The Machine Gunners

Spring 2008

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INTRODUCTION

The Machine Gunners was first published in 1975 and won the prestigious Carnegie Medal. It also established Robert Westall’s reputation as a significant children’s writer.

The book has become a modern children’s classic which appeals to all ages. With supported reading it is accessible to a wide range of children from upper KS2 onwards.

It is an action-packed real life adventure story which tackles serious moral issues. Studying the book offers opportunities to cover National Curriculum requirements for English, History and PSHE.

Studying the book:

The book is abridged in ten fifteen-minute episodes and is as faithful to the original text as possible.

- **Episode One** covers Chapters 1 and 2
- **Episode Two** covers Chapters 3, 4 and 5
- **Episode Three** covers most of Chapter 6
- **Episode Four** covers the end of Chapter 6 and half of Chapter 7
- **Episode Five** covers the second half of Chapter 7 and Chapter 8
- **Episode Six** covers Chapters 9 and 10
- **Episode Seven** covers Chapter 11 and part of Chapter 12
- **Episode Eight** covers the end of Chapter 12, Chapters 13 and 14
- **Episode Nine** covers Chapter 15 and the first part of Chapter 16
- **Episode Ten** covers the end of Chapter 16, Chapters 17 and 18

Each episode has a synopsis of the action and a range of suggested activities. These activities are not meant to be slavishly followed and not all of the activities will be undertaken by every pupil.

A range has been provided in order to allow the teacher flexibility to differentiate for the individual pupil's ability.

There are three different types of activity: **Before listening**, **During listening** and **After listening**.

The **Before listening** activities are designed to prepare pupils for each episode by predicting what might happen, recapping on previous episodes and discussing the development of the plot and characters. These activities are intended to support and develop the children’s understanding of what will follow.

The **During listening** activities are designed to focus the pupils’ attention on key incidents and events, and to help their concentration and comprehension.

The **After listening** activities are intended to help the children reflect on what they have heard and read, to express their own responses to the story and its characters and to deepen their understanding of how the story has been structured and written.
There are also additional activities designed to be done before starting any work on the book and at the end of the novel to draw it all together, with opportunities for the children to evaluate what they have learnt.

**Classroom management and support:**

The ten dramatised fifteen-minute readings make the book accessible to the full ability range. Each episode covers a major section of the book and abridges the action. More able pupils can read the whole book before listening to the adaptations.

Follow-up activities include comparing the book with the audio version. For less able pupils these provide focused readings of shorter extracts from the text after they have listened to the recordings.

The activities have been structured to fit into the Literacy Hour, as well as other times if the study of the book encompasses other curriculum areas. This is a highly flexible resource and activities allow for a range of groupings: whole class, small groups or individual work.

**Support materials:**

It is not necessary for every child to have a copy of the book. A small set of at least six copies should enable children to work successfully in groups or individually and allow access to the book for reference.

Multiple headsets would be useful. These would enable groups of children or individuals to listen to the episodes again without disturbing others and to access the text independently.

It would enrich the children’s experience if other resources were provided to support the book. Suggested books and other materials are listed in the Resources section below.

**Differentiation in activities:**

There is a range of activities on offer, most of which provide for differentiation by response and outcome rather than by task. They are designed to be accessible to pupils in upper KS2 and KS3.

With varying degrees of support, most children should be able to tackle the activities at their own level. Activities which are more challenging and might require more teacher support are clearly signposted.

**Time scale:**

Listening to the episodes may be best done weekly, so that the children don’t lose the thread of the narrative. Enough time must be allowed for discussion, reading and related activities. Teachers should be able to match the use of these Notes and the recordings easily to fit the needs of their class and National Curriculum requirements.
Background knowledge:

If studying *The Machine Gunners* is not being linked to an historical study of the Second World War, then the pupils will require a certain amount of contextual information. Much of this is contained within these Notes, with suggestions for additional materials in the Resources section below.

Consistent with the Literacy Strategy is the understanding that in learning about reading and how to read, children learn how texts work and about writing and language, which, in turn, informs their own writing. Central to this understanding is the practice of using texts as models to demonstrate linguistic styles. Some activities will therefore be more successful if the children are provided with a model to follow before or during the work.

Resources:

The Second World War is well documented and written about. Most local libraries have collections and material that would be useful. There are many books for both teachers and pupils. The following is a small selection:

- *Westall’s War – A resource pack for teachers of History and English* (Tyne and Wear Archive Service)
- *The Westall File – A resource pack about Westall himself* (Compiled by the English Department of Prestwich High School, Manchester – available from MacMillan)
- *BBC School Radio World War 2 Audio Clips Library* – audio resources from the war available at [www.bbc.co.uk/schoolradio/history/worldwar2audioclipslibrary.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schoolradio/history/worldwar2audioclipslibrary.shtml)
- Imperial War museum website at [www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk)

Books for teachers – non-fiction:

- *Children of the Blitz* (Robert Westall, MacMillan)
- *Children at war* (Patricia Williams – Ed, BBC Books)

Books for pupils – non-fiction:

- *War Boy, A country childhood* (Michael Foreman, Puffin)
- *Family life in World War 2* (Gary Patrick, Wayland)

Fiction:

- *Goodnight Mister Tom* (Michelle Magorian, Puffin)
- *Peepol* (Allan Ahlberg)
- *Fireweed* (Jill Paton Walsh, Heinemann)
- *The silver sword* (Ian Serraillier, Puffin)
- *I am David* (Anne Holm, Methuen)
- *Johnnie’s Blitz* (Bernard Ashley, Puffin)
- Other books by Robert Westall (see below)
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Atkinson Westall was born on 7 October 1929 in Tynemouth, Northumberland. (Garmouth in The Machine Gunners is heavily based on Tynemouth.) He died on 15 April 1993, aged 63 by which time he had become a very successful children’s writer with his books winning all the major children’s books prizes.

He was educated at Tynemouth High School, University of Durham and University of London where he obtained degrees in Fine Art. His National Service from 1953-55 was served as a Lieutenant-Corporal in the Royal Signals. He was a school teacher for 28 years, teaching mostly Art. When he retired from teaching he became an antiques dealer.

His first published book was The Machine Gunners which won the Carnegie Medal in 1975. By 1986 Westall had become a full time writer. He wrote an enormous number of very successful books and became one of the best-selling children’s authors.

His writing career started when as a bored 12-year-old he wrote a 12,000 word novel in the summer holidays called The Mystery of the Dead Man’s Bay. As his social life increased his writing life vanished for a long time until 1963 when he started writing regular art reviews for his local newspaper. He was a successful journalist for a while.

It was this experience and the discipline of writing to a deadline and tight word count that influenced his writing style. As a writer Westall had a routine which involved writing around eight sides a day, about 2,500 words, from 11am till 4pm. His manuscripts were all produced on an electric typewriter.

Many of the characters and events in The Machine Gunners are based on Westall’s childhood memories. For instance, his Westall grandparents are the models for Chas’s grandparents, while Chas’s father is based on his own father.

