

Des Dillon's *Me and Ma Gal*

A Study Guide for Standard Grade and Intermediate 1 & 2
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Reading and Discussion Questions

Teachers should decide, according to the needs of the class, which questions will be done as reading/analysis questions and which as discussion and whether these should be done individually or in pairs or groups.

Page references are to the Argyll Publishing edition of 1995.

Chapter 1: Me & Ma Gal

1. Why does Derrick like the Lane and what expressions used at the bottom of p14 shows that he feels a sense of security and belonging about it?
2. (a) Why don't the boys talk when they first meet? (p15)
(b) What impression are they both trying to create and what do they do to create this impression?
3. (a) What do they do to show they want to be friends (foot p16) and what do you find funny about this?
(b) Do you think this is typical of boys in your experience? Do girls tend to act differently? How? Why?
4. Derrick tells us that 'it was a dangerous place.' (p16) Why does he think this and what else does he tell us (top p15) that backs this up?
5. Bearing some of these dangers in mind, what skill is Derrick proud of that might be important later in the story and why do you think this might be the case? (check p14)

Chapter 2: The Tecs

1. Derrick tells us that his story will be about 'the time that someone was goin about killin boys that were the same age as me an Gal.' (p22) From what he tells us on this page, what kind of story do we expect this book to be?
2. What else makes their surroundings dangerous and why is this? (p23)
3. (a) What does Derrick think of 'the Tecs' and how does he back this up? (pp23-4)
(b) What does this tell us about the boys? (pp23-4)
4. Why does Derrick sometimes feel sorry for the Tecs and when does he stop feeling sorry for them? (p24, p26)
5. What do they do to really annoy the Tecs and what surprising effect does this have on the Tecs? (pp26-7)
6. There is plenty of humour in this chapter, but it also introduces us to some of the more menacing aspects of their environment. Explain what you find funny and how it also creates a darker undercurrent.

RANGE:

- Standard Grade, Intermediate 1 & 2

KEY TEXTS:

- *Me and Ma Gal*, by Des Dillon: Argyll, 1995

Chapter 3: The Bricklayer

1. What do we learn about Gal's family in this chapter and what does Derrick find funny about this?
2. Explain some of the stories surrounding 'The Bricklayer' (pp32, 34–35, 51) and what has maybe happened to make him behave like this.
3. (a) Do you think Mick Rettie's stories are likely to be true? (pp34–5) Why?
(b) Do the boys believe them? Why?
(c) Bearing this in mind, what is strange about what they are now doing?
(d) What do you think your answers to (b) and (c) tell us about the boys?
4. 'The best listener I've ever heard.' (p53) What is funny about this comment and how does Derrick support his claim? (p36–40)
5. How are Duffy and his gang shown not to be quite so tough after all and what really annoys Derrick about their behaviour? (pp47–52)
6. 'Man it was a dangerous place.' Explain the dangers he is referring to and show how a darker undercurrent is developed further in this chapter.

Chapter 4: The Burn

1. (a) How does Derrick feel about taking the blackie's eggs and why?
(b) Why doesn't he tell Gal? (p61)
2. (a) What strange feelings did Derrick get when Gal's hand was in the nest? (p62)
(b) What does he imagine when he looks at the egg in Gal's hand? (pp64–5)
(c) What does this experience tell us about the relationship between the boys?

3. What two explanations does Gal have for how birds can count (pp68–9) and what does Derrick think of his explanations?
4. What does Derrick's think of 'herryers' and what does this tell us about him?
5. (a) Why does Derrick suddenly feel scared? (top p68)
(b) How does the end of this chapter increase his premonition that something bad is going to happen? (p72)

Chapter 5: Hell Tar

1. Pick one part of this chapter you found particularly funny and explain why.
2. Explain two things that make Derrick scared on the pipe. Why doesn't he tell Gal?
3. (a) Do you think the scary man is really there or has Derrick just imagined it?
(b) Why doesn't the author make this clear until later?
4. Find two effective techniques that shows how scared Derrick is and explain why they are effective, e.g. the similes he uses to describe Strangler Joe on p92 or the use of short sentences.
5. Do you think 'Hell Tar' is a good title for this chapter? Why?

Chapter 6: The Workies

1. Why are the boys scared of 'the workies'?
2. Do you think the boys believe the stories about them? Why? (pp96–7)
3. As well as being scary, many of these stories are very funny. Do you agree? Give an example and explain why you agree or disagree.
4. What does Derrick like about lying in the long grass? (p98)

5. When the boys look up at the stars at night, why do they think there's 'somethin funny goin on out there?' (p99) What do you think about this idea? Is it all just nonsense?
 6. 'We slithered up that slopin hill, man, like two slugs.' (p101). Explain how the word 'slithered' and the simile, 'like two slugs' are very effective here.
- (b) What reputation is Derrick trying to create about himself and how does he show this?
 - (c) How do we know that this is just an act he is putting on?
6. There are some very contrasting changes of mood in this chapter. Explain what these are and why you think the author does this.

