

# Views from Edinburgh

## Pre-reading Activities and Poems

### Teachers' Notes

This is a DIY kit. That means that we have put all the ingredients of a BritLit lesson at your disposal and you, the chef, can, if you wish, combine them in your own personal way for the delectability and delight of your students.

It consists of the following: four poems, glossary, some cultural notes and some things to think about when exploiting poetry in the classroom. (see 'key') You will probably want to introduce some of your own ideas, too.

The **poems**, all by Jackie Kay, are called *I Try My Absolute Best*, *Dusting the Phone*, *Sassenachs* and *Attention Seeking*. You will also find them in the Edinburgh **Poems**. They are also reproduced here for ease of reference.

The Edinburgh **glossary** has sections on both of these poems, again reproduced here.



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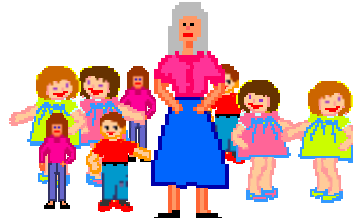
## I Try My Absolute Best

### 1. Try the quiz. Answer honestly!

#### What Kind Of Parent Would You Be?

1. *How many children would you like to have?*

- a) None. Children make me sick.
- b) I don't know yet.
- c) One or two.
- d) As many as possible! I want a huge family.



2. *When would you like to have children?*

- a) NEVER. I'd rather catch the plague.
- b) When the time is right.
- c) Before I'm 30
- d) As soon as possible!

3. *What is your personality like?*

- a) Stop asking me stupid questions – go and annoy someone else!
- b) I'm always happy! Hooray!
- c) This question is making me really stressed.
- d) It's okay. Usually.

4. *Your little girl wants a new laptop for her next birthday.*

- a) Forget it. She's getting socks.
- b) I'd better start saving up. I don't need to eat **every** day.
- c) If she wants a laptop, I'm afraid she'll have to wait until she gets a job.
- d) Is there anything else she'd like? Anything **cheaper**?

5. *Your little boy has been hitting other children at school.*

- a) Fantastic! A talent at last! Here's some money for extra boxing lessons.
- b) Shout a lot, and lock him in his room for a week without food.
- c) Talk seriously to him about why he has been hitting children.
- d) Just ignore it. All boys are naturally aggressive.

6. *Your teenager wants to go on holiday for four weeks with "a friend".*

- a) Good. That means a four week holiday for **me**.
- b) No! No! NO!
- c) Look everywhere in your teenager's bedroom for clues about this "friend". Check all the pockets, and drawers.
- d) Talk calmly to your child about the holiday, and discuss the situation.

6. *Your little girl is upset, because she has no friends at school.*

- a) I'm really not surprised. She's **weird**
- b) Do nothing. It's probably going to be all right in the future.
- c) Talk to her about how she feels, and make her know that **you** are her friend.
- d) Tell her to concentrate on studying instead.

7. *You go to the supermarket to buy some food for your children.*

- a) If it's cheap, I'm buying it.
- b) Buy food that your children like – chocolates, crisps, ice-cream.....
- c) Buy lots of good healthy food, and a few treats.
- d) Only buy healthy things, even if it's more expensive. **NO** sugar, **NO** fat, **NO** chemicals.  
(Spend a few extra hours checking the labels carefully.)

Now look at your partner's answers.

- Would your partner be a good parent? Why / Why not ?
- How is your partner different, or similar to the parent in the poem?



**2. Look carefully at the poem. Fill in the table below. (Sometimes you might have to imagine the answers).**

The parent tries to...	...because...	...but...

Now think about yourself. Complete this sentence in six different ways.

If I was a parent, I would...

...always

    ...always

        ...always

            ...never

                ...never

                    ...never

How are your answers different from your partner's? Who is most like the person in the poem?