A selection of books by Robert Westall:

The Machine Gunners, Macmillan 2001
Fathom Five, Pan 1992
Children of the Blitz, Piccolo 1995
A Place for Me, Collins 2001
Echoes of War, Puffin 1995
Stormsearch, Macmillan 2001
A Time of Fire, Pan Macmillan 1994
The Watch House, Macmillan 2002
The Haunting of Chas McGill, Macmillan 1995
The Cats of Seroster, Macmillan 1984
The Creature in the Dark, Yearling 1997
Old Man on a Horse, Blackie 1989
Blitzcat, Macmillan 2002
A Walk on the Wild Side, Mandarin 1991
The Kingdom by the Sea, Heinemann 1992
The Stones of Muncaster Cathedral, Mammoth 2001
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Second World War

Children will need help to develop their understanding of the historical context of the book. While they do not need to be overloaded with detailed facts about the War (unless the book is being studied for History as well as English) they will need an overview of the key events. In particular they require background and explanations of events that affect the characters in the book.

In other words, they need to know about the Home Front and the impact the War had on ordinary men, women and children left at home. How were their lives affected? What happened to schools? How did the War change the lives of women? What was it like to live with the danger of bombing raids? What was it like in the air-raids? What did people eat?

Spend some time establishing what pupils already know about the War. Make a note of key points arising from the whole class discussion on a large sheet of paper. This can be referred back to, if necessary, when discussing particular incidents from the book. It is important that the factual information is linked to the events in the book.

PRELIMINARY ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1 - The author:

Share with pupils the information about Robert Westall (see page 4). Ask them if they have read any of his other books. If possible, display a range of Westall’s books for the children to browse through and borrow.

ACTIVITY 2 - Historical background:

*The Machine Gunners* is set in Tynemouth, Northumberland where Westall lived as a child. Although the name of the town in the novel was changed to Garmouth, the geography is largely based on Tynemouth.

Ask pupils if they can imagine what it must have been like to grow up as a child during the blitz, like Westall. Help them to compare their lives now with the lives of children then.

As a whole class, talk about the advantages and disadvantages of growing up during the War. On a large sheet of paper make a chart with two columns and write down the advantages and disadvantages.

ACTIVITY 3 - Book cover and blurb:

Westall had particularly strong views on the importance of book covers and the book’s ‘blurb’.

Provide pupils with a variety of books to look at and compare the different covers and ‘blurbs’. Ask pupils what they think of them. Does the cover make them want to read the book? From the cover what do they think it is going to be about? Does the ‘blurb’ sell the story?
**EPISODE 1: A dead man’s gun**

**Synopsis:**

The story starts in the early morning after an air-raid. Over breakfast, the McGill family - Mum, Dad and Chas - discuss the previous night’s bombing and a crashed German plane. Chas goes off to investigate in the hope of finding war souvenirs. He comes across one of the crashed bomber’s engines being guarded by the local policeman, Fatty Hardy. Chas tricks him into leaving his post so that he can try to get a souvenir; but Fatty Hardy comes back and chases Chas who has to escape into the Wood. In a clearing, he finds the wreckage of the German bomber, complete with machine gun and dead pilot.

At school Chas has difficulty concentrating as he is preoccupied with his find. Chas enlists the aid of Cemetery Jones and his Guy Fawkes-laden bogie. After school, as they head off to the Wood, they are confronted by Audrey Parton who they reluctantly agree can come along with them.

Using Chas’s father’s hacksaw, lit by a torch held by Audrey, the boys try to cut the machine gun free. The torch-light is spotted on the edge of the Wood by Fatty Hardy. In his haste to escape with the machine gun, Chas accidentally fires it, causing Fatty Hardy to blow his police whistle. The children hide the machine gun up the trouser leg of Cem’s Guy and leave the Wood. Just when they think the gun will be discovered, Fatty is diverted by the furious barking of a dog in the Wood.

**Before listening:**

Ask pupils to consider:

- What they think is going to happen in this episode.
- Who the dead man is and what kind of gun it is.
- What they expect from the beginning of a book. [Introduction to main characters, scene setting, start of the plot.]

**During listening:**

Ask pupils to try to remember the names of the characters and the main action.

**After listening:**

*Background information*

The story is set in 1940-41 at the height of the Blitz. The following list covers the specific World War II references contained in the first episode. Children will need background information to understand these references and the historical context of the episode.

- air-raid
- air-raid shelter
- all-clear
- milk cart
- gasmask

The following activities can all be worked on in a whole class discussion with notes being made on a large sheet of paper. Alternatively, pupils can work in small groups, although in this case less able children may require teacher support.
ACTIVITY 1 - The characters:

Make a list of the key characters who are introduced during the first episode, including those who do not actually appear in it.

Chas and Mr and Mrs McGill, Fatty Hardy, Mr Liddell, Boddser Brown, Cemetery Jones, Audrey Parton

Leave enough space to write notes about each of them. These notes will be added to after each subsequent episode as the characters develop and the story unfolds.

Make notes on what you have learnt so far about each of the characters. Refer to the original book and find Westall’s descriptions. What do they reveal about each character?

Audrey Parton: She was bigger than either Cem or Chas ... She had bulging hockey-muscles and grey ankle-socks, and red hair in pigtails and, freckles. She fought boys and, alas, sometimes won ... she was as good climbing trees and drainpipes as any boy ... which made her the only girl Cem and Chas ever talked to.

Fatty Hardy: Fatty went off at a wobbling run, his gasmask case flogging his broad bottom.

ACTIVITY 2 - Word bank:

Pupils could keep a mini-dictionary of words from the story and add to it after each episode. Alternatively, the list could be compiled as a whole class activity and made into a wall chart. The children should be encouraged to try to work out the meaning of the words from their context before using a dictionary or reference book.

- incendiary bomb - Dorsal turret - anti-aircraft shell - Registration letters
- Nazi - tail-fin - Luftwaffe - swastika
- propeller - Heinkel III - nose-cone - Nicht Anfassen

ACTIVITY 3 - Discussion topics:

Violence and horrors of war:
Ask pupils what events in the first episode emphasise the dangers and the horrors associated with war.

War souvenirs:
What do the children think of Chas’s hobby? (This could be extended to include a discussion about the kind of things that they themselves collect.)

Attitudes to women:
Read out the above extract that describes Audrey. What attitude do Chas and Cem have about her and girls in general? Discuss how the War marked a permanent change in attitudes towards women and their position in society.
ACTIVITY 4 – Extract for close reading:


Objectives:
- to investigate how characters are presented by referring to the text (Y5 T1 3)
- to articulate personal responses to literature, identifying why and how a text affects the reader (Y6 T1 3)

Extract 1: Chapter 2 (pages 11 – 12)
Extract begins: ‘...He grabbed the round barrel, put his plimsolls against the curving sides...’
Extract ends: ‘...Chas dropped and was violently sick against a little door marked ‘Nicht Anfassen’...’

