

Madame Doubtfire

Anne Fine



About the author

Anne Fine was born in England, the daughter of a post office engineer. She had four sisters, three of them triplets. She says she cannot remember a time when she could not read; from an early age she was a voracious reader. She was happy at secondary school, and went to Warwick University. There, in 1968, she met a young philosopher called Kit Fine. They got married six weeks later.

After leaving university, Fine worked as a teacher. She wrote her first novel, *The Summer House Loon*, after the birth of her first child; she and her husband had very little money, the weather was freezing, and she was suffering from post-natal depression. 'I was writing for myself,' she says, 'to cheer and warm myself up. It was finished in weeks. But I wasn't surprised when the book was turned down.' She later submitted the manuscript to a newspaper competition for an unpublished children's book. It didn't win, but was a runner-up. At the award party she met an agent who was keen to represent her, and the book was published in 1978.

Fine and her husband lived in Scotland, Canada and California. She continued writing children's novels. At first, although she was well reviewed, she made little money from them. Then with books such as *The Granny Project* and *Bill's New Frock*, she began to achieve a wider popularity. However, Anne became tired of California – 'All that relentless blue and gold. I would wake up dreaming of a frosty morning ...' – and she returned to England alone, with her two daughters.

She met her second husband, a botanist who grows fruit trees in orchards, on a train to Edinburgh. He had his two small children with him – 'I watched him all the way up and he was so nice to his kids'. It was love at first sight for her. She gave him her telephone number but a year

passed before they bumped into each other outside a supermarket. They married and now live in a beautiful house with a huge walled garden, in County Durham in the north of England.

Anne Fine has now written about twenty-five books, mostly children's books, but including three adult novels. Her children's books have won many prizes. Fine says that peace is essential to her writing. She takes her dog, Ben, for a walk by the river, has breakfast, and then settles down to work. She writes in pencil, rubbing out frequently. She has no need of a second draft. She considers herself extraordinarily lucky to be a writer. 'You learn so much,' she says. 'Even if you have invented somebody not at all like you, you are still shining a light into your own self and you are learning something.'

Summary

Madame Doubtfire, written in 1987, is a very modern story about a 'broken home'. Daniel and Miranda Hilliard, parents of three children, have separated and are 'at war' with one another. The book tells the amusing – and moving – story of how Daniel and Miranda become friends again.

Chapter 1

The story begins with Daniel and Miranda living apart. Miranda is a successful businesswoman, and is deeply angry with her husband, an impractical and frequently out-of-work actor. Daniel's saving grace is his sense of humour – that and his love of the children. Miranda is making it difficult for Daniel to see his children. Daniel says quite nasty things about the children's mother in front of them without considering how they feel about it.

Chapters 2–6

Miranda decides to employ someone to look after them. Daniel hits upon the plan of disguising himself as a woman – and gets the job! All goes well – Daniel is able to spend time with his children. The two older children know perfectly well who Madame Doubtfire is.

Chapters 7–9

But inevitably, in an amusing sequence of events, Miranda discovers the truth. The resulting row between Miranda and Daniel leaves the children white and shaking. It seems there is nothing to be done, until Lydia, the oldest child, tells both parents what she thinks of them. At last Daniel and Miranda see sense. The story ends with the two parents making peace with one another – although it is obvious that they will not get back together again.

Madame Doubtfire

Background and themes

Anne Fine is without doubt one of today's most outstanding children's writers. Critics describe her books as witty, stylish and thought provoking. Her stories are comical, but nonetheless they deal with contemporary issues such as divorce, step-parenting, bullying and sexual-stereotyping. They have hopeful endings.

Madame Doubtfire is a rare book. It is written with an instinctive understanding of a child's point of view, and combines realism and fantasy in a way that appeals to children and adults alike.

Divorced parents: Fine backs her decision to write about children from broken homes with the following statistic: one in five of today's population is either a step-child or a step-parent. She says, 'Divorce may be good for the parents, but it's one of the worst things you can do to your children. People of our generation were brought up with an overall sense that love was permanent; children growing up now learn that it is conditional – conditional on sexual satisfaction, on job satisfaction ... Sometimes I wonder if in the past there was just as much pain but the adults bore the brunt of it. Now it's the children.'

Heroic children: However, the children in Anne Fine's novels are not victims. They are always articulate, and often wiser, more heroic and more far-sighted than their parents. 'Somebody always pays for divorce,' says Anne Fine, 'and it's often the children with the fairy-tale virtues of courage and generosity and an unflinching capacity to forgive who pay.'

Acting and real life: 'I have only one life and I want to live it, not act it,' says Daniel when the children wonder why their father didn't stay in the family and pretend to be happy. When they agree to stop acting and be real, they realise that *Madame Doubtfire* has to go.

Film: In 1993 the film *Mrs Doubtfire*, starring Robin Williams, and based on the novel *Madame Doubtfire*, achieved massive, worldwide success. The film, though plainly based on the book, differs in some respects. However, it has the same warmth, rich humour, and underlying wisdom.

Discussion activities

Chapter 1 *A Quiet Afternoon Tea with Dad*, pages 1–6

Before reading

1 **Describe:** Put students into groups. Ask them to

describe the woman on the front cover. Have each group share their descriptions with the rest of the class.