3. How would you describe the parent in the poem? Choose some words.

Educated	Insane	Rich	Intelligent
Stressed	Single	Healthy	Scared
Protective	Paranoid	Confused	Angry
Beautiful	Ignorant	Normal	Hard-Working
Conscientious	Decent	Successful	Thoughtful

What other words can you use?

4. Which thoughts below do you think the parent would agree with?

I ate sweets and hamburgers when I was a child, and it never did me any harm.

If you believed everything you see in the news,  
you'd never eat anything!

*You are what you eat*

**A little bit of what you fancy is always good for you.**

I'd rather starve than eat anything unhealthy

Which ones do you agree with?



5.

I try my absolute best  
drink decaff coffee to pipe me down  
instead of hype me up only to find  
out from my eldest daughter  
that what they put the beans though  
is worse for you than an ordinary Nescafe

*Why does the parent want to “try my absolute best”?*

*Do you think the parent is successful?*

6.

I'm back on Valium.  
My kids are stuffing Monster Munch  
and Mars Bars down them.  
My youngest even ate a hamburger yesterday.  
It's driving me crazy.  
I says it's your pocket money,  
do what you want with it.

Think about the parent once again, and answer these questions:

- a) Is it a mother or father?
- b) How many children?
- c) How old is the parent?
- d) Why is he/she so stressed?
- e) Why does he/she have to protect the children so much?
- f) Does he/she eat good food, or just try to make the children eat good food?
- g) Will the parent continue to “try my absolute best” in the future? Why, or why not?

*Show your answers to a partner, and explain what you think.*

7.

one minute

**Yes** or  
**No**

- Work with your partner.
- One of you will be “Yes” and the other “No”.
- Go to question a) and argue for 1 minute. Your teacher will time you.
- Then change and go to the next question

- a) It's not possible to eat good food these days without chemicals (E numbers, artificial flavours, etc.)
- b) Sugar and fat is bad.
- c) Vegetarians are healthier than meat-eaters.
- d) Children should do what they want, not what their parents tell them.
- e) It doesn't matter what you eat.

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## 2. Dusting the Phone

### Teachers' notes

**Look at the title and elicit what it means: if there is dust on a phone, has it been used recently? Why is someone dusting a phone? Why would we pay any attention to a phone?**

1. Get the students to imagine that they can see the person dusting the phone, waiting for it to ring. Ask them to go through the questions above one by one and write a short answer (notes, not sentences) for each one. Then they compare their notes with their partners.

They should have built up clear mental pictures – share these ideas as a class.

2. Moving on to think about the person's relationship with the one who isn't ringing: again, the students go through the questions to create a plausible context in their minds, and compare their ideas.

3. Ask the students if they have ever waited for something for so long that their obsession has led them to fear the worst...if so, share experiences, but tread gently in case you're touching on something personal that the students would prefer to keep to themselves.

Then the students make lists, individually, of the worst things that could have happened, and the best. They should do this from the perspective of the person waiting for the phone call, but they might also want to explore things from the other side.

After that they compare lists and try and come up with the most likely explanation.

Ask them to read the first part of the poem:

I am spending my time imagining the worst that could happen.  
I know this is not a good idea, and that being in love, I could be  
spending my time going over the best that has been happening.

The phone rings heralding some disaster. Sirens.  
Or it doesn't ring which also means disaster. Sirens.  
In which case, who would ring me to tell? Nobody knows.

The future is a long gloved hand. An empty cup.  
A marriage. A full house. One night per week  
in stranger's white sheets. Forget tomorrow,

4. Perhaps the students are thinking about what prevents the person in the poem from being proactive and ringing the other person. Individually they should make a list of possibilities before completing the sentence stems with a partner. Go round monitoring and feeding in ideas if necessary.

Now read the second half of the poem

You say, don't mention love. I try. It doesn't work.  
I assault the postman for a letter. I look for flowers.  
I go over and over our times together, re-read them.

This very second I am waiting on the phone.  
Silver service. I polish it. I dress for it.  
I'll give it extra in return for your call.

