

The House by the Sea

Aims

- To introduce some of the background to the story – the house, the sea, the people.
- To explore how the author builds the tension and sense of fear which run through the story.

1 Ask students what comes into their minds when they hear the phrase 'the house by the sea'. Elicit some ideas from the whole class.

2 Ask them to make a list of the things that they like or dislike about the seaside. Encourage them to think about all the things that appeal to the senses (you could perhaps suggest they use sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell as headings) and teach vocabulary as necessary.

Possible likes: smell – sea air, fish and chips; hearing – sound of waves, seagulls; sight – colours of sand, sea, sky, cliffs, boats; touch – sand between their toes, wind in their hair, sun and water on their skin; taste – salty seawater, seaside food e.g. fish, special sweets, icecream.

Possible dislikes: same smells; noisy seaside entertainments and crowds in summer / bleakness and quietness in winter; exposure to the elements, especially strong winds; sand on skin and in clothes and food; taste of seawater.

3 Ask students to read the Blurb and decide what kind of story it is (thriller). Ask them to read it again and say what sorts of things they think might happen in it.

4 In the Blurb, we learn that Carl and his wife buy the house to enjoy weekends away. Ask students to get into groups of four and make a list of reasons why someone might like to have a 'house by the sea'. They should think about what people typically do at the seaside, and why life near the coast is different. Call back answers from the whole class.

Possible answers: people sunbathe, walk on the cliffs or along the beach, swim, surf, windsurf, sub aqua, sail, fish, eat seafood, ice-cream; they often go there to escape the pollution and pressures of city life; near the sea, the air is cleaner, it is more peaceful and the pace of life is slower; it is easier to relax and unwind, to think, solve problems or be creative.

5 Ask students to read Extracts 1 and see what else they can find out about Carl and Linda's marriage.

Answers: Carl was so busy he didn't have time for Linda; she spent her time doing up the house by the sea; he rarely went there; she went to stay with a friend; Carl was angry.

Ask them what they would do next if they were in Carl's situation. Now ask them to get into pairs and invent a telephone conversation between Carl in London and his wife at the house, based on what they have discovered about their marriage. They should write the dialogue down and then perform it for others.

6 Tell students that Carl and Linda agree to meet at the house by the sea, but, as they know from the Blurb, Linda doesn't arrive. Ask them to read Extracts 2 and find out what was strange at the house when Carl arrived there.

Answers: a car had parked there recently; there was fresh food in the fridge, though Linda hadn't been there for three weeks; yesterday's newspaper was on the sofa.

Ask them what significance the story in the newspaper might have for Carl later.

Possible answer: When he reads about the discovery of the woman's body nearby, he might worry that Linda's failure to turn up at the house might mean that she has been murdered too. Tell students that later in the book Carl makes other strange discoveries at the house. Ask them to invent and note down some additional things that would disturb or frighten them if they arrived at a house which they thought had been empty for several weeks.

7 Tell students that Carl goes to wait for Linda to ring him at the village pub. Ask them to read Extracts 3 and say what things are starting to frighten Carl about his wife not arriving or phoning.

Answers: the mad man in the taxi; the idea that Linda might get picked up by the madman at the station; the fact of the recent murder; the fact that the taxi then passes him; Mary's comment that people aren't safe with 'mad Tom' in a taxi.

8 Ask students to look at Extracts 2 and Extracts 3 again and discuss with a partner how the author builds up the tension about Linda not arriving in Carl's mind. Call back ideas from the whole class.

Possible points: The author starts with small things, such as like the series of strange discoveries Carl makes when he arrives at the house. Then she introduces the news of a woman's recent gruesome murder, and the idea of a 'madman' who is reported to be driving a taxi. Mary then comments that people are not safe with him, and finally the taxi overtakes Carl as he is on the way to the station to look for Linda.

9 Ask students to work in pairs to create a two-column list. On the left they should list all the things they have found out which seem strange, frightening or negative to Carl; on the right they should attempt to come up with some possible explanations which would help him feel better. Call back suggestions from the whole class, and make a master list on the board.

Optional Extra

10 Ask students to imagine they are Carl arriving at the house as it is getting dark one afternoon in autumn and to produce a piece of descriptive writing. They should set the scene using the seaside vocabulary elicited in Activities 2 and 4, describe Carl's concerns about his marriage, and then his thoughts and feelings as he makes some of the strange discoveries at the house (students should refer to Extract 2 but also include their own ideas from Activity 6).

The House by the Sea

Blurb

A married couple, Carl and Linda Anderson, buy a house by the sea to spend their weekends. But one weekend Linda does not arrive at the house and Carl begins to worry. What has happened to her? Who is the taxi driver that follows Carl? And how much do the people in the village really know?

Extracts 1

- a We thought we had everything! Linda was working for a small company . . . and my job was going well. I had to work long hours and sometimes at the weekends. But it was well-paid and it was interesting work. Linda didn't seem to mind and anyway she had lots of friends – the flat was always full of Linda's friends. In fact, sometimes I had to say to her: 'Come on, Linda, let's just have a quiet night tonight.' 'You're so boring, Carl,' she used to say.
- b So Linda bought this house and started to go down every weekend to get the place ready, to make it look nice and pretty. I went there when I could, but I was getting busier and busier at work – they were giving me more and more to do, and it was very difficult to say no!
- c Then, one evening, she didn't come home from work. She phoned me to say she was staying with her friend, Melissa . . . I didn't understand how unhappy Linda was. She didn't come home for the next three nights . . . I was angry, but what could I do?

Extracts 2

- a I parked at the side of the house. The ground around the house was wet and I saw that another car had been there.
- b I went to put the champagne in the fridge. I saw that Linda had forgotten to empty it before she left. That was three weeks ago. There was cheese and eggs and a few other things. I took out two bottles of milk and started to pour them down the sink. I thought they would smell horrible, but they didn't.
- c I picked up a newspaper which had been left on the sofa. I read it for a few minutes . . . There was one story that interested me. A woman's body, or part of it, had been found in the river Deben near Woodbridge . . . I knew where the river was. I'd been there with Linda . . . I looked at the date on the newspaper. It was yesterday's.

Extracts 3

- a . . . a man came into the pub and began asking if anyone wanted a taxi to the station. He was a big man with a lot of black hair that fell over his eyes. He was rather dirty with what looked like dried blood on his face . . . Mary [the pub owner] went up to him and spoke to him quietly.
'Your brother's looking for you. He wants his taxi back. You know you shouldn't be driving that car.'
The man said nothing, then turned round and left . . . a man on my right said 'I see Bill has been letting his mad brother play taxis again.'
'It's not right, Tom driving a taxi,' said Mary. 'People are not safe with a man like that.' . . . in my head I saw Linda standing on the platform and mad Tom waiting in his taxi outside.
- b I left the pub quickly. I didn't like this talk about mad people. Maybe it was the newspaper article I had seen that afternoon, but I began to worry for Linda. Where was she? Was she safe? I had to go to the train station to wait for Linda . . . After a few minutes I saw the lights of a car behind me and turned round. The car passed me and I thought I saw the words PARKER'S TAXI on its side. For some reason I felt cold with fear.