Chapter 7: The Golfies

1. Put **True** or **False** or **Cannot Tell** against the following statements and say why:
 - (a) We now know that Derrick imagined the scary man.
 - (b) The scary man was just looking for birds' nests.
 - (c) He was definitely Bible John.
 - (d) He could be The Bricklayer.
 - (e) Derrick hadn't just imagined seeing him.
2. Read pages 104–7. What do you find funny about the golfers? Find a good word choice or expression to support your answer.
3. How does Dillon make us laugh at what the boys say or do? Look at word choice, repetition, rhyme, alliteration, comparison, exaggeration or any other technique.
4. (a) Why does Derrick feel he can tell Gal his earliest memory story and what does this us about their relationship? (check mid p110 and 112)
 - (b) How does the author make this memory seem extraordinary? Look at word choice, imagery or exaggeration or any other technique. (see p112)
5. Look at the incident with the farm boy (p113–4):
 - (a) What does Derrick say to make the boy seem huge and scary and how do we know that he isn't so scary after all?

Chapter 8: Mental Terry

1. What effect is created by the opening lines of this chapter and how is a link created between the end of the last chapter and the beginning of this one?
2. Why does Terry's attitude and behaviour suddenly change, and what is unexpected about this? (pp118–9)
3. How do the boys feel about what Terry did to the young birds? How does Dillon show their feelings e.g. via word choice, layout, type size and punctuation etc.?
4. At the end of this chapter the boys bury the birds. What does it tell you about them? Why do you think Derrick says a prayer and why doesn't he tell Gal?
5. How would you describe Terry McKenzie as a person? Imagine you are his teacher or social worker doing a brief report on him. What would you say about him? Is he sad, bad, cruel, mean, sadistic, dangerous, disturbed, damaged or what? Would you have anything good to say about him?

Chapter 9: Strangler Joe

1. 'Then the bones in ma back shivered.' What makes Derrick and Gal so scared? (pp126–7)
2. (a) Derrick describes Strangler Joe 'like he was a big movin hole in snow' and 'movin ... across the tip ... like ... on a magic carpet.' (p126) Explain why the first images is appropriate and the second one rather sinister.

- (b) What other features make him look like the devil? (check foot p127 and foot p128–top p129)
3. How does Dillon increase the suspense and tension at this point? (pp131–4)
4. (a) How does the author show that Gal and Derrick have almost a telepathic understanding of each other? (pp131–2)
- (b) What Derrick imagines is also used as a kind of foreshadowing technique. Explain what is meant by this and how it help to increase the suspense.
5. (a) Explain how the boys manage to escape, how Terry McKenzie unwittingly helps and how their own survival techniques play an important part.
- (b) How does he suggest the speed of Derrick's flight on the last page of the chapter?
6. Is Mick's story about what has happened true or false and how do we know? (p142–foot p143)
7. What is ironic or funny about the following comments:
- (a) 'man it's been great so it has you've missed yourself where have you been anyway?' (p142)
- (b) 'Now mind you an stay away from that Railway an that Pipe ... an up them Lochs d'ye hear me?' (p144)
8. Do you think they are likely to heed his mother's warning? Why?
9. Do you think the ending of the story is effective? Why?

Chapter 10: The Lochs

1. How does the author effectively keep us in suspense at the start of this chapter?
2. Why do you think Dillon puts the words of Derrick's prayer in italics and breaks it up into separate lines between the narration?
3. (a) Explain why Derrick shouts 'Amen'? (top p139)
- (b) Is there any sign that his prayer might be answered and that a miracle is about to happen? (p139, 'I shouts it like a swear word ... ran away into the woods.')
4. How does Derrick feel when he sees Gal, how do they react to each other when they meet and what is or isn't surprising about this? (p139)
5. (a) How is Gal feeling when he meets Derrick and how do we know? (pp140–1)
- (b) Why do you think he doesn't want Derrick to tell anyone? (p141)

Talking/Writing

1. Talk or write about the first time you met a close friend, the first impression you got, what you said and did, liked or didn't like then about them, how this has perhaps changed and what the friendship now means to both of you.
2. Talk or write about your own earliest memory and try to make it as vivid and detailed as possible. You could maybe try writing it in a younger child's voice and/or in your local dialect.
3. Now try writing your own story about a day in your childhood that really left an impression on you. (see p22 for Derrick's task)

OR Try writing an alternative ending to the story, writing it in Derrick's voice.

OR Tell us what happens next day when the two boys meet up.

OR Tell the story that Gal and Derrick tell Gal's mother next day. (see p141)

OR Write a newspaper or television report about the Strangler's attack on Duffy.

Further Language Study

In one part of the novel Derrick tells us that 'folks in Coatbridge ... (p111) ... couldn't speak the right posh way some folks like Doctors an Teachers an that spoke.'

What do you make of this comment? What do you think the author is trying to show about Derrick's attitude towards Coatbridge speech or the 'posh' speech of doctors etc? (e.g. pride, embarrassment or a sense of inferiority?) Why do you think Derrick would think this?

