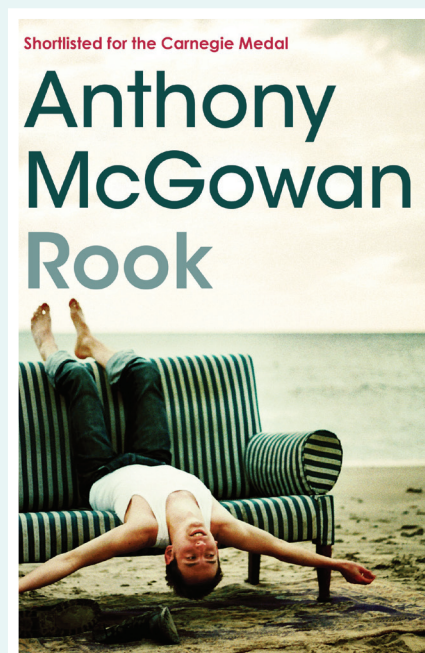


Barrington Stoke

CLASSROOM RESOURCES



ROOK

Anthony McGowan

- PART 1** Synopsis and Themes
- PART 2** Suggested Questions to Develop Reading Strategies
- PART 3** About Anthony McGowan

PART 1 SYNOPSIS AND THEMES

SYNOPSIS AND THEMES

This guide has been produced to provide ideas for guiding readers through Anthony McGowan's moving short novel **Rook**. The guide is written to be used after reading the full text in order to discuss the book as a whole.

A synopsis is followed by quotes from the book with suggestions for discussion points designed to help readers engage with the topics the book covers. The topics assigned to each quote are intended to further understanding of the text and provide opportunities for classroom discussion or written work.

We hope you enjoy using these materials with your students.

Rook is the third book in **The Truth of Things**, a series that follows brothers Nicky and Kenny, teenagers in a rural working-class town, as they navigate family life and growing up. Although things can be tough, the brothers stick together, sharing adventures and finding humour even in the most difficult times.

Rook follows the story of one particularly bad week for Nicky. This time, it's not his dad or Kenny who need help – his dad's sorting his life out and Kenny is busy making plans with his new best mate. It's Nicky's turn to struggle – with a school bully, his first love and the fact that everything is about to go very, very wrong.

Rook is written in an accessible, often humorous style whilst remaining a moving story that covers a wide array of issues. This book is perfect for classroom discussions as it will help teen readers engage with topics around bullying, handling complex emotions, class differences and the importance of kindness and empathy.

PART 2

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS TO DEVELOP READING STRATEGIES

Now the rook caught the fear, opened his wings and sprang into the air. One beat, two. The earth was three metres below him, and the safety of the trees only a few seconds away.

And then a force hit him, like nothing he had ever felt before. It seemed to melt his bones and turn his flesh to vapour. And in the bone-crushing impact there was a sharper pain, searing into him like hot needles. [page 3]

Discuss chapter 1:

- Why is this chapter unusual? How does it differ from the rest of the book?
- Why do you think the author chooses to start the novel like this? Why does he choose to personify the bird?
- What sort of scene does this set for the book?
- What does it do for the sense of place? What does it reveal about where the book is set?
- The imagery in this chapter is violent and quite gruesome. What do you think the author is trying to convey with this? What does it tell the reader about nature?
- Do you like how the book opens? Do you find this style of opening engaging? Why?



While the caterpillar is alive it's just a slave of the wasp inside it, eating just so the wasp can be born. My secret was a bit like that, inside me, taking up all the space, until it could come out. [...] I fancied her so much my whole body ached, from my eyeballs to my toes. Every time I saw her it felt like my insides were boiling over, like when you leave the milk pan on the heat. [page 34–39]

[...]

It was dark when I got home. I'd started out pretty low, and by the time I opened the back door I felt like the blackness of the night had flooded into me, like water into a sinking ship. [page 59]

[...]

I walked up to Stanno, full of a kind of jittery, nervous energy. It was like I had creepy crawlies running around on my skin, across my back and down my arms. I scratched and pulled at my clothes as I walked, like a dog with fleas. [page 70]

Discuss Nicky's feelings and how he expresses them:

- Do you think Nicky is good at talking about his feelings?
- Do you think he reveals more about how he feels to the reader or to his family and friends? Why do you think this is?
- Do you think Nicky's feelings are realistic? Do you understand how Nicky feels?
- In what ways do Nicky and Kenny express their emotions differently? Find examples from the text to support your answer.
 - Why do you think Nicky finds it suddenly so easy to share his thoughts and feelings with Sarah?

Using the above quotes explore the author's use of language to reveal Nicky's feelings to the reader:

- What techniques is the author using to convey Nicky's feelings?
- How do the chosen images help us understand Nicky's feelings? Can you think of other images to describe the same emotions?
- Do you find these images effective? Why?

There was a smell of cooking, and I heard the telly from the front room. My dad was laughing at some comedy show. For years after my mum left, he never laughed, and now it seemed like he laughed all the time. It was as if the years of laughter had got stored up inside him, and now they were coming out. [page 59]

[...]