Questions about the text:
- What do you learn about Chas from this incident? [Brave, fearless, determined, sensitive to the horror.]
- Comment on the author’s use of language. [Simple but powerful description using colour; texture and sound for impact.]
- Find the similes the author uses. [Like a monkey...like that moment in a fight...as a statue or a toy soldier would move...]
- Westall uses his senses to describe what Chas finds in the wreckage. Search the passage for words and list them under each sense [e.g. sound – seething mass of flies...buzzed angrily...]
- Westall uses a strong sense of colour in this scene to evoke the mood. How many colour words/phrases can you find?
- The scene is experienced through both Chas and the pilot’s eyes. Westall also appeals directly to the reader. How is this done?
- What unusual verbs and adjectives can you find in this passage and why do you think the author has used them? [Mitted, grabbed, overalled, seething, sticky.]
- Encourage the children to talk about their personal response to the scene. Some people might feel that children should be sheltered from the horrors of war – do pupils have a view on that? Can they imagine what it must have been like to find the pilot?

ACTIVITY 5 – Extended writing activities:

Pupils could write:
- Chas’s diary extract for that night describing how he finds the pilot
- A first person narrative of the incident
- A character description of Chas based on the information gleaned from the episode
**EPISODE 2: Cat and mouse**

**Synopsis:**

At the end of the last episode the children were saved by the barking dog. Under cover of an air-raid, Cem and Chas set off to get the gun to a safe place while the streets are empty. However, they have to abandon the Guy and the bogie in Chas’s garden when Mr McGill insists that they go into the shelter. The following morning Chas hides the gun in his dad’s greenhouse.

A few days later Boddser Brown, the school bully, boasts about the souvenirs he has acquired which have obviously come from the crashed German plane; a flying helmet, money and a blood stained photograph. Mr Liddell is taken by the police to the scene of the crash. They have concluded that the machine gun and its ammunition have been stolen by a clever child.

In an attempt to discover the guilty boy, Mr Liddell addresses the class and intends to show them a diagram of the machine gun. Chas creates a diversion; he writes an essay on War souvenirs implicating Boddser.

Boddser’s house is then searched by the police. Meanwhile, when Chas and Cem return home the police are waiting for them. They search the greenhouse and garden. Mr McGill, who doesn’t trust the law, is furious as the police dig up his garden.

**Before listening:**

Recap on Episode 1, and then ask pupils to consider:

- What might happen in this episode. Does the title offer any clues?
- Whether the gun and ammunition will be discovered.
- How Chas might be feeling.
- Who the terms ‘cat and mouse’ refer to.

**During listening:**

While pupils are listening to the episode ask them to think about:

- Which new characters are introduced.
- How Chas outwits Mr Liddell. Does Mr Liddell know that Chas outwits him?
- Why Chas’s dad doesn’t ask him if he knows anything about what the police are searching for. Why is he not cross with Chas?
- Why the authorities are so concerned about the gun.
- Why they think it is a child who has stolen the gun.
- Why the police don’t look in the rabbit hutch. If they had, what would they have found?

**After listening:**

*Background information*

Reference is made during this episode to ‘the Home Guard’. Ensure pupils understand the role played by the Home Guard during World War II.
ACTIVITY 1 - Character development:

Consider how Chas and Boddser’s characters have been developed during the second episode.

Chas: What extra details do we find out about Chas? Why is he so upset by Cem and Boddser? What is the difference between what he has done and what they have done?

Boddser: What do we learn about Boddser’s character? What do the children in the story think of him? How do you and your classmates view him?

*Chas hated Boddser; he had round spectacles and cropped hair like a German, and a great gangling grown-up body. He was stupid and a bully...*

ACTIVITY 2 – Word bank:

Pupils can add the following new words to their word bank. Encourage them to try to work out each word’s meaning before using a dictionary or reference book.

- anti-aircraft guns  
- Jerries  
- Mein liebling

ACTIVITY 3 – Discussion topics

- What do pupils think about Chas getting Boddser into trouble in order to save himself?
- Are Chas and Cem brave or stupid when they do not go to the shelter at the start of the air-raid? What could have happened to them?

ACTIVITY 4 - Extract for close reading:

Objectives:

- to analyse the success of texts and writers in evoking particular responses in the reader (Y6 T2 8)
- to take account of viewpoint in a novel (Y6 T 12)
- to identify the point of view from which a story is told and how this affects the reader’s response (Y5 T3 2) to consider character and plot development.

Extract 2 Chapter 3 (pages 29 – 30):

Extract begins: ‘Two days later, Chas saw a crowd standing around Boddser Brown...’

Extract ends: ‘Taking the mickey out of Boddser was like bullfighting; dealy but fun.’

Questions about the text:

- What do you learn about Chas from the text?
- What do you learn about Boddser?
- What do you think is going to happen between these characters later on in the story?
- From what point of view is the story written?
**EPISODE 3: A real punch-up**

**Synopsis:**

Just as the McGills think the air-raid is over, there is a renewed bomb attack and they have to run for the shelter. The following morning when they emerge from the shelter there is a lot of damage with two houses in the next row completely missing.

Mr McGill and Chas go to check on Chas’s grandparents. Chas is proud to have been asked to accompany his Dad but scared at what they might find. They walk through the bomb-damaged streets; even the church has been hit. As they get closer to his grandparents’ house they notice that the roof has been blown off the house. However, the grandparents are both safe although Granda has been affected by the bombing and is having nightmares about his experiences in the First World War.

Chas and his father spend the day helping the grandparents sort themselves out for the move to live with the McGills. Chas walks home alone, taking with him his Granda’s war souvenirs, a Union Jack flag and his helmet, and plotting his own revenge against the Germans.

At school, Chas befriends Nicky and then goads Boddser into a fight. Chas hits Boddser with his gasmask case and injures him badly. He is ostracised by everyone except Audrey and Nicky. Chas, Nicky and Audrey then start to make the secret camp, as planned, in the rockery of Nicky’s garden with a view down to the sea.

**Before listening:**

Recap on the previous episodes and discuss what might happen in this one. Ask pupils to consider:

- Who might be involved in a punch-up. Who do they think would win?
- What Chas is planning to do with the machine gun.

**During listening:**

While pupils are listening to the episode ask them to think about:

- Which new characters are introduced. [Granda, Nana, Clogger and Nicky]
- What effect the events in this episode have on Chas.
- If they were Chas, what they would have done when challenged by Boddser.
After listening:

Background information
The following list covers Word War II vocabulary contained in the third episode (pupils may need some background information to help put the words into context):

- barrage balloons  - heavy rescue lorry
- parachute flares  - First World War and shell shock

ACTIVITY 1 - The characters:

Talk about the four new characters - Granda, Nana, Clogger and Nicky. What clues does Westall give in the text about their characters?

Nana: “D’you see what Hitler and his Jarmans have done!” Her blue eyes were snapping with fury ...

Clogger: He was very silent and very hard...He had ginger hair and freckles, and always spat on his hands before he started any job, even a Maths exercise.

