

## *Unexpected Twist*

### **Summary**

An original and thought-provoking contemporary twist on *Oliver Twist*, by the best-loved team of Michael Rosen and Tony Ross. *Unexpected Twist* moves the action into a modern secondary school for a sensitive and perfectly observed story about fitting in and knowing who to trust. It's a daring look at big themes, told with a light touch.

Shona and her dad are moving house yet again, and the rules at Shona's new school are pretty weird. She keeps getting into trouble without meaning to! But when she's unexpectedly given a mobile phone by an older boy, Shona starts to suspect there's something fishy about Tino and his gang. Not all gifts come for free, after all...

### **Did You Know?**

Michael Rosen was the Children's Laureate from 2007 to 2009 and his much-loved books include *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*.

He is best-known for his funny books, but he has also written darker books including *Michael Rosen's Sad Book*, about his teenage son's sudden death.

He has created several books with top illustrator Tony Ross, including *Bah! Humbug!* - a modern take on Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

*Unexpected Twist* can be read as a prequel to *Bah! Humbug!*, or as a stand-alone novel.

### **Ideas for using this book in your classroom:**

#### **If your class has not yet read the book:**

Explain that *Oliver Twist* is a book about poverty and crime in Victorian times, while *Unexpected Twist* updates it into the modern day. Read the extracts from *Oliver Twist* on pages 69-74; then read the first part of chapter 5, about Shona's life. Ask your class to think about how Shona's situation is similar to or different from Oliver's.

Read chapter 5 and ask the children to discuss the topic of poverty in small groups. What do they think about the challenges that Shona and Oliver face? Do they feel that life for poor people is fair, then and now? How is the past different from the present?

#### **If your class has already read the book:**

Ask your class to think about how Shona's situation is similar to or different from Oliver Twist's. Does it matter that Oliver is a starving orphan, while Shona longs for a phone with YouTube and Snapchat? Do either of them really understand what is happening, or have a choice in how their lives unfold?

Oliver Twist is shunted around constantly without really knowing why or where he's going. How is this echoed in the depiction of Shona? Why is she so confused? Ask your class to think about why Charles Dickens and Michael Rosen depict their lead characters in this way. You could focus on page 54, where Oliver meets 'the board', and chapter 12, where Oliver learns to pick pockets.

Social injustice is a key factor in the lives of both Oliver and Shona. Ask pupils to look at pages 77 and 189-191. How does poverty make Shona and her friend Serena vulnerable to exploitation? Why are Shona and her dad poor? Is it fair? Ask the children to work in groups to create a Kids' Manifesto for a fairer society. In an ideal world, what rights would people have? Would food and shelter be provided for all? Would adults and children have the same rights? Would they have to do anything to earn those rights?

Oliver Twist is an orphan, while Shona is not. Ask the children to think about the adults in Shona's life. Do they provide direction? Do we like and trust them? Why – or why not?

Explore the story's setting. How does moving the story into the modern day change its impact?

Remind your class that when *Oliver Twist* was written, it WAS a contemporary story. Ask them to imagine how people at the time might have reacted to it. How might those reactions compare with their own reactions to *Unexpected Twist*? If the children tried to move *Unexpected Twist* back into Victorian times, do they think their story would resemble *Oliver Twist* or not?

In small groups, have the children break down the plots of *Oliver Twist* and *Unexpected Twist* into ten key moments, and write them down on cards. How closely are the two stories linked? (If the children have recently read another historic novel, they could use this technique to transpose that novel's plot into a new time or place.)

What impression do the children get of Pops from pages 171-177? How does Michael Rosen create mood and tension in the scene?

Ask the children to think about the characters of Oliver, Nancy and Bill Sikes. They are all caught up in the same trap. Why do they behave so differently? Then ask the children to think about their feelings towards Shona, Tino and Gazz. What do they think of these characters? Do they feel sorry for them? Are they afraid of them? How might they end up in the future, if they stayed in the gang?

In chapter 16, Shona's class make freeze frame pictures based on *Oliver Twist*. Ask your class to try this activity in small groups, based on their favourite moments in *Unexpected Twist*.

Look again at the interactions between Tino and Shona, especially on pages 146-147, where Shona meets Tino for coffee. Ask the children to think about the tactics that Tino uses to manipulate her. Then discuss aspects such as buying coffee for Shona, creating a sense of urgency, talking in riddles, minimising Shona's role, and offering gifts/rewards that turn out to be contingent on favours.

What do the children think about the endings of *Oliver Twist* and *Unexpected Twist*? Do they like the endings? Do they find them realistic? You could talk about the Victorian convention of the happy ending and the extent to which Michael Rosen's choice of ending is shaped by Charles Dickens's.