First published in 1906, The Railway Children is one of the most famous of the novels of Edith Nesbit, whose books for children are recognized as some of the greatest classics of the genre.

The book introduces us to Roberta, Peter and Phyllis, three children in a fairly wealthy family. Their lives are stable and happy until one day their father is mysteriously taken away from their home. Their mother will not say where he has gone, only that he is ‘not coming back for a long time’. Without the father’s income, the family have to move to smaller accommodation in the country. Here, they become fascinated with the railway line that runs past the bottom of the garden, and make friends with the drivers and guards who work at the station. However, they are now so poor that they cannot afford coal for the fire or good food to eat. This and the disappearance of their father hangs over them like a dark cloud. Finally they learn what has happened to their father, but at the same time they are learning other lessons about the difference between right and wrong in their own lives.

Edith Nesbit (1858-1924), like the characters in The Railway Children, was born into a middle-class family whose fortunes declined. Unlike the children in the novel, however, she did not see her problems suddenly swept away. For her, financial and other insecurities continued, even to the time of her death.

Her childhood was hard: her father died when she was four years old, and her mother moved the family around Europe looking for a warm, dry climate suitable for Edith’s sister Mary, who had consumption, a disease which was then incurable. It was not until 1871 that the family settled, after Mary’s death, in Kent, in south-east England. Here, one of the main attractions was the railway, which ran past a field at the back of their house. In this house, Edith began writing poetry, some of which was published, and began dreaming of becoming a great poet.

Later, Edith moved to London. Here, in 1880, she met and married Hubert Bland. She was seven months pregnant when they married, which was very much against the conventions of the day. It was not long before she had to provide the main income for their growing family, as Hubert’s business collapsed. This she did mainly by writing - poetry, stories, novels: anything that matched the literary taste of the time and might sell. Slowly, the family’s fortunes improved. Hubert Bland became a successful journalist, and Edith’s writing brought her fame and success when she focused her energies on writing children’s stories.

The Blands had a lively social life. Their house was always full of visitors and talk. The writer H G Wells, a family friend, said their house was ‘a place to which one rushed down from town at week-end to snatch one’s bed before anyone else got it’. Edith cut her hair short, dressed in a very modern way, smoked in public and always said exactly what she thought.

When Bland died in 1914, Edith was heartbroken, and her financial situation now again grew insecure. Her difficulties were eased a little in 1915, when she was awarded a small pension from the government for her services to literature. She also sold produce from the garden of her house.

In 1917, she married again, this time to a cheerful, kind man called Thomas Terry Tucker, a marine engineer. She found marriage to him, after three years of struggling alone, a relief. Her final novel, The Lark (1922) was a return to form, but her final years were plagued by illness and poverty.

When the first of Edith Nesbit’s many successful novels, The Story of the Treasure Seekers, was published in 1899, she was instantly recognized as a different kind of writer of stories for children.

Before the 19th century there was very little in the way of enjoyable stories written specifically for children, the vast majority being aimed at teaching children how to behave properly and concerning themselves primarily with moral values. In order to enjoy fiction, children had to rely on books for adults such as Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver’s Travels. In the early part of the 19th century the situation for children began to improve, helped as with
(f) The man stops the fire on his boat with water.
(g) A man says to the children: ‘You can’t fish here!’
(h) The children see that the boat is on fire.

Chapter 6
1 Answer these questions.
   (a) Why do the people in the village want to give something for Perks?
   (b) Where is Perks when they take the gifts to his house?
   (c) Why does Mrs Perks begin to cry?
   (d) Why is Perks angry?
   (e) Why does Perks begin to smile?

2 Talk to another student.
   Imagine that it is Peter’s birthday. What will you give him?

Chapter 7
1 Close your book. Are these sentences right or wrong?
   (a) The children fight all the time.
   (b) The doctor thinks Peter is going to die.
   (c) Peter wants to stay in bed.
   (d) Roberta reads about her father in an old newspaper.
   (e) The children’s father is a spy.

2 Talk about this question with other students or write your answer.
   What kind of things does a spy do?

CHAPTERS 8-10

Chapter 8
1 Close your book. Who says these things?
   (a) ‘One boy is down there, in the tunnel.’
   (b) ‘I don’t like this. I want to go home.’
   (c) ‘Is he dead?’
   (d) ‘Where did you come from?’
   (e) ‘You go to the nearest house and get somebody to help us.’
   (f) ‘It’s very dark in here. Are you afraid?’