Nicky: "My mother doesn’t like him [Nicky],” said Audrey. "She’s told me not to come here...I think its because his mother...drinks.” “Well it’s...you know...sailors.”

Add each of these four to the character charts, along with any new information about the other characters gleaned from this episode.

ACTIVITY 2 - Character and plot development:

With each episode and subsequent developments in the plot we learn more about Chas’s character.

- Do you agree with people’s attitude to him after the fight with Boddser? Did he go too far? It was their [the class’s] opinion that...Chas shouldn’t have done it...The neighbours said Chas was a wicked boy who would come to an evil end...
- Why do you think Chas “imprisoned in a glass bubble”?
- Each event builds on Chas’s hatred of the Germans and the war in a way that personalises it to him (as in the fight with Boddser). This is paving the way for what eventually happens. It is important that pupils appreciate this and therefore understand how the author is constructing the story.
- What part do the new characters play in developing the plot?

ACTIVITY 3 - Word bank:

Pupils can add the following new words to their Word bank. Encourage them to try to work out each word’s meaning before using a dictionary or reference hook.

- hinny (North east dialect meaning love, pet)  - shrapnel
- jarman (North east accent for German)  - cordite
ACTIVITY 4 - Discussion topics:

The fight:
Can the children remember the part in Episode Two, also included in this episode, where the author prepares us for what Chas does during the fight? How do the pupils feel about what Chas does?

Nicky:
Why was Nicky bullied? Why did the other children’s parents not like them playing with Nicky? [See quotation above.]

ACTIVITY 5 – Extract for close reading:

Objectives:

- To describe and evaluate the style of an individual writer (Y6 T3 1)
- To consider how texts can be rooted in the writer’s experience, e.g. historical events and places, experience of wartime (Y5 T1 4)

Extract 3: Chapter 6 (pages 67 – 68):
Extract begins: 'Across the classroom, alone as always, Nicky was packing…'
Extract ends: 'He’d never touched him, but constantly teased him. Why? Chas shrugged.’

Questions about the text:

- What point of view has Westall used here? What does it reveal about Chas?
- What do we learn about Nicky’s character?
- What metaphor can you find in this passage? [The wolf-pack was gathering] Why do you think the author has chosen it?
- What helps to make the descriptions so convincing?

ACTIVITY 6 – Further activities:

This episode provides a whole range of interesting topics for children to explore further using a variety of writing forms – e.g. descriptions, stories, accounts, diary entries, school policies. These topics include:

- Grandparents (their own or Chas’s)
- Fighting (writing about the fight from different perspectives)
- Bullying
EPISODE 4: The Fortress Caparetto

Synopsis:

Chas, Nicky and Audrey gather up the remains of the barrage balloon and hide them to use for the Fortress. However, work on it is not progressing well despite their efforts so Chas decides it is time to make up with Cem and Clogger.

Some time later Cem and Chas spot an aircraft tail sticking out of the school roof. Mr Liddell tells them that, because of the plane crash, the school has closed early for Christmas. The gang continue to work on the Fortress but need more help. Chas enlists John Brownlee, a simple-minded adult who helps them without understanding what he is doing. At home Chas is free to come and go as he likes.

People start noticing the theft of a whole range of items from sandbags to fire-buckets and cement, and even the Anderson shelter from Nicky’s garden. All of the objects have found a home in Fortress Caparetto which, thanks to John’s efforts, is now complete with a Crow’s Nest, a set of rules and the machine gun.

One night Nicky wakes and is very disturbed. He can smell the sea which makes him think of his father. Convinced that something terrible is about to happen, he runs for shelter in the Fortress.

Before listening:

Recap on the previous episodes and discuss what might happen in this one. Ask pupils to think about:

- What the Fortress is like.
- What it will have in it.

During listening:

While pupils are listening to the episode, ask them to consider:

- Whether any significant new characters are introduced. [John Brownlee]
- If their predictions of what the Fortress will be like are fulfilled.
- Why it is called Fortress Caparetto. [Granda fought at Caparetto, Episode Three.]
- Why the children have so much time to spend on and at the Fortress.
- What other rules there might be.
- Their thoughts on the incident at the end. What might happen to Nicky?

After listening:

Background information:

This episode highlights the pressures placed on men who stayed at home during the War. Chas’s Dad has to cope with dual pressures of being a daytime worker with shortages of equipment as well as the strain of being a warden.
Widen the discussion to include the following themes:

- food shortages and rationing
- the Black Market
- children’s lives at this time
- attitudes to John

**ACTIVITY 1 – Character:**

The one significant new character referred to in this episode of the story is John Brownlee. Why does Westall introduce him into the story? [The children cannot build Fortress Caparetto on their own, but cannot enlist the aid of a normal adult, so John fits the bill.]

We continue to learn more about the main characters and their lives during this episode. This additional information should be added to the pupils character charts.

**ACTIVITY 2 – Word bank:**

Pupils can add the following new words to their Word bank. Encourage them to try to work out the meaning of each word before referring to a dictionary or reference book.

- **Dornier Do 17**
- **Kitchener moustache**
- **Crow's Nest**
- **sand bags**
- **machine gun**
- **Court Martial**

- **Junkers 88**
- **paraffin stove**
- **Quartermaster**
- **tin hats**
- **emplacement**

- **Prussian**
- **stirrup pump**
- **Sector-leader**
- **fire-buckets**
- **Standing Orders**

**ACTIVITY 3 - Discussion topics:**

**Nicky’s character:**

Why was sleep a refuge for Nicky? Why were the smell of the sea and the sound of the foghorn desolation to him?

...Nicky had liked that smell of the sea, and the sound of the foghorn. It made him imagine the bridge of [his father’s ship]...But now, the smell of the sea and the sound of the horn were a desolation...

Can pupils imagine what Nicky’s life must have been like before he was befriended by Chas? How do they think he feels about the Fortress being in his garden and belonging to the gang? How has it altered his life?

**Audrey’s role:**

From the previous episodes what do we know about Audrey and the boys’ attitude to her? What role does she play in the Fortress’?

...the quartermaster [Audrey] kept it so neat...

How do you feel about Audrey’s role in the Fortress?
OBJECTIVE 4 – Extract for close reading:

Objectives:

• to investigate how characters are presented by referring to the text (Y5 T1 3)
• to investigate different versions of the same story in print or on film, identifying similarities and differences (Y5 T2 2)

Extract 4: Chapter 7 (pages 94 – 95):

Extract begins: 'Chas’s heart glowed with pride. All done in a fortnight and as dry as a bone…'
Extract ends: '…everyone bent and swore to keep them, with their hands on the machine-gun.'

Questions about the text:

• Why does Chas’s heart glow with pride? What does that tell us about him? Does he have cause to be proud?
• What do the Rules tell us about Chas?
• How do we know they were written by a young boy? Are they sensible rules? Why do they swear on the machine-gun?
EPISODE FIVE: Gone to ground

Synopsis:

Mrs Spalding visits the McGills to gossip about the bombing raids in the night. She tells them that Nicky’s house has taken a direct hit. His mother and Commander Horsefall are dead. Nicky is also presumed dead. Chas is concerned about Nicky and sets off to investigate.