Paired Activity – possibly work with a partner

1. Why do you think the author has chosen to tell the story in Derrick's voice?
2. What are the advantages or disadvantages of this?
3. What does Dillon do to make the narrative voice sound like a ten year old boy from Coatbridge telling us his story in his own voice?

Look for some good examples of how Dillon does this and try to explain what techniques he uses to make it sound authentic or genuine. You will find plenty of examples on just about any page. The following headings and examples might help to point you in the right direction, but they are only suggestions.

Narrative Viewpoint and Register

The author has to make the narrative sound like someone talking, not writing, but also talking to someone of his own age. This makes it sound as if Derrick is taking us into his confidence and telling us things he normally wouldn't tell anyone else. In fact he warns us that we better watch who we tell, all of which makes him sound very open and honest.

Dillon therefore uses a very **colloquial style or register**, i.e. a very informal or conversational voice, as you would use in talking to friends. We need to appreciate that spoken language has its own codes, conventions or norms which are quite different from written, especially formal written language and perhaps after studying this section you will be more aware of some of these.

Firstly he uses the **second person** pronoun 'you' a lot and in addition he also addresses the reader directly as if he is actually talking to us e.g. :

'Oh! that's right you probably don't know about this story... So I'm tellin it to you.'
(pp21–2)

OR 'so you better watch who you tell cos I promised Gal not to tell anybody about it... That's how you'll know him', etc. (pp141–2)

Secondly he uses many **linking words and phrases** used a lot in conversation, such as ‘well, so, an, an that, anyway, you know, so he was’ and he keeps using ‘an’ a lot as if another thing has just occurred to him.

We also find lots of **exclamations** like ‘waoh!’ and ‘wham!’ to show surprise or shock or Derrick’s excitement in telling us something really dramatic.

Verbs: he mainly uses contracted, i.e. shortened verb forms, such as ‘I’m’, ‘don’t’, ‘that’s’, etc., which is what we usually do in conversation, instead of the longer versions we would use in more formal speech or writing.

In conversation we also tend to **cut words and sentences short or run them together**, as in the way he shortens words like ‘magine’, ‘member’, ‘c’mon’, ‘cos’, etc., or breaks words up (e.g. ‘mental’, p49, p125 or see p82) or runs words together (‘prayfrus sinners’, p139).

Type Size, Font and Punctuation are also used a lot, as if in a comic or cartoon, especially **BLOCK CAPITALS** in bold type, usually on a separate line, often continuing the sentence above, to create a dramatic or visual effect on the page (e.g. p133 or p136), often with multiple exclamation marks etc.

See how many you can find and look out for other typographical techniques, e.g. p101. Try a cartoon drawing of one of these examples.

Sentence Structure and Grammar

As well as the features noted above he uses a lot of **short, simple sentences** (i.e. saying only one thing). Also many of the sentences use **simple conjunctions/joining words**, especially ‘an’ or ‘so’.

Check any page and count the number of simple sentences in any one paragraph and the joining word used. How does all this suggest a young person talking?

Notice how he also plays around with **sentence structure** to suggest the ebb and flow of speech or thought, e.g. he **interrupts** (‘I mean ... c’mon’ p70, or check pp108–9) or adds **additional comments in brackets** as a humorous afterthought (‘an you think I’m mad!’ p71) or **cuts sentences short or**

doesn’t take new sentences where you would expect, e.g. ‘man it’s been great so it has ... you’ve missed yoursel where have you been anyway?’ (p142) to show someone saying several things quickly.

He even runs a separate sentence in italics across two pages, but broken up between paragraphs of narration to show how Derrick is aware of many things at the same (pp138–9). Look for further examples and show how they illustrate the way people actually talk or think.

Syntax (word order) is often used both in speech and writing to emphasise the important part of what we are saying and Dillon often inverts or rearranges the usual word order, e.g. ‘Right off the ground he was.’ (p106) or ‘Man was I the hero’, etc. (p114) Explain why he does this.

Another key feature of dialect speech is that it doesn’t always follow the **conventional grammatical patterns or ‘rules’ of Standard English**, though they aren’t really rules, only conventions or ‘norms’ based on the official or standard variety of the language. So we find Derrick’s narrative uses plenty of **non-standard English or local dialect grammar** like ‘I done’, ‘the terrifiedist I’d ever been’, ‘so we walks’, ‘we stands’, etc. – features that are definitely not posh and most likely to be seen as ‘bad’ English when in fact they are the normal or even distinctive grammatical features of any local dialect which follows different norms from Standard English grammar.

Spelling, etc.

Like most children, Derrick often gets **words mixed up or gets them wrong** and there are several words which he regularly confuses or alters like ‘soldiers’ for shoulders or ‘mudderer’ for murderer, ‘varnished’ for vanished, ‘sploded’ for exploded. Can you find any others?

At the same time he **spells some words to suggest how it is said in dialect**, such as ‘ma’, ‘an’, ‘yin’, ‘kinda’, or removes the final ‘g’ of the English ‘ing’ (e.g. ‘missin’, ‘somethin’, etc.) or deliberately misspells words, using a phonetic spelling, i.e. how it sounds, like ‘abyoosed’, ‘konkreet’, ‘krazy’, ‘syko’, ‘feroshis’, ‘ventrilokwist’, etc., while he also uses ‘were’ for ‘where’.