2 Peter wrote to a friend about the accident in the tunnel. This is part of his letter, but there are a lot of mistakes in it. Find the mistakes and correct them.

   My leg was better so I got out of bed for the first time. We went to watch a game at the school. One boy ran in front and left newspapers behind him. The other boys followed and tried to catch the first boy. Seven boys went into the tunnel but only six came out. Roberta and I went into the tunnel to look for the boy. It was very hot and dark. A train came.
   It hit the boy. He hurt his leg. I didn’t want to stay with the boy. Roberta didn’t want to stay with the boy. She is the oldest so she went for help. I stayed in the tunnel with the boy.

Chapter 9
1 Join these beginnings and ends of sentences with so.
   (a) Peter and Phyllis are going to help Jim...
   (b) The signalman sits with his son at night...
   (c) Jim hurt his leg...
   (d) Peter wants Jim to stay in their house...
   (e) The family don’t have much money...
   (f) Jim’s grandfather thinks he can help them...
   (i) they can’t buy Jim what he must have.
   (ii) he sleeps when he is at work.
   (iii) Phyllis has to go into the tunnel again.
   (iv) Mother writes a letter to Jim’s grandfather.
   (v) Roberta is happy.
   (vi) he can’t walk.

2 Talk with another student or write your answer.
   Why do you think Jim’s grandfather wants to help the children and their mother?

Chapter 10
1 Answer these questions.
   (a) Why don’t the children have time to go to the railway?
   (b) What does the old man ask everybody on the train to do?
   (c) Why does Roberta think something is going to happen?
   (d) Why is it Roberta’s happiest day?
   (e) Why is Father out of prison now?

2 Roberta, Peter and Phyllis like helping other people. Write down the people they helped in the story.

Activities after reading the book
1 Look back at your answers for Chapter 1, question 1. Were you right? Was anybody in your class right?

2 Talk to two other students.
   Did you enjoy this story? Why/Why not? Write down what you think. Then read it to the class. Do other students think the same as you?
Activities before reading the book

1. Look at the picture on the front of the book. Try to answer this question.
   When does this story happen?
   (i) the 1670s
   (ii) the 1770s
   (iii) the 1870s
   (iv) the 1970s
   Why do you think this?

2. Read the Introduction in your book. Now close the book. What can you remember about E. Nesbit?
   (a) What was E. Nesbit’s first name?
   (b) What year was she born?
   (c) Where was she born?
   (d) How old was she when her father died?
   (e) Why did she begin to write books and stories?
   (f) Where did the stories for her books come from?

Activities while reading the book

CHAPTERS 1-3

Chapter 1
1. What happened to the children’s father? What do you think? Write it down. Then look at it again at the end of the book. Were you right?

2. Answer these questions. The answers are Roberta, Peter or Phyllis.
   (a) Who “wants to be the boss”?
   (b) Who is the youngest?
   (c) Who loves trains?
   (d) Who wants to help repair the engine?
   (e) Who can’t sleep because she can hear her mother crying?
   (f) Who wants to move to a new house every month?

3. Talk with another student.
   “Girls are as clever as boys, you know,” Father said. Is Father right? Did most people think the same a hundred years ago?

Chapter 2
1. Answer these questions.
   (a) Why does Roberta kick Phyllis and say, “Be quiet”?
   (b) What three things can they see below the house?
   (c) Why can’t they make fires in January?
   (d) The Station Master shouts at Peter. Who goes to help Peter?

2. These three adjectives describe one person. Who is it? kind, angry, friendly

3. Talk with another student or write your answer.
   You are one of the children in the story. How will you get coal?

Chapter 3
1. Put each name with the right words.
   (a) Mother
   (b) The old man
   (c) Perks
   (d) The Station Master
   (i) is the children’s first friend at the railway.
   (ii) tells the children stories about the trains.
   (iii) is angry with the children.
   (iv) gives the children some food for their mother.

2. Talk with another student or write your answer.
   Mother is angry because the children asked for money. How can the children get money?