Chas finds Nicky hiding in the undamaged fortress. The gang meet to discuss what to do about Nicky who is very distressed now that both of his parents are dead. Clogger offers to live in the Fortress with him. Chas makes everyone swear on the gun to look after Nicky.

With John’s help, the gang extend the Fortress and create additional defences. Clogger is on look-out when he spots an approaching aircraft. Chas fires at it with the machine gun. Although he misses, the pilot loses control of his plane and is attacked by a gunner and then three Spitfires. The German plane blows up over the harbour mouth.

No one notices Rudi the pilot bail out. He seeks shelter in an allotment shed and survives by eating rabbit food. Meanwhile the gang are trying to solve the problem of firing the gun which needs a stand. Chas tricks his Dad into making one.

Before listening:

Recap on the previous episodes and discuss how the story has developed so far. Ask the children to consider:

- Where the story is leading.
- What is going to happen next.
- Whether the gang are playing a game.
- Whether they are really going to try the gun.
- Explain to the children that this episode is the turning point of the story and comes almost exactly halfway through.

During listening:

While the children are listening to the episode, ask them to think about:

- What has happened to Nicky.
- Whether the bombing has affected the Fortress.
- If the children realise what they are doing. If they still think it is a game.

After listening:

Background information

Make sure the children understand that Spitfire and Messerschmidt are the names of the British and German planes. Interested children could do additional research on the differences between them since this was a significant factor war.
ACTIVITY 1 - Character and plot development:

Discuss the significance of Rudi Gerlath, the new character introduced during this episode. What impact might he have on the story? What do we know about him? Is Rudi a coward?

*He looked at his ankle...Just sprained so he couldn’t walk. Might as well surrender, he [Rudi] thought...*

ACTIVITY 2 – Discussion topics:

Audrey's role:
Why do the boys all turn to Audrey when Nicky is upset and expect her to know what to do?
...*all the boys looked at Audrey. She took a timid step forward...*

Nicky:
Did the gang fully realise the implications of their decision to look after Nicky?
Why do grown-ups become the enemy along with the Germans?
...*Fortress Caparetto became more than a game...And the Germans ceased to be the only enemies. All the adults were a kind of enemy now, except John...*

Plot development:
What other events happen once the gang make this decision? [Firing the gun, Chas lying to his Dad.] Could these events have happened before the decision was made? Do the gang still think it is a game? Are they aware of the seriousness of what they are doing?

ACTIVITY 3 – Extract for close reading:

Objectives:
- to analyse how individual paragraphs are structured in writing (Y6 T2 2)
- to analyse the success of texts and writers in evoking particular responses from the reader (Y6 T2 8)

*Extract 5: Chapter 8 (pages 115 – 116)*

Extract begins: ‘...*It was a peaceful evening, like one before the war...’*
Extract ends: ‘...*the round body of the machine-gun equally well, and if the legs were bedded in concrete...’*

Questions about the text:

- Why is this an important moment in the story? [Chas lies and tricks his Dad. He is learning to distance himself from his parents.]
- What contrasting words does the author use to create mood and effect? [*’It was a peaceful evening...’ / ‘Grandpa had gone off to the pub...’ / ‘Mrs McGill put some potatoes to bake...’*]
- Can you find the different points of view that the author writes from? [The passage starts in the third person narrative, then moves to Chas, and then back again.]
What evidence is there that Mr McGill thinks Chas has grown up? [‘...A railway’s a bairn’s thing...’]

What makes this line ironic? [The fact that Chas has hold of a machine-gun.]

**ACTIVITY 4 – Further activities:**

Make a list of all the key events that have happened since Chas found the machine gun. This will help the children understand the structure of the story and how everything has been building to this point.
EPISODE SIX: A Prisoner in the Fortress

Synopsis:

A woman from across the river visits the police station to complain that her house has been fired at by a German gun. She produces the bullets. At first the sergeant is baffled, then he remembers the missing machine gun. He visits the house to work out where the bullets had been fired from.

Meanwhile, Rudi has recovered from his sprained ankle sustained when he landed. He disguises himself as a tramp with some old sacks and sets off. He comes across Nicky's house and garden and hides when the police sergeant appears. Rudi watches him look round and go down the garden where he sinks into the swamp created by the gang. Put off exploring further, the sergeant leaves.

Rudi, undeterred by the mud, goes down the garden and finds the Fortress. As he enters he is confronted by what he sees as four helmeted figures crouching over a machine gun. The gang are trying to put the gun back together after mounting it on the tripod. They disarm Rudi who realises he has been captured by children. While they are all working out what to do, Rudi, overcome by fatigue, falls asleep.

Before listening:

Recap on the previous episode and ask pupils to think about the following:

- The machine gun has been fired. Will anyone find out which gun it is and who has fired it?
- Our attention has been focused on the gang so far and we have not seen events from the adults' perspective. This begins to change during this episode. What might the adults start to notice? Are the gang going to get caught?
- Who the title is referring to. Could the title apply to anyone else?
- What do they think might happen to Rudi. Is he dangerous?

During listening:

While the children are listening to the episode, ask them to consider:

- How much of a threat to the gang the police sergeant is.
- How Rudi reacts when he enters the Fortress. Who does he think is inside?
- How the gang reacts to Rudi.
- Whether it still seems like a game to the children.

After listening:

Background information

The following list covers additional World War II vocabulary contained in the sixth episode (children may need some background information to help put the words into context):

war damage          prison camp          reconnaissance          Gestapo plane
ACTIVITY 1 - Character and plot development:

Rudi starts to develop as a character during this episode. What more do we learn about him?

...Rudi was a gambler at heart...And at the moment his luck was holding...Rudi couldn 't resist his curiosity...he had a feeling he was being foolish, but he had to know what was inside...

When the gang arrest Rudi, they are role-playing parts that they have seen in films. They are not behaving like children. This is an important development in their characters and the story line, and needs reinforcing.

‘...Quick, it's a Jerry. Get his gun.' The phrase sprang to his lips from so many war-films. Clogger reacted, too, like someone in the movies, getting behind the German, patting around his waist for a weapon...’

ACTIVITY 2 – Word bank:

The children can add the following new words to their Word bank. Encourage them to try to work out the meaning of each word before using a dictionary or reference book.

Crooked Cross (Swastika) Oberschule Ich hatt einen
kameradaen rear-gunner The Tea-time Sneaker Polizei
magazine of bullets Dumkopf Luger pistol

ACTIVITY 3 - Discussion topics:

• The children display a stereotyped response to Rudi as a German. List the things that they expect of him. Where would they have got this view from? Is Rudi like that? What is lie like?
• Westall deliberately creates an overlap where time stands still when Rudi enters the Fortress and the children react to his presence. What is the effect of this? Does it help the dramatic tension? Point out that the scene is also written from two viewpoints. Rudi's and the children's.
• Rudi’s response to the children is important since he sums up the dilemma - they are only children but they have a very powerful real machine gun and now his Luger pistol. They have a secure hide-out and are organised. They respond like adults would when they arrest him. Is this a game or not? Do the gang realise that with every event the situation gets more and more serious?