Can you think of other examples you use or have seen (e.g. in texting)?

Pronouns mainly use English spellings, but he uses some Scots like 'ma' for my and also uses some hybrid Scots-English spellings like 'yoursel' (instead of 'yourself' or 'yersel'). Check for others.

Can you think of other examples of non-standard spelling, e.g. in everyday communication between friends? Write out some examples and explain the rules or conventions used.

Some people think using this kind of spelling will undermine the use of standard or 'proper' spelling, so that many people won't be able to use the standard forms correctly. Do you think this could cause problems or do you think it could maybe have the opposite effect, i.e. make people think more carefully about how to spell words? Why do you think Dillon uses some non-standard or phonetic spellings (i.e. how it sounds)? Why do you think he doesn't spell all the words this way?

Vocabulary and Idioms

Derrick uses some very funny or effective dialect words and expressions, such as, 'hey youse ya pair a tubes' (p115), 'glaykit' (p81), 'pure mingin' (p96) or 'We shoots the craw' (p107).

Try to identify some other examples. Look for expression you use and ones that you don't or are unfamiliar with. Look them up in a Scots dictionary. Try translating a section into Standard English.

Do you feel the way Derrick does about the way people in your area speak? Why? Is there anything interesting, funny or distinctive about your local accent or dialect? Is it really 'bad' English or slang or dialect or 'Doric' or 'Scots' or a mixture of Scots and English or what? How would you describe it and what do you think some of its main features are? You might find some of the above features useful.

Des Dillon's

Me and Ma Gal

Critical Essay Note and Help Sheet

'The best book I've read in ages.'

Explain what you enjoyed most about *Me and Ma Gal* and say why you think it does or doesn't deserve this description. Some useful ways of introducing your text and developing other paragraphs are printed in italics.

Introduction

Me and Ma Gal by Des Dillon is a novel about... OR which deals with...

In my opinion/I certainly agree/I think that in some ways (i.e. I agree/disagree with this statement because...)

In my essay I plan to write about OR aim to/intend to investigate/discuss the setting, storyline, characters, themes, style etc. to show why I enjoyed/did not like this novel, etc.

Setting

Firstly I think the setting of the novel helped me to enjoy/relate to the story because it is set in or around a small town in the west of Scotland, close to the countryside, which is quite similar to or different from my own area because...

Although the author doesn't say exactly when the story is set, it could be around thirty years ago because it mentions Bible John (late 1960s–70s) but I don't think the time period is important/significant because...

Storyline

In your own words tell us what the storyline is mainly about, i.e. about all the adventures Derrick and Gal have in one day and the sort of funny, exciting or dangerous things they get up to as they explore their surroundings and the various funny or scary characters (mainly scary) they meet.

In chapter 2 (p22) Derrick tells us that they had to write a story in school about a day in their childhood that made an impression on them and he decides to tell us about the time someone was going about killing boys around the same age as him and Gal.

N.B. Don't try to tell the whole story chapter by chapter. After you have explained what it's mainly about, pick out the parts that you liked best, such as the bits that you thought were funny, weird, scary or exciting, etc. Try to explain why certain episodes were very important to the development of the narrative or to your appreciation or understanding of the novel. Explain how Dillon uses peaks and troughs of tension and excitement in each chapter, or varies the pace of the story, or develops atmosphere or suspense in the book as a whole, builds the story up to a climax and creates an effective or unusual or unexpected or unsatisfactory ending.

e.g. the railway line where they get chased by 'the Tecs' (chapter 2) and wait for the Bricklayer's train to pass (chapter 3), a psycho who is out to take revenge on kids by hurling bricks at them from his guard's van;

or finding a blackie's nest down the burn (chapter 4) where Derrick feels as if he and Gal have a telepathic understanding of each other;

or Derrick getting stuck on the sewage pipe in Hell Tar (chapter 5), and is scared to move until he thinks he sees the scary man, 'dressed like a coffin carrier';

or being chased by 'the workies' (chapter 6), where the boys believe that if they are caught they will be thrown into the swishers and be chopped up among the sewage;

or making a fool of two angry fat golfers (chapter 7) who are mad at the boys for trespassing on their private course;

or being threatened and then bribed to keep quiet by Mental Terry McKenzie who sets fire to birds' nests (chapter 8);

or finally being caught by Strangler Joe (chapter 9) but escaping and living to keep quiet about what happened to them (chapter 10).

The boys are especially haunted by stories about Strangler Joe and Bible John. Derrick thinks that he sees a scary man several times (e.g. p68), especially when he gets stuck on the pipe (p92), but we think he has just imagined him because he was so scared, until Gal also sees him (p103). Finally they both see Duffy being dragged across the dump by him (pp126–7). Explain why you liked these episodes or found them scary or exciting. You will also need to explain how the climax of the story involves escaping from Strangler Joe (chapter 9).

