

**Creased up**



**Tickled pink**



**Gobsmacked**

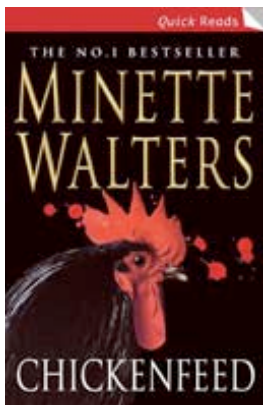


**Swept away**



Quick Reads

**Get hooked on books.**



# *Chickenfeed*

## Minette Walters



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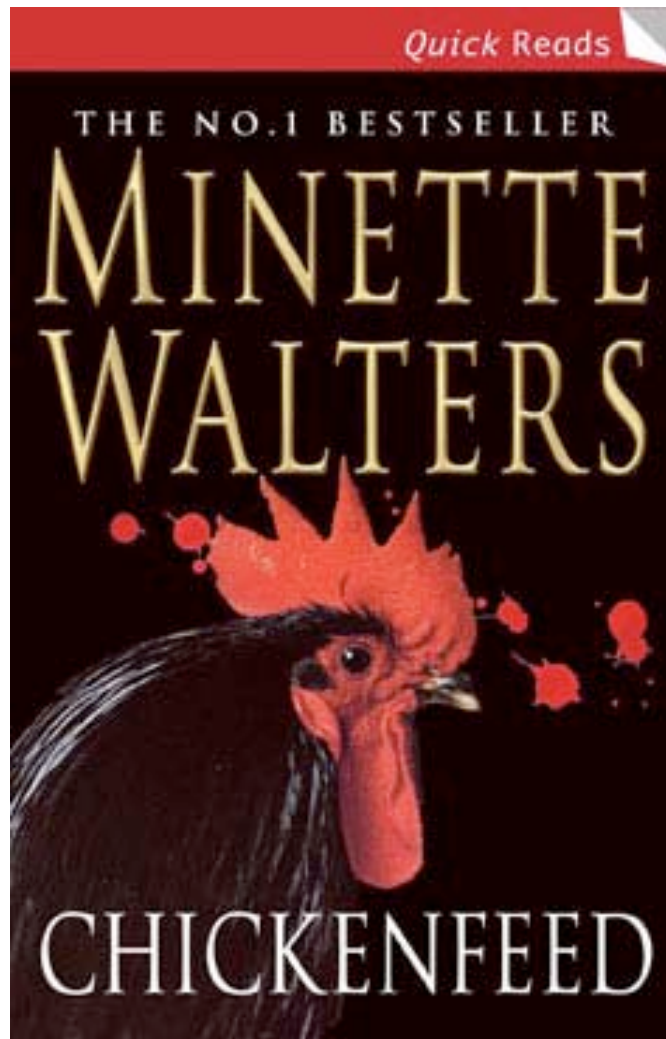
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### Acknowledgement

The learning materials to accompany the Quick Reads publications have been produced as part of The Vital Link's Reading for Pleasure campaign, funded by the Department for Education and Skills and in co-operation with World Book Day. Our thanks go to the writing and editorial team of Nancy Gidley, Kay Jackaman and Moreen Mowforth.

**The  
Vital  
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### Blurb

Minette Walters brings a thrilling interpretation to a real-life mystery. Young Norman Roche finds himself in an untenable situation...but does he resort to murder to escape Elsie's clutches?

### Synopsis

*Chickenfeed* is based on the true story of the 'chicken farm murder', which took place in Blackness Road, Crowborough, East Sussex in December, 1924. Although Norman Thorne never confessed to killing his girlfriend, Elsie Cameron, he was tried and hanged for the crime.

Minette Walters' fictionalised account of their relationship is told from the points of view of both Elsie and Norman, from the time of their first meeting at chapel when Norman is 18 and Elsie is 26, until the eve of Norman's trial for her murder just over four years later.