Infuriatingly, it sends me hoaxes, wrong numbers;  
or worse, calls from boring people. Your voice  
disappears into my lonely cotton sheets.

I am trapped in it. I can't move. I want you.  
All the time. This is awful – only a photo.  
Come on, damn you, ring me. Or else. What?

I don't know what.

5. What advice could be given to the person trapped dusting the phone? Students might role play giving advice, or write a note as homework.



# Views from Edinburgh

## 3. Sassenachs

Here are some cultural references found in the poem.  
Match them with descriptions and pictures in the box.



Sassenach







Tartan

Tammy

Pony

Bru

Euston

<b>Kind of hat (like a beret)</b>		
<b>Way of wearing hair (tied at the back)</b>		
<b>Railway station</b>		
<b>English person</b>		
<b>Drink</b>		
<b>Pattern on material</b>		



## Sassenachs

Me and my best pal (well, she was till a minute ago) are off to London. First trip on an InterCity alone. When we got on we were the same kind of excited – jigging on our seats, staring at everyone. But then, I remembered I was to be sophisticated So when Jenny starts shouting, ‘Look at that, the land’s flat already,’ when we are just outside Glasgow (Motherwell actually) I feel myself flush. Or even worse, ‘Sassenach country. Wey Hey Hey.’ The tartan tammy sitting proudly on top of her pony; the tartan scarf swinging like a tail. The nose pressed to the window. ‘England’s not so beautiful, is it?’ And we haven’t even crossed the border. And the train’s jazzy beat joins her: Sassenachs sassenachs here we come. Sassenachs sassenachs Rum Tum Tum. Sassenachs sassenachs how do you do. Sassenachs sassenachs we’ll get you. Then she loses momentum, so out come the egg mayonnaise sandwiches and the big bottle of bru. ‘Ma ma’s done us proud,’ says Jenny, digging in, munching loud. The whole train is an egg and I’m inside it. I try and remain calm; Jenny starts it again, Sassenachs sassenachs Rum Tum Tum.

Finally, we get there: London, Euston; and the very first person on the platform gets asked – ‘Are you a genuine sassenach?’ I want to die, but instead I say, Jenny. He replies in that English way – ‘I beg your pardon,’ and Jenny screams ‘Did you hear that Voice?’ And we both die laughing, clutching our stomachs at Euston station.



Drawing by Paul Millard

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## Glossary

clutch	hold tightly
Euston	railway station in north london where trains arrive from scotland
jig	fidget (a quick, lively dance)
pony	Ponytail. (Long hair tied into a “tail”)
sophisticated	showing

## Attention Seeking

I'm needing attention.  
I know I'm needing attention  
because I hear people say it.  
People that know these things.  
I'm needing attention,  
so what I'll do is steal something.  
I know I'll steal something  
because that is what I do  
when I'm needing attention.  
Or else I'll mess up my sister's room,  
throw all her clothes onto the floor,  
put her gerbil under her pillow  
and lay a trap above the door  
a big heavy dictionary to drop on her  
when she comes through. (Swot.)  
This is the kind of thing I do  
when I'm needing attention.  
But I'm never boring.  
I always think up new things.  
Attention has lots of colours  
and tunes. And lots of punishments.  
For attention you can get detention.  
Extra homework. Extra housework.  
All sorts of things. Although  
yesterday I heard the woman say  
that I was just needing  
someone to listen. My dad went mad.  
'Listen to him!' he said. 'Listen!  
You've got to be joking.'  
Mind you that was right after  
I stole his car keys and drove  
his car straight into the wall.  
I wasn't hurt, but I'm still  
needing quite a lot of attention.

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## Glossary

detention	punishment where children stay after school to do extra work
gerbil	small rodent kept as a pet
mess up	make untidy
punishment	penalty for doing something wrong
swot	(negative) someone who studies very hard, seriously and enthusiastically