Narrative Structure

Remember Derrick is telling his story about a day in their childhood that made an impression on them (see above), but notice how in telling the story Derrick often wanders from one thing to another. His imagination or memory jumps to something else he has just thought of, or wanders onto other events that maybe happened a long time ago, such as the first thing he could 'member' (pp110–113). This creates a kind of meandering narrative at times, a bit like their wandering journey through their neighbourhood. Can you

think of some good examples? Explain one and say what you liked or didn't like about this. Look at **Chapter 3: The Bricklayer** for example.

Yet Des Dillon manages to create effective links between the chapters, firstly because the story takes us through all the events that happen to the boys in the one day and secondly through the stages of the boys' journey in that where they are at the end of one chapter leads onto the next one, such as being chased by the Tecs from the railway line and then in the next chapter waiting for the Bricklayer's train to pass. He also creates links between all the chapters through recurring characters or incidents involving dodgy or scary characters, especially the recurring references to the Strangler and all their dangerous situations and escapes.

Also notice how at the end Derrick and Gal's story is kept secret and the attack on Duffy is what is making the news; we are reminded that while they have been having all their adventures and escapes, other scary incidents have been happening to boys of their age that day. However Derrick's mother's comment at the end highlights how little some parents know about what their children have been up to, and that the world of children can be far scarier than their parents could ever imagine.

Characters

In between these 'adventures' Derrick also tells a lot about himself and Gal, such as about how he and Gal first met or the things he likes most about Gal. Like boys of their age they need to pretend to be tough, but Derrick is very honest about how scared he often is. He is also very honest about his own emotions, including trying not to show any at times, especially fear or affection (such as how he feels when he thinks Gal is going to be killed).

In what ways are the boys similar or different? What do they like or not like about each other? (check top p24.) Like most children they sometimes fall out because they won't admit to being wrong (pp82–3) but Derrick admires Gal's skill at lots of things that help them to survive e.g. listening like an Indian (p38), or 'slithering' like a slug to escape the workies (p101), and his clever answers (p68). He constantly refers to 'the bold' Gal.

How would you describe Derrick's feelings about Gal (check chapters 9 and 10, especially pp131–2) Since the story is told from Derrick's viewpoint, we don't hear what Gal is thinking; but from what Derrick tells us, what do you think Gal likes most about him?

Above all perhaps, both boys make us laugh a lot, both in the things they do and say, including their arguments, e.g. about whether the pipe is encased in cement or 'konkreet' (pp80–82), or the Golfie chapter when they ridicule and imitate the two angry fat golfers.

Derrick also has a great imagination, something we can clearly see when he and Gal look up at the stars and wonder what is out there (pp98–100) or where he tells Gal about his earliest memory. What effect do these episodes have on the reader and what do they tell us about Derrick's character in particular?

Although they maybe do some things they are not supposed to, they have a strong sense of right and wrong about things like vandalism, graffiti or stealing birds' eggs. What do these episodes, especially their reactions to people like Mad Terry or Duffy and his gang, show us about the boys?

The main reason I found Derrick interesting is because he is very honest about a lot of things, especially how scared he can be, such as when he gets stuck on the pipe etc. ...

One of the most important aspects of the story is the relationship between the two boys, and I especially liked the way Derrick tells us about...

Although they sometimes argue, they never fight with each other unless older boys force them to which shows us...

They are also very loyal to each other because...

Derrick admires many things about Gal, especially...

In fact Derrick cares a lot about Gal which he reveals when... (e.g. p95 or pp131–2)

... This is also shown through the title of the novel Me and Ma Gal because...

Narrative Viewpoint and Voice

Possibly one of the most enjoyable aspects of this novel is the way it is written not just from Derrick's viewpoint, but also in his own voice, so that the novel really sounds like a boy from that part of Scotland talking in his local dialect. See the **Further Language Study** section for details. Why do you think Dillon has written the book in Derrick's voice and how successful do you think this is?

What are the main advantages of using this first person narrative voice all the way through? Are there any drawbacks to this very limited viewpoint, i.e. limited in the sense that we can only know what Derrick is telling us, not what others, including Gal, are thinking? Do you think the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, e.g. to help increase the suspense?

Bearing in mind that he is only about ten, do you feel Derrick is a reliable or honest narrator? What does Dillon do to make us feel that we can trust Derrick? He is very honest about his own emotions, including trying not to show any at times, especially fear or affection, but he confides in the reader about this, especially his admiration, concern and affection for his friend, something that makes us like and trust him even more.

How much did the first person narrative add to or detract from your enjoyment? How much of the book's success is due to the fact that it is written in this way? Do you think it would work as well if it was all written in Standard English?

Themes

You could expand on various themes the book deals with, such as friendship, childhood, growing up, loyalty, etc. Perhaps a central one is about children learning how to survive in a world that turns out to be much darker and more frightening than either the boys or the reader expect, full of mad, bad, crazy or scary adults, a very sinister and very dark place indeed when seen through the eyes of a ten-year-old. The terror of the final chapter is even greater because Dillon almost lulls us into a false sense of security via all the humour, the childhood love of exaggeration, the exciting escapes the boys have and the possibility that the Strangler exists only in Derrick's weird imagination.

