

A Tangled Web

Aim

- To get students to reflect on the spy thriller genre.
- To introduce students to some of the characters, facts and themes of the story.

1 Ask students to look at the words and phrases in Box 1. Ask them to decide what kind of story *A Tangled Web* is.

Answer: spy thriller.

2 Elicit students' individual feelings about this genre – what they like and dislike about it, which genres they prefer, and why.

3 Ask them to get into groups of four to make a list of the people and events they expect to find in a typical spy thriller. They can also refer to books and films they have seen. Call back ideas from the whole class, and make a class list on the board.

Possible answers: open, but expect students to list typical characters, plot lines, settings, etc.

4 Ask students to read the Blurb. Ask them who the main character is, what his job was and where the story takes place

Answers: Dan Combes; MI6 agent; England.

Ask students to suggest what kind of person you need to be mentally to work as a secret agent.

Possible answers: quick-witted, calm, lateral thinker, intelligent, single-minded, decisive, unemotional, self-confident.

List students' ideas on the board and then, working in pairs, ask them to use the information they have gathered here and in Activity 3 to write a job description for an MI5 agent.

5 Ask students to look at the Dan Combes extracts and decide what sort of person he seems.

Possible answers: a loner, suspicious of everyone and everything, careful, dissatisfied, troubled.

Ask them to consider how similar their findings about Combes are to their suggestions about the mind of an agent in Activity 4. Using the profile of a typical agent they have built up and the information about Dan Combes, start a class discussion on the probable difficulties of life as a secret agent.

6 Draw a simple spider's web on the board and ask students what it is and what implications it has (e.g. it implies danger because a spider uses its web to catch its prey).

Tell them that a spider's web appears on the cover of the book (you can show them if you have a copy).

Ask them what they understand by the word *web* – you could suggest they think of the World Wide Web to help.

Suggested answer: A web is a series of things which are connected.

Ask them what the word *tangled* means, and what things get tangled up.

Suggested answer: It means connected in a messy, random way; it has a negative meaning; you are obstructed from doing what you want if something is tangled. Typical associated words are string, hair, wool, relationships.

7 Write this quotation on the board:

“Oh what a tangled web we weave
When first we practise to deceive!”

(Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) *Marmion* Canto 6 Stanza 17)

Tell students that this quotation (which appears as an epigraph at the front of the book) is very famous and used regularly in English. Ask them to work in pairs to discuss what it means. Call back suggestions.

Suggested answer: It means that when we tell a lie, we often have to tell other lies or behave in other dishonest ways to prevent people from finding out the first lie.

Ask students to relate the quotation to what they know about the story.

Possible answers: The story reveals a web of lies and deceit in MI6. Dan Combes is still connected and tangled up in the organization and is reluctantly drawn back into this dangerous life. He is also trapped in a ‘tangled web’ about his own identity after a life of ‘pretending’.

8 Ask students to read the sentences in the Summary and to put the events they describe in the correct order; they should use what they know from the Blurb to help them.

Answers: 1 – a; 2 – d; 3 – f; 4 – b; 5 – e; 6 – c.

9 Ask students to use the information in the Summary to decide where they think Dan will go next and what will happen. They should discuss their ideas with a partner.

10 Ask students to imagine they were once a secret agent and to write a magazine article called ‘My Life in MI5’ in which they look back over their life and talk about the high and low points of the job.

A Tangled Web

Box 1

MI6	agent	the San Cristobal operation		
rifle	dangerous	binoculars	automatic pistol	
kill	CIA	weapons	explosives	murder
	headquarters	emergency		

Blurb

Dan Combes is a former MI6 agent living peacefully in France. After being attacked by a former colleague, he realises his relationship with the British Secret Service has not yet finished. He believes the attack is linked to his roles in Berlin and Central America. But that was over five years ago so why do they want him dead now? Dan returns to England and faces his difficult past – a web of lies and deceit.

Dan Combes

- a I had chosen the house for its position. It stood on the corner of the steep road . . . Behind the house there was a steep rock face. I had a view of the whole valley in both directions. No one could approach the village without being seen.
- b Airports are wonderfully anonymous places . . . But . . . also dangerous places, especially if you are a ‘wanted’ person. Those video cameras are everywhere – eyes that never close for sleep. And there are those apparently ordinary men – so ordinary that no one notices them. Men who sit for long hours, checking the crowds pretending to read their newspapers.
- c I had no real friends – friends didn’t go with my kind of job!
- d I spent most of the day on the outside terrace of the hotel, looking at the river, and thinking about what to do next. This was perhaps the only time I had really sat down to think about my life since I was a teenager. I realised everything I had done was a lie. I had spent my life pretending to be someone I was not, pretending to have feelings I did not have, pretending to believe things I did not really believe.
- e . . . I drove slowly, taking minor roads all the way. It was . . . safer like that, in case someone was following me.

Summary

- a Dan Combes is attacked near his home in southern France by his former colleagues from the failed ‘San Cristobal operation’ Jurgen Heid and Nina Rowlandson.
- b Back in England, Dan gets in touch with Bert Perkins, one of his former colleagues and a friend who still works for MI6.
- c While Bert and Dan are talking, Cas has already arrived at the Wimbledon ‘safe’ house and killed Nina.
- d Dan kills Heid, takes his car and escapes to England by plane from Barcelona.
- e Bert tells Dan various bits of useful information – that the fourth of his San Cristobal colleagues (Cas) is coming to London, that there would be an important meeting at a big house in Oxfordshire, and that Strang – his boss at MI6 – is the one who ordered his killing.
- f Nina phones MI6 and tells them that they have not killed Dan; she then returns to London by train and goes a ‘safe’ house in Wimbledon.
- g Dan goes to the Wimbledon ‘safe’ house next morning but finds that Nina is dead, and that Cas was in the house (he finds one of Cas’s special cigarette ends).