of the setting? How do the titles of each poem and the name of each section contribute to the plot development?

*Correlates to CCSS in Reading Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL. 4-6.1-3; Craft & Structure RL. 4-6.4-6; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 4-6.1-3; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 4-6.1; Knowledge of Language 4-6.3.*

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

- Atmosphere or mood is the feeling that is created in the story. Write a short paper that describes the atmosphere of *A Slip of a Girl*. Instruct students to cite specific scenes and use direct quotes to support their thoughts. Write a concluding paragraph that discusses whether the mood has changed by the end of the novel.

*Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-6.1; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 4-6.1-2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-6.3.*

- Giff uses figurative language to create certain images. Remind students that a simile is a comparison of two things using “like” or “as.” Explain the following simile: “The English earl’s house spreads out like a castle” (p. 6). Ask students to write a simile that describes the Mallon house.

*Correlates to CCSS in Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 4-6.5.*

- Father Tom conducts a funeral mass for Anna’s mother. Think about Mam, and the responsibility that she places on Anna. Then write a eulogy that Anna might deliver at the grave of her mother.

*Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Production & Distribution of Writing W. 4-6.4; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 4-6.1-2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-6.3.*

- When Anna is on “The Hill,” she makes reference to the “little people.” The schoolmaster gives Anna fairytales to read. Find a story about Leprechauns, little people found only in Ireland, that

Anna might read to Nuala. Share the story with the class, and state why this particular story was chosen.

*Correlates to CCSS in Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 4-6.4.*

- Anna’s brothers go to Brooklyn in search of work, and she realizes that she will never see them again. Write a letter that she might write to them that gives them the family news. Include her search for the Aunt, and why Anna left Nuala.

*Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-6.2; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 4-6.1-2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-6.3.*

- The schoolmaster says, “It’s good to imagine. It’s what writers do” (p. 52). Take advice from the schoolmaster and imagine an additional chapter that reveals what happens next for Anna and Liam. Write the chapter in free verse.

*Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-6.3; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 4-6.1-2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-6.3.*

- The schoolmaster explains *nonfiction* to Anna. Read the Author’s Note. Discuss how good historical fiction is based on nonfiction. Then write a paper that discusses how much of Anna’s life is nonfiction. Ask students to cite specific passages and use direct quotes to support their thoughts.

*Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-6.2; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 4-6.1-2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-6.3.*



- Divide the class into small groups and ask them to research the National Irish Land League ([askaboutireland.ie/narrative-notes/the-land-league-1/](http://askaboutireland.ie/narrative-notes/the-land-league-1/)). Ask each group to develop a PowerPoint presentation that addresses the following questions:

What was its purpose? Who were the founders? How did it change life for people like the Mallons? How did the Land League help families like the Mallons? What is the mission of the Land League

today? Instruct the students to include photographs gathered from the Internet to illustrate the narrative.

*Correlates to CCSS in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-6.2; Production & Distribution of Writing W. 4-6.6; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 4-6.7-9; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 4-6.1-2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-6.3.*

## VOCABULARY/USE OF LANGUAGE

The Glossary provides definitions and explanations of words and places unique to the time and place of the novel. Ask students to jot down other unfamiliar words and try to define them by taking clues from context. Such words may include *nettles* (p. 17), *keen* (p. 26), *trussed* (p. 84), *shard* (p. 93), *townlands* (p. 115), *tinkers* (p. 117), *crescents* (p. 124), *card* (p. 148), *shuttle* (p. 152), *intricate* (p. 188), *quavers* (p. 207), *swagger* (p. 212), and *wary* (p. 219).

*Correlates to CCSS in Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 4-6.4.*

## INTERNET RESOURCES

### Encyclopedia Britannica

[britannica.com/place/Ireland](http://britannica.com/place/Ireland)

This site provides geographical and historic information about Ireland.

### History

[history.com/topics/landmarks/brooklyn-bridge](http://history.com/topics/landmarks/brooklyn-bridge)

This site provides information about the Brooklyn Bridge and the contribution of immigrants like the Mallon brothers in its construction.

[history.com/topics/immigration/irish-potato-famine](http://history.com/topics/immigration/irish-potato-famine)

This portion of the History site gives information about the potato famine that plagued the the Mallons' ancestors and threatened Irish families whose farms were owned by the English.

Guide created by Pat Scales, retired school librarian and independent consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**PATRICIA REILLY GIFF** received two Newbery Honor Awards for her novels *Lily's Crossing* and *Pictures of Hollis Woods*. Some of her other middle-grade novels include *Genevieve's War*, winner of the Christopher Award; *Nory Ryan's Song*, an ALA Notable Book; and *Eleven*. Her Kids of the Polk Street School series remains a popular chapter book mainstay. Patricia's newest chapter book series is *Mysteries on Zoo Lane*. She has a doctorate in reading and spent twenty years teaching in New York City public schools. She now lives in Connecticut.