However the boys do survive (though Gal cannot bring himself to speak about it). Above all the novel also celebrates the closeness of their friendship, and the human strengths, skills, cleverness, sensitivity, goodness, love and loyalty the boys demonstrate in their battle to survive, help and protect each other.

Personal Study: possibly you could compare *Me and Ma Gal* with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. *Huckleberry Finn* is told in the Mississippi dialect used by the hero, Huck, a 'wild' boy who befriends Jim, a runaway slave. Both are on a quest for different types of freedom, learning how to escape from the hazards of 'civilized' adult society and discovering an unexpected bond of loyalty, trust and affection for each other on the journey.

Answer Guide to Reading Questions

Chapter 1: Me & Ma Gal

1. The lane is wide and long – good for playing games. Expressions like ‘our bit’ ... ‘you were home,’ ... ‘like a dog marking out new territory.’
2. (a) They are both too scared to talk.
(b) Both are trying to show they are tough so they kick stones, look mean, spit, etc., plus Derrick digs his heels into the ground.
3. (a) They eye each other up, ignore each other, follow each other about without talking and Derrick leans forward and goggles his eyes, all of which is a funny way of trying to make friends.
(b) Accept any sensible answer!
4. He tells us that the scheme is full of half-built houses and piles of rubble, but he has also told us about the ‘Big Guys’ that ‘terrorise’ them with hatchets.
5. Derrick is proud of his running skills, which might just come in very useful to escape from ‘Big Guys’ and other dangerous characters.

Chapter 2: The Tecs

1. Probably a horror story, murder, thriller, etc.
2. They walk along the railway lines, but can’t tell which side the trains run on.
3. (a) They think the Tecs are ‘daft’. He shows this by the way the boys freeze when told to stop, then give their secret signal to run away when they get close.
(b) It shows they have a mischievous sense of humour, or they are cheeky or enjoy making a fool of adults in authority.
4. He feels sorry for making them look so daft, but he stops feeling sorry when they shout abuse and threaten them.

5. They lob half bricks over the fence, make faces, wiggle their bums, flick their tongues, laugh etc., all of which makes the Tecs so mad they threaten to ‘rip them’, etc.
6. Humour – accept anything reasonable, e.g. the way they make a fool of the Tecs, or his mother’s answers, or about Catholics walking funny, etc. There is a darker undercurrent with the mention of sectarian prejudice and abuse, the dangers on the railway or how mad and abusive the Tecs become.

Chapter 3: The Bricklayer

1. They are a huge family, all called ‘Gal’ and when their mother shouts them in for dinner, they all run; but their father always gets served first anyway, so there is no point.
2. He has killed hundreds, but he is within his rights; he looked like a pirate (Mick Rettie’s description). His wife and child were killed by a gang of boys throwing a concrete block over a bridge onto his guard’s wagon.
3. (a) No, because of the unlikely way he claims to have seen him, he is taking money and the description is like something out of a horror film.
(b) Yes, because they are on the look-out for the man described by Mick.
(c) They believe he has killed lots of people, but they still want to see him.
(d) They are rather gullible, likely to believe the wildest horror stories and although they are scared, they can’t resist the excitement, danger and challenge.
4. You can’t hear a listener! Gal can tell how many wagons are on the train and that it is sure to be the Bricklayer’s train.
5. They are terrified: screaming, fighting each other to escape by running through the burn. However, they will later go around bragging about how they ‘sorted him out’.

6. Wanting to see the Bricklayer in spite of believing he has killed hundreds; there is also Duffy and his gang. They were terrified when the train passed and they could be dealing with people who are really crazy.

Chapter 4: The Burn

1. (a) He tells us he feels sorry for them and starts thinking about confession and guilt.
(b) He thinks it is not the kind of thing you tell other boys and he's afraid Gal will think he's soft.
2. (a) He can feel and see what Gal is feeling in the nest.
(b) He feels a pleasant shiver running through him and imagines Gal is God holding the sky for the angels, etc.
(c) This shows how close the boys are, able to read each other's minds, but also it shows their shared sense of beauty and joy in holding the egg, as if it is something sacred.
3. He argues that they can work out that one person has gone and one has left and that the bird will fall into a hole left by the eggs that have been taken. Derrick is impressed by the first explanation, but not too sure about the second.
4. He doesn't like them and he would feel guilty if he did it. This shows he has a sense of responsibility or sympathy for other creatures, a clear set of moral values.
5. (a) Derrick suddenly sees, or thinks he sees, a big man floating through the trees, grinning.
(b) At the end of the chapter he compares the bird's yellow eyes to 'a horrible little heart sizin us up for somethin terrible.' He later describes Strangler Joe's eyes as yellow (p92) so he is making an imaginative connection between the two.

