



This Hostel Life

A Transition Year teaching resource

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Pre-reading exercises:

Read the front cover and title. What does it suggest? What do you think this book will be about?



Pre-reading research:

Find out the meaning of the following terms:

- Direct provision
- Asylum seeker
- Refugee status
- Migrant

What changes were made as a result of the outcome of the 2004 Citizenship Referendum?



Activity: Watch testimonies from 'Lives in Limbo' and discuss what you have found out about the direct provision system in Ireland. 'Lives in Limbo' is a special series by *The Irish Times* on life inside Ireland's direct provision system. It includes video testimonies from asylum seekers. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/lives-in-limbo>

You might explore the following topics in your discussion:

- Education
- Diet
- Work
- Cultural/religious practices
- Mental health
- Money
- Welfare
- Family



Story 1: 'This Hostel Life'

Extract from the introduction:

One of the lighter pieces from this series is 'This Hostel Life' (in this collection). I told the story from the point of view of a Congolese woman for whom I created a language, a mixture of Nigerian pidgin English and some American slang words which she speaks in a strong Kinsala accent. The idea was born from my observation of how the different nationalities in the direct provision hostel were reconstructing language in order to communicate with one another. The Nigerian pidgin English (albeit with all kinds of variation) became one of the most commonly spoken, which is not surprising as Nigerians made up the highest number of residents. [pages vii-ix]

Questions:

1. Write a list of characters you encounter in the story.
2. Why are they queuing?
3. Why is it better to go to the GP on a Monday?
4. Why does the narrator feel sorry for the new security man?
5. Who has power in this world? How is it exercised?
6. How would you describe life in this direct provision centre? Use three pieces of evidence to support your answer.
7. What did you learn about the characters through their discussion of TV programmes?
8. What are the differences between being given provision monthly and weekly?
9. Why is Ngozi's fight for honey so important?
10. Why do you think Beverl ee feels she has 'to leave her' at the end of the story?
11. Why do you think the author chose to write the story in pidgin English? How is this technique effective in telling the story? Why is it important to the story told here?
12. The author likens being in direct provision to 'an abusive relationship'. How is this seen in this story?
13. Why does the author begin the story at 10:26 am and conclude it at 12:01 pm?

Notes



Story 2: 'Under the Awning'

Extract from the introduction:

Even though 'Under the Awning' is set outside of the direct provision system, I wanted to highlight the everyday racism that most African people living in Ireland who I've had conversations with have faced. The idea of making it a story within a story happened serendipitously. I was once part of a writers' group and had presented what I call the main story at a workshop. The feedback I got was that the main story was too dark and harsh. As I was replaying in my head the comments I got in the feedback, and doodling them down, the idea came to me to frame the main story around the feedback. [pages xiv-xv]

Questions:

1. What does the phrase 'everyday racism' mean?
2. What kind of everyday racism does the character in 'the story within the story' experience?
3. What is the effect of identifying the other writers in the writers' group as A, B, C, etc.?
4. Describe your impression of the character Dermot. What role does he play in the story?
5. In your opinion is Dermot the most appropriate person to 'give anti-racism talks'?
6. Dermot advises the author 'not to bother about' the racism that she experiences (page 36). He also suggests that 'he didn't think the girls meant anything by it.' What do you think of his advice? What message is he giving here?
7. What is the role of the group facilitator in the story?
8. What changes did the main character make to her story after she received feedback from the group?
9. What is gained and lost in the rewriting of the story?
10. Do you think the group's criticisms are justified? Why do you think they were so uncomfortable with/critical of her first draft?
11. How does the feedback affect the writer in the story?
12. Do you think Okorie achieves her aim of highlighting the everyday racism in Ireland?

Notes



Stand up!

Reflect on what you have read and discussed as a class and consider the actions the students and schools/university have taken to support the following people:

- Eric Zhi Ying Xue (St. Cronan's, Bray)
- Nonso Muojeke (Tullamore College)
- Shepherd Machaya (Dublin City University)

Think about what actions you and other young people could undertake to make Ireland a 'kinder place' for everyone.

How will you contribute?



End assignments

- 'Ireland could benefit from people becoming kinder towards each other' (page x). Write a personal response to this.
- Class discussion: In what different ways is everyday racism expressed in Ireland?
- 'Nothing is better than when you decide something for yourself' (page 3). Write a personal response to this.
- 'This brings you there in a way journalism can't' (Kathleen McMahon reviewing *This Hostel Life* on Marian Finucane, 9th June, 2018). How can fiction support issues of our time?
- Have you read any other stories where the author writes in a non-conventional style? Do you enjoy reading writers who give their characters authentic voices? Consider Roddy Doyle, Marina Carr, Irvine Welsh.
- Review your research completed as pre-reading activity. Now that you have read the stories, evaluate if your knowledge has deepened and your views changed/developed?
- In what ways are we as members of society complicit in the suffering of people in direct provision?



Further research

- » *HateTrack: Tracking and Monitoring Racist Hate Speech Online* by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (28th November, 2018).

<https://www.ihrec.ie/documents/hatetrack-tracking-and-monitoring-racist-hate-speech-online>

- » Interview by Maggie Armstrong on *Independent.ie* on 3rd June, 2018

<https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/book-reviews/direct-provision-is-like-being-in-an-abusive-relationship-nigerian-writer-melatu-uche-okorie-on-direct-provision-and-racism-in-ireland-36966597.html>

- » Review by Carol Ballantine on *Headstuff* on 25th June, 2018

<https://www.headstuff.org/culture/literature/book-review-this-hostel-life-melatu-uche-okorie>

- » Article by Kit de Waal in *The Irish Times* on 30th June, 2018

<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/don-t-dip-your-pen-in-someone-else-s-blood-writers-and-the-other-1.3533819>

- » Melatu Uche Okorie interviewed by Seán Rocks on *Arena* on 6th July 2018

<https://www.rte.ie/radio1/arena/programmes/2018/0706/976900-arena-friday-6-july-2018/>

- » Article by Gráinne O'Toole and Melatu Uche Okorie in *The Irish Times* on 31 July, 2018

<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/we-as-migrants-are-used-to-being-spoken-for-yet-these-are-our-experiences-1.3580819>

- » Review by Emma Flynn in *The Stinging Fly* on 14th August, 2018

<https://stingingfly.org/review/this-hostel-life/>

Texts:

- » *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
- » *We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo
- » *Harare North* by Brian Chikwava
- » *Orchestra of Minorities* by Chigozie Obioma
- » *The Good Immigrant* edited by Nikesh Shukla

Music:

- » Rusangano Family