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**GCSE STUDENT  
GUIDE**



Dennis Kelly's

# DNA

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BY **MAGGIE INCHLEY**

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# DNA

# GCSE Student

# Guide

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# GCSE Student Guide

Second Edition

**MAGGIE INCHLEY**

Series Editor: Jenny Stevens

Bloomsbury Methuen Drama  
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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## **Bloomsbury Methuen Drama**

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Imprint previously known as Methuen Drama

50 Bedford Square  
London  
WC1B 3DP  
UK

1385 Broadway  
New York  
NY 10018  
USA

**www.bloomsbury.com**

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First published 2016

Second edition published with changes to the text 2017

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### **British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: PB: 978-1-3500-3886-8  
ePDF: 978-1-3500-3887-5  
epub: 978-1-3500-3888-2

### **Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Series: GCSE Student Guides

Cover design by Jesse Holborn/Design Holborn  
Cover image © Shutterstock

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

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*For all my partners in crime. You know who you are.*



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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In researching and writing this book, I have been grateful for the help, knowledge and insight of Anthony Banks. In addition to giving a heartfelt acknowledgement of his contribution, I would also like to thank Dennis Kelly, James Alexandrou and Ruby Bentall for so generously giving interviews. Throughout the process I have been fortunate to have had the encouragement, wisdom and support of editors, Jenny Stevens and Anna Brewer. Thanks, too, for the permissions granted by Libby Purves, Tanika Gupta and Laurie Hanna.

I also want to express a heartfelt acknowledgement to Oberon Books who have given me permission to quote from their editions of Dennis Kelly's plays, *DNA* (Dennis Kelly, *DNA: School Edition*, London: Oberon, 2008. ISBN: 9781840029529), *Orphans* (Dennis Kelly, *Orphans*, London: Oberon, 2009. ISBN: 9781840029437), and *Our Teacher's a Troll* (Dennis Kelly, *Our Teacher's a Troll*, London: Oberon, 2014. ISBN: 9781783191277).

This book is a partly a product of many years of teaching in schools and universities, and I am indebted to each of my past colleagues, students and pupils for the privilege of working with them. To any of you who may pick up this book, know that you have helped me to write it.

# CHAPTER ONE

## The Play

### Introduction

Dennis Kelly wrote *DNA* for young people of your age to perform, and for people of all ages to see in the theatre.

While you are reading, think about *DNA* not only as a text, but also as a play that is performed. Try to imagine it. What would this play look like in a theatre? Who are the *characters*, and what situations are they in? How would they think, feel and move? What would they be wearing, and what would their *costumes* say about them? It is also good to imagine the design of the play. That is, how it would look in the theatre. How would the *set* take you to the locations of the play, and what kind of mood or atmosphere would it create? How would *lighting* and *sound effects* contribute to the atmosphere of each scene, and help to tell its story? As you study the play, take any opportunities you can to perform scenes, as this will help you to understand how it works as drama.

In this guide, I will frequently mention Kelly, the playwright. For your English Literature GCSE it will be important to show an understanding of the many choices Kelly has made about the play, and the ways he has planned and constructed it. As part of your studying, get into the habit of talking and writing about Kelly and how he presents the characters, the plot and the themes in *DNA*.

While you are studying, it will be good to have a copy of the play close at hand. All the quotes and page numbers I have included

come from the *DNA* school edition published by Oberon (Dennis Kelly, *DNA: School Edition*. London: Oberon, 2008).

Plays are often divided into sections called acts. As you are reading the play, you will notice that Kelly does not use this traditional term. In the text, the reader sees only One, Two, Three and Four. For ease of reference in this guide, I have used the word *section* rather than act to refer to the four parts of *DNA*, and the fourteen *scenes* that they contain. Within the sections, Kelly has shown a change of scene just with three asterisks. This suggests how in performance the action of each scene blends quickly into the next, even though it takes place in a different location. A challenge for the designer and director of any production of *DNA* is to make these changes of locations happen quickly, without holding up the action of the play.