Chapter 5: Hell Tar

1. Accept any reasonable answer, e.g. their comments about the older boys talking about girls; Derrick's planning to hit Strangler Joe with the hammer; their parents' warnings; Derrick's pipeline shuffle; the argument about cement or 'konkreet' etc.
2. He is initially scared when he is crossing he pipe. Gal's plan to jump into the tree also alarms Derrick as he is afraid that he will fall to his death; it is only his fear of Strangler Joe coming that makes him jump to safety. He doesn't want Gal to laugh at him for being scared and then doesn't mention Strangler Joe in case he might be going 'bonkers.'
3. (a) Because Derrick is really scared, he has been thinking a lot about the Strangler and he admits to having his doubts, so it is possible he imagines him. On the other hand the description is very detailed, vivid and frightening, so we are also left with the possibility he was really there.
(b) Derrick is so scared he is unsure, and Dillon wants to keep us in suspense.
4. Mark on merits: e.g. 'dressed like a coffin carrier' suggests a sinister figure, dressed in black, dealing in death; the hyperbole of 'walkin so fast he's runnin with his legs straight' to heighten Derrick's fear and dread; the short sentences to increase pace and tension, etc.
5. Yes, it effectively sums up their fears associated with this place. 'Hell Tar' suggests something a black, smelly, sticky, deadly and so on, with lots of associations of Hell and the Devil.

Chapter 6: The Workies

1. They have heard a lot of scary stories about the workmen throwing children into the sewage and getting chopped up, etc.
2. Yes, because the boys think no-one has ever left the sewer alive if they got caught and they don't believe Tam Caddel's explanation for peeing his trousers, partly because he wouldn't have lived to tell the tale.

3. Accept yes or no with appropriate example and reason.
 4. The peacefulness, sense of timelessness, freedom from fears, awareness of Creation's beauty and mystery, etc.
 5. They think that people from other planets are watching them and trying to communicate with them. Accept any reasonable answer.
 6. Accept any explanation of movement similar to slugs or closeness to the ground, well hidden, skill at blending into surroundings, but it also suggests how afraid they were.
- (b) Accept any reasonable comment on contrasting imagery of cold and heat; expressions such as 'like magic... magic'd through that door'; repeated use of 'magic'd'; comparison of the vest to 'a big white tent'; the big orange that 'splodes' all over the kitchen, etc.

5. (a) He says he 'was shakin the ground with his feet... five times the size of us', but when Derrick hits him he starts 'greetin for his mammy'.
 - (b) He wants to show how tough he was and hopes Gal will tell others, as he keeps hinting and walks with his chest out.
 - (c) He says at the end of the chapter that his real reason for not going back was he was 'scared in case he got us an done us right in'.

Chapter 7: The Golfies

1. (a) False
 - (b) Can't tell
 - (c) Can't tell
 - (d) True, he could be, but can't tell.
 - (e) True.
2. Accept anything reasonable, such as their rage over their private course being invaded by two small boys; the descriptions of 'wobbly jelly belly man'; their posh names and voices; comparison to their granny trying to run; similes like squealing pig or big whale, etc.
3. Accept some of the above, plus the boys' mocking antics and evasive tactics; their funny run or dance; putting on posh voices; grotesque exaggeration of imagining what the golfers would do and say if they caught them; use of mocking rhymes and alliterative expressions, like 'wobbly jelly belly' or 'puffin an pantin an rantin an ravin'; mocking names like 'old Redface'; use of typography to imitate and dramatise, and so on.
4. (a) He knows that he really wants to hear his story and won't use it to make a fool of him later. This shows they really respect and trust each other.
6. We begin with their fear of actually seeing the scary man, move on to the comic relief of the golfers, then hear about Derrick's very personal earliest memory and end with him telling us about the fight with the farm boy. These contrasts help to vary the mood and pace of the narrative, especially after the fear and tension of the previous chapter. They also show the many different emotions Derrick is experiencing, especially trying to forget about the scary man, though a mood of fear and menace are never far away.

Chapter 8: Mental Terry

1. Dramatic effect – sudden and unexpected, surprise, etc. The previous chapter ends with Derrick telling of his fear of the farm boy and this chapter begins with Mental Terry threatening them.
2. Derrick pretends he is dying from the cut in his neck. Mental Terry suddenly switches from being a gangster to a 'friend', bribing them with presents as he is now afraid of the consequences, especially from Derrick's 'krazy' Dad.

3. Accept disgust, shock or anger, etc., shown via words like 'screamin', 'greetin', 'shoutin', 'cruel bastard', etc., 'boak', the simile of his 'greetin was rollin round the tunnel like thunder', lots of short sentences and exclamations to express shock, etc., itemised sentences on separate lines, phonetically spelled expression of disgust, '**EEEEUCH!**' in bold block capitals, in a paragraph by itself, Gal's anger in bold italics, repetition of '**OH MAN OH MAN**' in block capitals with larger type, plus spaces, or BOAK in block capitals.
4. Burying the bird shows they feel sympathy or respect. The prayer shows Derrick has a sense of pity for birds as fellow creatures that have been sadistically and mercilessly killed. Maybe Derrick doesn't want Gal to know how much pity he felt or to think he is going too far by treating birds as humans.
5. Terry McKenzie's report might mention that he has a record of bullying and extortion, disturbed, dangerous, threatening and potentially violent behaviour, with a capacity to inflict cruelty, etc., but he has maybe suffered neglect, abuse or violence himself.