“You used to swear all the time when you were drunk,” I said. “It was ‘shit this’ and ‘shit that’.” “Stop that, Nicky ...” But, now I was going, nothing could stop me. “And there was never any bloody food. Me and Kenny lived off toast for two years.” “I did me best.” “Well, your best was shit.” [page 60–61]

Discuss Nicky and Kenny’s home life:

- What sort of home life do you think Nicky and Kenny have? Is it a happy one? Why?
- What is the reader led to assume about their family’s financial situation? How is this shown in the text? Give three examples to support your answer.
- How does their home life differ from Sarah and Stanno’s? How is this shown in the text?
- What effect, if any, does this difference have on the confrontation in the head teacher’s office?
- What assumptions are made about Nicky because of his background? Do you think this contributes to his expulsion?



Sometimes I forget that even though Kenny has learning difficulties he can read me like a book.
[page 29]

I suddenly thought about Kenny and his friend, Doctor Who, and his magic tricks. And I felt a big wave of love for my brother rise up from my stomach, and with it came a jumbled-together urge to laugh and cry and dance all at the same time. **[page 105]**

Explore the shifting dynamic between Nicky and Kenny:

- Describe the relationship between the brothers in your own words and think about the following:
 - Who is in charge?
 - What roles do they each fill within the relationship?
 - How do they feel about each other?
 - Is it a good relationship?
- How does the brothers' relationship change over the course of the novel?
- Why does Nicky hurt Kenny on purpose? How does this make Nicky feel?
- Why is it a surprise to Nicky that 'Kenny existed all by himself'? Why is Kenny's independence overlooked by his brother?

I was there to say sorry to Stanno. Sorry for shoving him. Sorry for making him have that fit. It was too late for it to make any difference to anything, but that wasn't the point. You don't do the right thing because it helps you. You do it because it's the right thing. Well, no, that's too simple. I was doing it to help myself, but in a special way. I was doing it so I didn't have to feel shit about not doing it any more.

But I was also doing it because of Kenny's story. It made me realise that our lives are all about the stories we tell. In fact, our lives are a story. And it's up to you how you tell it. You can tell it sad, or you can tell it happy. You can be a good guy or a bad guy. **[page 91–92]**

Explore the themes of empathy and kindness within the novel:

- Do you think Nicky is kind? How does he show kindness? Give examples from the text to support your answer.
- What does Nicky learn about doing the right thing?

- What lies behind Stanno's bullying? How does this change the reader's and Nicky's opinion of him by the end of the book?
- Why is it important for Nicky to empathise with Stanno even though he has been bullied by him? What does Nicky's ability to do this tell us about him as a person?

While Kenny was talking to Rooky, I said to my dad, "I thought he was dead. Dead and buried." "Did you?" My dad looked at me. "You should have a bit more faith, lad. Mind you, I had to give them a decent donation to take him. To begin with, they said rooks were too common to bother much with. Too common and too scruffy and too much trouble. Bit like us, eh?" [page 123]

Examine the role of 'Rooky':

- What does Rooky symbolise?
- Discuss the above quote. What are the parallels between Nicky and Rooky?

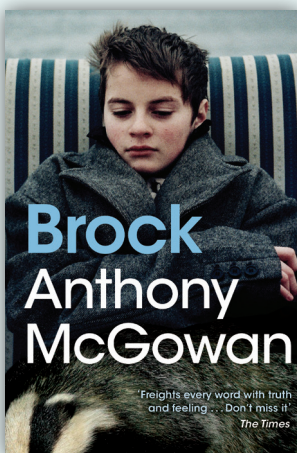


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

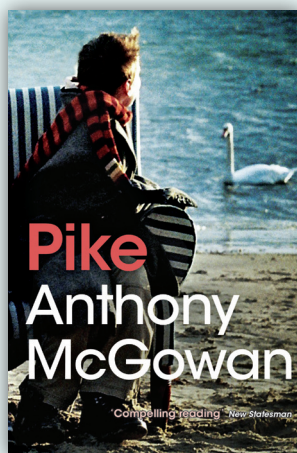


ANTHONY MCGOWAN is the author of many critically acclaimed and award-winning YA novels including *The Knife that Killed Me* and *The Truth of Things* quartet. In 2020 Anthony won the prestigious Carnegie Medal for *Lark* and was previously shortlisted for *Rook* in 2018. He was born in Manchester, attended school in Leeds and now lives in London.

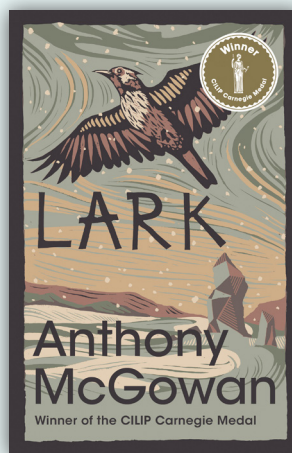
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