ACTIVITY 4 - Extract for close reading

Objectives:

• to take account of viewpoint in a novel, e.g. by explaining how this influences the reader's view of events (Y6 T1)
• to identify the point of view from which a story is told and how this affects the reader's response (Y5 T3 2)
• to change point of view, e.g. tell an incident or describe a situation from the point of view of another character or perspective (Y5 T3 3)
Extract 6: Chapter 10 (pages 128 – 129)

Extract begins: ‘...Chas felt his stomach pull together in a tight knot...' 
Extract ends: '...Another was pointing a long black air-rifle at him...' 

Questions about the text:

- Why do you think the author uses the image of a spider at the beginning?
- Why does Chas feel a link to Grandpa's nightmare? [The author is emphasising the personal element for Chas.]
- What words/phrases does Westall use to emphasise the sense of a game/role-play? [...The phrase sprang to his lips from so many war films...like someone in the movies...these were children playing at soldiers... ]
- What effect does this have?
- Once again the author writes from different viewpoints – whose? [Chas and Rudi’s.]
- How does Rudi’s perspective made the reader aware of different things? [The Germans’ view of the war and England; the fact that these are children but they have a real gun.]
- Look through the text and underline the different questions the author uses throughout. What effect do the questions have on the mood of the scene? [They convey confusion.]
- Although Rudi speaks English, how does the writer convey the feeling he is a foreigner? [Sentence structure creates authenticity.]

ACTIVITY 5 - Further activities:

The children could write:

- the report that the sergeant made of his visit to the house in Simpson Street and to Nicky's house
- two accounts of Rudi stepping into the Fortress - one from Rudi's point of view and the other from Clogger's.
EPISODE SEVEN: Hunted

Synopsis:

At home the McGills are worrying about the possibility of a German invasion on Garmouth. Meanwhile the sergeant goes to see Mr Liddell to discuss with him his suspicions about the machine gun. He has been collecting evidence which has convinced him that John, Audrey, Clogger, Nicky and Chas are all involved. He is sure that they have hidden the gun somewhere and has been following Chas in an attempt to find out where.

At the Fortress, Rudi is getting to know the children and feels less and less like a prisoner. The children ask him lots of questions. Chas asks him whether he can mend their gun. Rudi agrees to mend the gun if they get him a boat, thinking this to be impossible.

Following the sergeant’s visit, Mr Liddell has been watching Chas through binoculars. One morning he sees Chas being followed. Chas sets off to the Mud Flats in an attempt to shake off his follower. He realises, too late, he has been chased by Boddser.

Rudi seizes the chance one night to take the gun from Nicky who has fallen asleep on duty. But he realises that he cannot harm the children and is unsure where he would go if he did escape; so he puts the gun back.

Before listening:

Recap on the previous episode and then ask the pupils to consider:

- Who the title of this episode is referring to. How many characters in the book could the title refer to?
- How the gang are going to he able to guard Rudi. What do they think Rudi will do?
- Whether the police sergeant will make any more discoveries. Will lie get any closer to finding where the gun is hidden?

During listening:

While the children are listening to the episode, ask them to think about:

- What evidence the sergeant is piecing together.
- What the growing fears in Garmouth are about.
- Who is following Chas?

After listening:

Background information

Show the children a map of Britain and point out how vulnerable the North East of England was to attack. Indeed, invasion was a very real threat.
ACTIVITY 1 - Character and plot development:

What more do we learn during this episode about Rudi and his relationship with the children?
’...Everybody laughed. Everybody was there. They didn’t feel like guards with a prisoner now. More like a class with a teacher, even a family…’

What new information do we learn about the children by seeing them through Rudi’s eyes?
’...The children baffled him. They weren’t ordinary children...They were too solemn, too adult...It was as if they depended on each other like...the crew of a bomber. Sink or swim together…’

Reinforce how the plot develops with Rudi doing a deal with the children - he agrees to mend the gun if they help him to escape.

ACTIVITY 2 - Discussion topics

Rudi’s character:
How do the children feel about Rudi? What reaction is the author trying to generate and how does he get that response?

What do the gang think about Rudi? Do they still see him as their enemy? Do the gang realise how serious the situation is?

ACTIVITY 3 - Extract for close reading

Objectives:
• to analyse the success of texts and writers in evoking particular responses in the reader, e.g. where suspense is well-built (Y6 T2 8).

Extract seven: Chapter 12 (pages 152 - 153)

Extract begins: ’...Faffing fool! thought Chas. Does he think I don't know…’
Extract ends: ‘...no way out from the wrecked boat except the way he’d come.’

Questions about the text:
• How does the author create tension? [By allowing Chas to believe it is the policeman following him until almost the end of the extract.]
• Make a list of all the different verbs used in this extract to describe how Chas and his pursuer move. How do they create the effect of a chase? Look closely at the order in which they appear. [The author create the effect of speed and slowing down, of panic and calm – walked, limped, grinned, hidden, wriggled, ran, peered, scrambled, streaked, slowed, got stuck, crossed, ran, ducked, sped, crouching.
• Westall uses the sense of sound to describe what’s happening. What words can you find that describe what Chas hears? [Extra quiet...listening to the footsteps...boots with heelplates...ran back silently…]
• Is the reader meant to guess who it is at this stage? [As readers you are given information that the character does not have even though we see the scene through Chas’s eyes.]
ACTIVITY 4 – Further activities:

Work on the structure of the story can be extended by looking at more of Chapters 11 and 12. Look at how the story intercuts between scenes in the Fortress Caparetto and elsewhere as the author builds the tension and excitement.

ACTIVITY 5 – Extended writing activities:

This episode provides a whole range of interesting topics for children to explore further using a variety of writing forms. These topics could include:

- writing Nicky’s diary entry about Rudi’s arrival in the Fortress and what it is like guarding him
- writing an account of what happens when Chas and Boddser confront each other
- writing the next section of the police sergeant’s report including the new evidence that he has gathered
The Machine Gunners

EPISODE EIGHT: Fight at the Mud Flats

Synopsis:
Boddser holds Chas under water, trying to force him to tell where the machine-gun is being hidden. Chas at last manages to break free and run off to Nicky's house where he enlists Clogger's aid. Boddser is surprised and afraid to see Clogger. He does not want a fight with him but Chas tells Clogger 'to do him proper'. Chas is horrified by the violent and relentless way that Clogger fights.

Meanwhile the gang is trying to keep to its half of the deal to get Rudi a boat. They are anxious for Rudi to mend the gun as the threat of invasion is growing stronger. Nicky, under pressure, produces the key to his father's boathouse. Reluctantly he agrees to show them where the boat is. The children prepare the boat for sailing.