After reading

- Pair work:** Elicit the fact that the children don't like their father to be angry with their mother. Have students work in pairs and find four things that show this.
- Role play:** Have students work in pairs to act out the following role play:
Student A: You are Daniel. When Miranda comes to pick up the children, tell her that you are angry with her. Explain why.
Student B: You are Miranda. You come to pick up the children at Daniel's home. You do not want to talk to Daniel.

Chapter 2 *Naked in Front of the Neighbours*, pages 7–9

Before reading

- Discuss:** Talk about pictures. Have students look at the pictures on pages 5 and 9. Ask some students to read out the captions and describe the pictures. Have them talk about what kind of person Daniel is and ask them if they think he is a good dad.

After reading

- Discuss:** Have students discuss these questions in groups.
 - Describe Daniel.
 - Do you like him? Say why/why not.
 - Why do you think it could be a problem to be married to him?

Chapter 3 *A Visit from the Stone Woman*, pages 10–14

Before reading

- Get ready:** Bring in some wanted ads from the newspaper and show them to students. Have them find out what kind of information they can see in the ads, e.g. job description, contact information etc. Now have students look at the wanted ad on page 12. Ask *What is the job?* and *If you want this job, what will you do?*

After reading

- Discuss:** Put students into small groups. Have them answer these questions.
 - Why does Daniel change the advertisement, do you think?
 - What do you think his plan is?
 - Do you think it will be successful?
- Role play:** Have students work in pairs to act out the following role play:
Student A: You are Christopher. Talk to Lydia about your parents. Say what you feel.

Madame Doubtfire

Student B: You are Lydia. Talk to Christopher about your parents. Say what you feel.

- 9 Discuss:** Have students discuss the following question in pairs: *Daniel and Miranda don't have a happy marriage. What do you think are the five most important things for a happy marriage?* Then have a whole-class discussion about the question. Students can write their answers for homework.

Chapter 4 *Saying the Right Thing*, pages 14–16

After reading

- 10 Write:** Have students work in groups. They have a conversation between Lydia and Christopher after they go upstairs. Then they write it.

Chapter 5 *Learning to Do the New Job*, pages 16–22

Before reading

- 11 Retell:** Have students look at the picture on page 17. Have them take turns in small groups to recap what was going on when Madame Doubtfire came to Miranda's house for the first time. Encourage them to describe Madame Doubtfire's clothes, the children's reactions etc.

After reading

- 12 Role play:** Have students work in pairs to act out as follows:
Student A: You are Miranda. Talk about Madame Doubtfire to a friend.
Student B: You are a friend of Miranda. Listen to her and ask questions.

Chapter 6 *Happy Families*, pages 22–25

After reading

- 13 Discuss:** In groups, students discuss the following question. Then have a whole-class discussion on the subject. *If parents are unhappy together, which do you think is better: to stay together because of the children or to divorce? Give reasons for your opinion.*

Chapter 7 *Actors and Happy Pigs*, pages 25–29

After reading

- 14 Discuss:** Put students into small groups. Have them discuss the following questions.
- *Why do Lydia and Christopher think the play is wonderful?*
 - *Why does Daniel get so angry with Christopher?*
 - *Why doesn't Daniel want to pretend to be happy with Miranda?*
 - *Do you agree with him? Say why/why not.*
 - *Why does Daniel say, 'I'm not a happy pig'?*
 - *Why does he decide to stop being 'Madame Doubtfire'? Do you think it's better to be an unhappy thinker than a happy pig? Say why/why not.*

Chapter 8 *Don't Mend the Roof on the Day of a Storm*, pages 29–34

- 15 Discussion:** Put students into small groups, and have them discuss the following questions.
- *Do you think Miranda is right to be angry with Daniel? Give reasons for your opinion.*
 - *Do you think Daniel is right to be angry with Miranda? Give reasons for your opinion.*
 - *How do the children feel? How do you know?*
- 16 Role play:** Have students work in pairs. Have them play Christopher and Lydia after they have gone upstairs at the end of the chapter. Encourage them to discuss what you could do to help things.
- 17 Guess:** Have students work in groups. *What do you think is going to happen? How do you think the story will end? Write one or two paragraphs about this.*

Chapter 9 *A Book at Bedtime*, pages 34–38

After reading

- 18 Group work:** Put students into small groups. Have them discuss the following questions.
- *Why does Daniel clean the house when he gets home, do you think?*
 - *What does Lydia say is the most important thing for Daniel to do? Do you agree?*
 - *What does Lydia tell Miranda? What do you think of this?*

Extra activities

- 19 Discuss:** Have students work in groups to discuss these questions.
How do children feel when their parents have an unhappy marriage? How do they feel when their parents quarrel? What do you think an unhappy marriage does to children?
- 20 Discuss and write:** Ask, *What kind of person do you think Daniel could be happy with?* Have students discuss in pairs and write a description of this person. Do the same for Miranda.
- 21 Write and discuss:** Have students write down all the things that they find funny/sad in the story. Then, as a whole-class activity, guide them to agree on what they think is the funniest/saddest thing.
- 22 Pair work:** Have students ask each other the following questions in pairs. *Have you seen the film "Mrs Doubtfire" with Robin Williams? Have you seen Robin Williams in any other films? If you have, which films have you seen him in? Did you enjoy them? What are the stories about?*