As you are studying *DNA*, you will need to think in detail not only about its performance and audience, but also about the *language* of the play. What does each character say and how do they speak? How is language used to create tension or suspense? Pay close attention to the *stage directions*. These are a very important part of the script. Through the stage directions, Kelly gives very important instructions that will tell us about location, action, dialogue and plot.

If I use a word in this guide that you do not understand, you can look it up in the glossary. Do not be afraid to ask your teacher if you are still unsure, or if the word is not included. Try to get used to any new words by using them yourself when you talk or write about the play. By doing this, you will expand your vocabulary and be able to write about *DNA* in a way that will meet the requirements of your GCSE examination.

I hope you enjoy studying *DNA* for your GCSE as much as I have enjoyed writing this guide. It's a great play. Good luck!

## Overview

This overview section gives you a brief summary of each scene. It is there to help to give you a quick check on which characters

are in each scene, what happens in it, and some of its themes. It is not there to replace your own reading: you will need to get to know each scene in detail, and to develop your own thoughts and interpretations about each one.

### **Section one**

Kelly opens the play in a street, giving no other details as to specific town or city or time of day. The tense dialogue between Jan and Mark projects the reader or audience member immediately into a dramatic and deadly serious situation. A death is revealed as the inciting but as yet mysterious incident.

Changing the setting to a field, Kelly introduces us to Phil and to Leah. Phil spends the entire scene entirely silent, eating an ice cream, while Leah tries to get a response from him, and speaks of the ‘brutal terror’ that everyone is living in (12). When Jan and Mark arrive at the end of the scene, Mark announces, ‘We need to talk to you’. Leah’s response, ‘Oh, shit’, heightens the sense that something very serious is happening (12).

The third scene is much longer and more complex, moving the action to a wood, and involving the whole ensemble cast. Only Adam is absent, and the entire scene is structured around the group’s reactions to what has happened to him. At first, John Tate tries to allay Lou and Danny’s fears, to exert his authority, and impress upon the other teenagers the need for silence. After Richard arrives with the ‘grinning’ Cathy and tearful Brian, John Tate forces the friends to acknowledge his leadership (15). The audience at last hears what happened to Adam when the arrival of Jan, Mark, Phil and Leah leads to a chilling description from Mark of Adam’s apparently fatal fall. When Phil speaks for the first time in the play, it is to issue instructions for an elaborate plan to fake DNA evidence that will divert attention from their own involvement in what the teenagers (and audience) believe is Adam’s death.

The final scene of the first section returns to the field for the second of Leah and Phil’s duologues. While Leah muses on the

differences in behaviour between bonobos and chimps, Phil says nothing. His only action is to open and eat a packet of crisps. In what seems like an effort to test his capacity for empathy, Leah attempts to strangle herself. With her final words, 'Trouble now', Kelly creates a cliffhanger ending, ominously suggesting that something worse is yet to come (28).

## **Section two**

Using a pattern of structural repetition, Kelly begins the second section just as he did the first, using the same location and characters. As in the play's opening scene, there is a short, tense exchange between Jan and Mark. The scene introduces a complication into the action as Mark reveals, 'He's not going' (29). The audience is left wondering to whom and to what Mark's comment refers.

The second scene of the second section continues the pattern of structural repetitions. As in Leah and Phil's first field scene, Leah speaks to a silent, junk-food eating Phil. The scene further establishes Leah's character as a natural and moral philosopher, and reveals that the group has been carrying out Phil's instructions. There is a growing strangeness and darkness to the play's tone, as the themes of killing and fakeness are developed. Again, Jan and Mark appear at the end of the scene. When Jan announces, 'We need to talk', the audience is sucked in further to the story, and suspense grows over what has gone wrong (32).

In this second of Kelly's series of three ensemble wood scenes, Lou and Danny bring Leah and a muffin-eating Phil the news that the man who has supposedly killed Adam has been found. The group is faced with a rapidly snowballing sequence of events about which they must decide to speak or keep silent. Richard and Cathy enter, revealing that they have faked DNA evidence to link a postman to Adam's disappearance. When Jan and Mark then arrive with Brian, who is refusing to identify the postman falsely, the group appear to be 'screwed', as Lou repeatedly