Before listening:
Recap on the previous episode and then ask the children to think about:

- What will happen to Chas. Will he escape from Boddser or is he going to take a beating?
- What Boddser actually wants. Is it revenge or something else?

During listening:
While pupils are listening to the episode, ask them to consider:

- Why Stan Liddell checks up on Chas and Boddser.
- Whether Rudi really believes that the gang will be able to keep their side of the deal.
- Why Nicky is so reluctant to co-operate.
- What action Cem mentions in case of an invasion.

After listening:

ACTIVITY 1 - Character and plot development:

This episode sees further development of both Clogger and Chas's characters primarily through their encounters with Boddser.

'...Usually, by this time, kids were blabbing, begging for mercy...But McGill wasn’t like that…'

The scene between Clogger and Chas is indicative of the strength and loyalty of their relationship.

Clogger: '...It’s up to you, Chas. Shall I do him proper?’
Nicky’s loyalty is also put to the test over the boat and his loyalty to the gang eventually wins through.

‘...the stone of the jetty scraped the dinghy’s white paint. Nicky felt it was his own heart that was being scraped...’

By keeping their side of the deal and providing Rudi with a boat the children will have a machine gun that fires again. Explain to the children that the action is moving on to a climax heightened by the threat of invasion.

**ACTIVITY 2 - Discussion topics:**

*Boddser’s beating:*
Did Boddser deserve to be beaten up by Clogger? Why was Chas so horrified, particularly given his earlier fight with Boddser? [Chas feels implicated.]

‘...This was a Clogger he had never known existed: a Clogger he had called out...’

Clogger also fights like a man, i.e. by different rules. What does the author want the reader to feel about this incident? What does it tell us about what is happening to the children?

*Chas:*
What does Clogger mean when he refers to Chas as:

‘...a hard man in your own way...Hard on yerself...’

Do you agree? Give examples from the story of Chas being hard on himself.

*Assisting Rudi:*
Given that Rudi is a German, should the children be helping him to escape? If they want the gun to be able to fire to protect Garmouth against the Germans, why are they letting him go?

*Nicky:*
Why is Nicky so reluctant to let the gang have the boat? Does he really believe that his father is watching disapprovingly?

‘...So, with heavy-hearted skill, Nicky showed them how; while all the while,, just over his shoulder, his father seemed to watch disapprovingly...’

At which other point in the story did Nicky feel the presence of his father?

**ACTIVITY 3 - Extract for close reading:**

Objectives:

- from reading, to understand how dialogue is set out (Y5 T1 7)
- to prepare a short section of a story as a script (Y6T 19)
- to compare and evaluate a novel or play in print and the film/TV version (in this case the radio adaptation) (Y6 TI I)
Extract 8: Chapter 13 (pages 161 – 162)

Extract begins: ‘...They left Boddser lying and walked back to the camp in silence...’
Extract ends: ‘...It was the admiration in Clogger’s voice he couldn’t bear...’

Questions about the text:

- How does the author create a contrast of mood in the first paragraph? [...the silence went before them...just sat and stared... - yet Rudi is reading the Beano.]
- Look at the two narrative paragraphs in this extract. What more do we learn about the characters?
- What local dialect words can you find in this scene? Why does the author use them? [The author makes the scene come alive by having the characters speaking in their own voices. Point out the details of punctuation and layout.]
- Why does Clogger say to Chas: ‘...you’re a hard man in your own way...Hard on yerself...’
- Study other examples of dialogue used elsewhere in the book.

ACTIVITY 4 – Further activities:

Pupils could try their hand at writing dialogue. Possible topics include:

- Choose a short section of the story and write it as a radio script with dialogue, demonstrating the use of punctuation and layout for direct speech. Use dialect if possible.
- More able pupils working in small groups could try to produce their own scripts from short sections of the story. Once completed, they could read them out loud to the rest of the class.
- Recall the scene when Stan Lidell visits Chas. Write the conversation that Chas and Mr Lidell could have had. Read it out to the class.
EPISODE NINE: Invasion!

Synopsis:

It is the worst raid of the war and Chas, his Mum and Mrs Spalding are in their shelter. In the distance they hear the sound of church bells ringing: it can mean only one thing - an invasion! Pretending that he needs the toilet, Chas sets off to the Fortress.

Meanwhile Cem’s family are preparing for the invasion by going to hide in a tomb in the cemetery. Cem runs off heading for the Fortress too. Audrey’s family are also on the move, setting off by car to escape. Audrey manages to leap out of the car and runs off to the Fortress. Frightened by the bombing, John remembers the Fortress as a place where he could be safe.

Mr Liddell is on duty at the Home Guard HQ. He is confused and trying to find out exactly what is happening. When the phone line goes dead he fears the worst.

Mr McGill is desperately busy coping with all the damage reports that are coming in when his wife appears to tell him that Chas has run off. But he refuses to leave his Warden’s post to help look for him. Rudi, spurred on by all the commotion of the air-raid, mends the gun and sets off with Nicky to find the boat.

Before listening:

Recap on the previous episode. Explain that the action in this episode is fast and furious as the story rushes to its conclusion. Then ask pupils to think about:

• What the title means. What is going to happen? Will the gun be tired?
• What will Rudi do? When will he try to leave?

During listening:

Explain that amidst all the noise, confusion and panic, the children and John are making their way to the Fortress. While listening to the episode, ask the pupils to consider:

• What Chas thinks they are going to do when they get there. Is that what the others are thinking too?
• What Mr Liddell thinks is happening.
• Why Mr McGill refuses to leave his post.
• Whether Rudi will manage to escape.

After listening:

ACTIVITY 1 - Character and plot development:

A number of new characters are introduced during this episode [Cemetery Jones Senior, Mr and Mrs Parton, Mrs Brownlee]. What do we learn about them?
Explore how Westall creates confusion and panic in the way the scenes are constructed and how the characters act.

Mr McGill’s decision to remain at his post is a tough one and demonstrates a level of duty that overrides personal considerations. What does this reveal about his personality?

‘...He [Mr McGill] felt very lonely; but quite determined to stay on that phone till the Germans shot it out from under him...’

Rudi decides to mend the machine gun. What does this reveal about his character? Why does he choose to escape?

‘...Rudi hesitated. It was wrong to put such a gun into the hands of children. But what was right tonight..?’

**ACTIVITY 2 - Discussion topics:**

- A key theme throughout the book has been the relationship between the adults and the children at this very stressful time. Events draw them into a situation which stops being a game and becomes deadly serious. The children lose faith in the adults. Why and how?
- What is the response to Mr McGill’s decision not to help his wife look for Chas? Should duty have come before personal considerations?
- Why is it fitting that it is Nicky who takes Rudi off to the boat?
- Is an invasion taking place? What is actually happening?