Chapter 9: Strangler Joe

1. They see Strangler Joe sinisterly moving across the dump, holding Duffy by the scruff of the neck and Duffy trying to escape.
2. (a) The first simile effectively shows how the seagulls of the dump are so densely packed together they seem like snow. A man dressed all in black appears like black hole in this whiteness, while later he appears to move like a magic carpet across the tip, suggesting a threatening and sinister figure with some kind of black power, possibly supernatural.

(b) Descriptions of smoke and soot, the figure floating over the ash, his ability to appear and disappear, to turn his head backwards, his unnatural power of vision, etc.
3. The boys don't know where the Strangler has gone and Dillon keeps us waiting to find out. He keeps building up the tension through description of the atmosphere in the wood and a deadly fear increasing between the boys as they sit watching and listening.
4. (a) As they stare into each other's eyes 'for ages an ages', Gal can clearly see what Derrick is thinking, their eyes 'like mirrors... really in contact... like twins'.

(b) Derrick has a premonition of Gal's death, making us wonder if this going to happen and greatly increasing our fears for Gal's safety, especially when Strangler Joe bursts out of the trees and grabs him.
5. (a) Gal pretends to be dying, but when the Strangler grabs Derrick, Gal seems to somehow throw Mental Terry's knife into the Strangler's leg (Derrick's explanation isn't 100% clear). The Strangler lets go of them and they run away using their 'different ways' plan.

(b) His speed is suggested by word choices like 'Whizz', 'whippin', 'whacked', or the hyperbole of 'I fell an got back up before I knew I fell'. Further suggestion is made via sentence structure such as breaking up simple statements like 'But I'm Billy Whizz. The fastest runner in Cadzow' into two separate sentences to create a breathless effect, and by repetition of 'so I got faster an got scarer', etc., to suggest accelerating speed and fear. The physical layout of the text is also used, such as breaking off the sentence at 'It was all' and then adding '**trees trees trees**', repeated three times, each on a separate line in bold type, before allowing the sentence to run on into the next line with 'an blackness' but then stopping it at 'then' when a stop isn't needed. Finally a verbless sentence is added in two separate lines, 'The Sky The Lochs'.

Chapter 10: The Lochs

1. Again he simply keeps us waiting to find out what has happened to Gal by focusing on Derrick becoming frantic, waiting, watching, listening intently and desperately praying for any sign of his friend.
2. Firstly to suggest that while he is praying he is still aware of many other things going on at the same time; secondly to make it stand out more in italics; and thirdly to continue building the suspense by drawing out his prayer to make it seem much longer.
3. (a) Derrick shouts 'Amen' to suggest his desperation or anger with God.
(b) The crack in the cloud and 'the blitz of light' that 'showered the rock' sounds like something out of the Bible; it could be taken as a sign that his prayer will be answered, though everything around looks normal, unchanged, unaffected.
4. He is very happy, overjoyed, relieved, etc., but instead of running to embrace each other or show any kind of emotions, which Derrick has shown he is really feeling, they 'never screamed or shouted', but simply walked towards each other 'like the way we always do'. Everything is deliberately played down, emotions held in check or suppressed, which is what boys are supposed to do, even after nearly being murdered!
5. (a) Gal is still very frightened, traumatised even, because although Derrick tries to prompt him, Gal frantically washes blood off his hands and tells him he doesn't want to talk about it and that he feels sick. Derrick tells us 'he looked angry and scared at the same time'.
(b) Possibly Gal is scared they will get into a lot of trouble from their parents and the police. More likely he has been so terrified by what happened he doesn't want to speak about it ever again, but to bury it and pretend it didn't happen because it was too traumatic.
6. Mick's story isn't likely to be true (we already know from his claim to have seen the Bricklayer that he makes up stories) because we know about Duffy and the Strangler.
7. (a) 'man it's been great so it has... you've missed yourself where have you been anyway?' We know what has really happened and how they have been involved in more excitement than they want to talk about.
(b) 'Now mind you an stay away from that Railway an that Pipe... an up them Lochs d'ye hear me?' Their parents are warning them to stay away from dangerous places where the Strangler has been spotted, the very places they have been to, little suspecting what has really happened to them.
8. Unlikely, because they can't resist going to dangerous or exciting places or like exploring places they aren't supposed to be in. Or maybe likely, because now they have had such a terrible experience and the Strangler hasn't been caught.
9. Some might find the ending disappointing because the boys don't tell anyone what has happened to them and there is no dramatic finale with the boys centre stage helping to catch the villain. Others might like Dillon's use of understatement and a low-key ending with its ironic humour, making us feel that we are privy to the boys' secret which the adults know nothing of; all their adventures are pushed offstage, ignored by everyone else, a sort of return to normality for them.