CHAPTERS 4-7

Chapter 4
1. Join these beginnings and ends of sentences with because.
   (a) The children think that there is going to be an accident...
   (b) Jim and Bill are not going to stop when they see the children waving...
   (c) The children must wave something red...
   (d) Jim knows there is danger on the line...
   (i) red is for danger.
   (ii) he sees the red skirts.
   (iii) they always wave at the train.
   (iv) there are trees on the railway line.

2. Look up imagine in your dictionary. Now imagine that the children didn’t stop the train. What happened to the train and the people on it? Describe it.

Chapter 5
Shut your book. Which of the things below happens first? Which is second, third, fourth...? Put a number next to each sentence.
   (a) The children take a baby from the boat.
   (b) The children stand on a bridge and watch a family’s boat.
   (c) The man takes the children down the river on his boat.
   (d) The children go fishing.
   (e) The man’s wife goes to find her husband.
books of all kinds by cheaper publishing costs and the more cost-effective distribution of books.

By the second half of the 19th century, many different types of stories for younger people were being written. These were largely set in fantasy worlds, which were considered to be the ideal worlds for the imaginations of children. Victorian authors such as Lewis Carroll (1832-98), with stories like the much-loved Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865), were not concerned with real-world settings.

Edith Nesbit, on the other hand, wrote adventures about children in the world they shared with adults. In this way, she was able to mark out her own territory in children’s fiction. The characters in The Railway Children are true to life and are portrayed in such a way that young readers find it easy to identify with them and sympathize with their emotions. Though Nesbit introduced elements of magic and fantasy into some of her stories, her children are psychologically real, and the situations they have to cope with, too, are real. For this reason Nesbit has been called ‘the first modern writer for children’.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK
1. Ask the class if any students have seen the film of The Railway Children. If so, ask them to tell the others in the class about it. Did they like the film? Did they like the story?

2. Put students into small groups. Ask them to answer this question:
   You are going on a journey. How do you like to travel? Which of these things don’t you like? Explain why.
   train, car, aeroplane, bus, ship

3. Copy five of the pictures in the book. Cut off the captions. Put the students into small groups. Give a set of the pictures and the captions to each group. Ask them to match the captions to the pictures.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION
Chapters 1-3
1. The family was happy before Father went away. Working in pairs, students find sentences in the book to show this.

2. Ask students to work in pairs. They role-play the conversation between Mother and Father before Father goes away. They talk about the following: the family have to leave the city; Mother can’t tell the children why Father is away; the children can’t ask questions; they have to help; they are not going to have much money.

Chapters 4-7
Ask students to work in groups of three. They role-play a conversation between Roberta, Peter and one of the people in the village. The children ask the villager to give something for Perks’ birthday; they say ‘Don’t tell Perks about it’.

The villagers say they want to give him something because Perks always helps people; they talk about what to give him.

Chapters 8-10
Put students into small groups to discuss this question:
Mother teaches the children at home. Do you think this is a good idea? Would you like your parents to teach you? Would you like to go to school? Write down the good and bad things about learning at home.

Then discuss ideas as a class.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK
1. Put students into groups of four. They role-play the following conversations between the children and their father after he comes home. Students take turns to be one of the children and the father. The children tell their father about the following. Their father asks as many questions as possible.
   (a) the trees on the railway line
   (b) the fire on the boat
   (c) the boy in the tunnel

2. In small groups, students talk about life at the time of the story compared with now. They think about TV, computers, cars, etc. Do they think life for children is better now or then?

Glossary
It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the ‘Before You Read’ sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapters 1-3
coal (n) this is hard and black and people light it to get heat
engine (n) this makes a train or car move
piece (n) a small part of a bigger thing
repair (v) to make something good again when it breaks
Station Master (n) this person is the boss of the station
thief (n) this person takes other people’s things
thief (n) this person takes other people’s things
tunnel (n) a hole through a hill or under a river for cars and trains to go through
wave (v) to hold your arm up and move your hand from left to right

Chapters 4-7
blood (n) this is red and is in people and animals
gift (n) you give this to someone when it is their birthday
prison (n) when people do something bad they have to go to this place and have to stay there
spy (n) this person tells other countries important things about their country

Chapters 8-10
signal-box (n) a small house next to the railway line; a man sits in it and tells the trains ‘Go’ and ‘Stop’.