**ACTIVITY 3 - Extract for close reading:**

Objectives:

- to describe and evaluate the style of an individual writer (Y6 T3 I)
- to consider how texts can be rooted in the writer’s experience, e.g. historical events and places, experience of wartime (YS T1 4)

*Extract nine: Chapter 15 (pages 168-169)*

Extract begins: ‘...It was not yet midnight, and already it was the worst raid...’
Extract ends: ‘...some mistake,’ said Mrs McGill, tight-lipped. / Nobody answered...’

**Questions about the text:**

- How does Westall set the scene? [His spare, straightforward style sets the scene with every word making an impact.]
- Once again, Westall uses his senses to write. Make a list of the sight and sound words/phrases that he uses. [*Ghastly orange-pink, smell the burning oil...*]
- Find the simile in this scene [*Like a pack of cheated hounds...*] What effect does it have? How does it help to create the mood?
- This scene is full of contrasts. Search for phrases
EPISODE TEN: Advancing hordes

Synopsis:

The Home Guard are informed that the Germans have arrived. Mr Liddell and his men set off to investigate. He discovers the Polish Free Army. Nicky and Rudi run into a road block where Fatty Hardy is checking identity cards. They are facing some difficult questions, but then everyone is diverted by John rushing up. Nicky and Rudi slip away. Meanwhile Mr Liddell is trying to sort out the Polish Free Army and discovers that there is no invasion.

Rudi sails off but when the bombing stops, he returns home to the Fortress. Fatty Hardy has been left with the problem of searching for the reported missing children. He comes across the Polish soldiers and enlists their aid in the search, using them to form a line on the beach to sweep across the Heath towards Nicky's house.

Chas is looking out of the firing slit when he sees lines of foreign soldiers advancing towards him. He fires the machine gun. Rudi waves a white flag and tells Fatty Hardy about the children. Then parents, police and Home Guard all start arriving. Something breaks in the children and the Luger is fired and all the adults dive for cover. Rudi advances towards the children and Clogger shoots him.

Stan Liddell takes charge and clears the scene. The children show him the Fortress and hand over their weapons. There is a brief discussion about what will happen to the children. They then part never to be together again. The episode ends on a note of defiance from Nicky.

Before listening:

Recap on the previous episode and then ask the pupils to think about:

- Who the title of this episode is referring to. [Hordes of soldiers, adults and police].
- Whether there has been an invasion. Has Rudi escaped?
- Whether the machine gun will he fired.
- The end of the story. Can the story have a happy ending? What do the pupils want to happen?

During listening:

While listening to this episode, ask the pupils to consider:

- Who the Polish Free Army are. Why do they have no orders?
- How Nicky and Rudi escape the road block. Why does Nicky want to go with Rudi?
- What Stan Liddell discovers.
- The only people not aware that there has been no invasion.
- The shooting that takes place. Why does Chas fire the machine gun? Who fires the Luger the first time? Who shoots Rudi? Is he killed?
- Why Stan Liddell clears the scene.
- The ending of the hook. What will happen to the children? Why does it end with Nicky and his note of defiance?
After listening:

Background information
The following list covers additional World War II vocabulary contained in the final episode (children may need some background information to help put the words into context):

- Polish Free Army
- identity cards
- Movement Order
- white flag

ACTIVITY I - Word bank:
The children can add the following new words to their Word bank. Encourage them to try to work out each word’s meaning before using a dictionary or reference book.

- pillbox
- fixed bayonet
- tiller
- Panzers
- Stormtroopers
- Nil carborundum

ACTIVITY 2 - Character and plot development:
The ending is complicated and the pupils may need help in understanding the different layers of meaning. Explore who the children see as the enemy. Why do the gang turn on the adults at the end? Are there any adults who show some understanding of the children? (Some of the questions posed in the ’Before listening’ section could be explored again here.)

Nicky’s act of defiance at the end tells us how much he has changed. Trace his changes through the story. How has he been altered by his experiences? What has he learnt?

As a group, adults do not come out of the book well. Certainly the children in the book find them wanting. How do they fail the children and why?

ACTIVITY 3 - Extract for close reading:

Objectives:
- to develop an active attitude towards reading; seeking answers, anticipating events, empathising with characters and imagining events that are described (Y5 T1 9)
- to articulate personal responses to literature, identifying why and how a text affects the reader (Y6 T1 3)
- to contribute constructively to shared discussion about literature, responding to and building on the views of others (Y6 T1 5)

Extract 10: Chapter 18 (pages 206 – 207)

Extract begins: ‘...Cheeroh, boy,’ said Clogger. ‘Nil carborundum...’
Extract ends: ‘...Nicky took a deep breath. / ’Get stuffed,’ he said...’
Questions about the text:

Study the text closely and then ask questions to help pupils focus on the key points:

- Are the gang ashamed of what they have done? What would Nicky's Dad have said?
- What about the reaction of the parents? What does the ending tell us about the children's relationship?
- Encourage the pupils to talk about their response to the ending, comparing and defending each other's views. Discuss the characters, both the children and the adults, and encourage the pupils to draw upon their own experiences.
- What do you think about Nicky's comment at the end? Why does he say it?
- Do you agree with this critic's view about the ending: ‘...The plot in the last fifty pages becomes increasingly improbable; macho characteristics, guts rather than integrity are extolled, and there is too much emphasis on incidents of unpleasant violence...' (The Westall File, Macmillan)
- Talk about the story as a whole. Which episode is the strongest? Why?
- Who is the most popular character? Did pupils enjoy the story? Why?

ACTIVITY 4 - Extended writing activities:

The final episode provides a wide range of interesting topics for pupils to explore using a variety of writing forms. This could include writing:

- a character study of one of the main characters, using the notes from the character charts and by referring to the book
- an article for The Radio Times advertising the serialisation of the book
- a newspaper article about the events that take place at the end of the story; it could include interviews with key characters
- the report that Stan Liddell will write about Chas after all these incidents
- a letter from Rudi to the gang, written from hospital at the end of the story

ACTIVITY 5 - Further activities:

- Robert Westall has been criticised by some adults because his books include swearing, violence and references to sex. This is what he says in his defence:

  I have had a lot of bother over the years because The Machine Gunners contains swearing. But I am quite unrepentant - children do swear a lot and that's a fact. I wanted the book to be realistic. Children read books that tell them what they want to know, and what they want to know about...is what we all want to know about if we are honest with ourselves. Love, sex, death, injustice, freedom, honesty, old age, decay, conflict and how other people tick. And how to cope with it all. And what it feels like to be somebody else. (The Westall File, Macmillan)

  Do you agree with what Westall says? Why do you read books? What do you think of The Machine Gunners?
• Use the drama technique of hot seating to explore character and events. Nominate pupils to be characters from the story and in role to answer questions put to them by the rest of the class.

• Using the drama technique of freeze frame and thought-tracking, ask small groups to choose key moments from the story to depict.

• In small groups, prepare dramatised readings of key events from the book. Choose sections with lots of dialogue and discuss the role of a narrator.

• Design a cover for the book and write the blurb for it.