In the real-life case, an exchange of letters between the lovers, in which Elsie told Norman that she was pregnant, formed part of the evidence that suggested a motive for murder. The author builds this brief exchange into a

two-year correspondence between Elsie in London and Norman in Sussex, where he has bought a poultry farm and is trying to establish himself as a chicken farmer. The lovers gradually grow apart. Elsie refuses to accept the changes and creates a fantasy to replace the reality of their dwindling relationship, while Norman has met someone else but finds it hard to tell Elsie that he no longer wants to marry her.

Through the narration and the letters, readers come to know Elsie and Norman quite well and, at the end of the story, are encouraged to reach their own verdict about the case.

**Readability**  
9/10 Level E3

## Minette Walters

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After graduating from Durham University, Minette Walters became a sub-editor for IPC Magazines on a romantic fiction magazine, where she also contributed articles, short stories and novellas.

She eventually went freelance and started writing full-time for women's magazines. After a break of seven years following the birth of her children, she started writing her first book, *The Ice House*, which was published in 1992 and won the Crime Writers' Association award for best first novel. Since then she has written a book practically every year for the past ten years. However, she has never wanted to create a series character like Poirot or Rebus because, in her own words, 'I wanted to be free to tackle whatever I wanted, when I wanted, without being shackled to a particular person or place'.

Minette's books have been published in over 35 countries around the world and several of them have been adapted for television.

She lives in Dorset with her husband. Her favourite way to relax is DIY because the physical disciplines are so different from the cerebral disciplines of writing.

About her motivations as a writer, she says:

'It is very rewarding to create people in your own imagination who come alive again through your readers' imagination.... I don't set out to offer comfortable certainties or trustworthy characters who can be relied on. Who ever said that discovering the truth was simple? Like policemen in real life, my readers can take nothing and no one for granted.'

'I concentrate on the trauma that exists within families and communities both before and after a murder is committed. Well-balanced families don't kill each other. Dysfunctional ones may. Because I explore family tensions, there is a greater sense of involvement for my readers. Most of us have been angry with our close relations at one time or another, though thankfully few of us are driven to commit the ultimate theft of taking another person's life.'

To find out more about Minette Walters, visit her website:

<http://www.minettewalters.co.uk>

# Activity 1

## Tell me a story

<p><b>Purpose</b></p>	<p>→ To encourage readers to consider how an author’s narrative style contributes to ‘a good read’.</p> <p>→ To explore how dialogue can be used to carry a story forward.</p>
<p><b>Resources</b></p>	<p>First chapter of <i>Chickenfeed</i>                  Paper, pens                  White board or flipchart</p>
<p><b>Activity</b></p>	<p>‘It is very rewarding to create people in your own imagination who come alive again through your readers’ imagination...’ (see biographical information above.)</p> <p>Minette Walters brings her characters to life for the reader and provides insight into their psychology through her narrative style and use of dialogue.</p> <p>First, she uses the device of free indirect narrative, whereby readers are given the characters’ thoughts – but not signalled with ‘he thought’, etc. – mixed with the narrator’s comments.</p> <p>Then, when the characters speak for themselves, we are given dialogue, once again without the usual speech markers.</p> <p>As a group, read the beginning of Chapter 1, up to the asterisks. Ask readers what they have learned about Elsie and her upbringing from these opening pages, e.g. Is she happy, confident, popular? What is her family life like? What are her goals? Is she realistic? Cite passages from the text to support each statement. Record findings on a flipchart.</p> <p>As a group, read the dialogue that follows next in the first chapter, and think about how the author uses it to carry the story forward. What additional information do we now have about the characters? What can the readers add to the flipchart notes about Elsie? What have they learned about Norman? How do readers think the story will develop, i.e. What do they think will happen?</p> <p><i>continued</i> →</p>

<b>Activity</b> <i>continued</i>	Ask readers to read to the end of the chapter and continue the above activity to build up detailed portraits of Elsie and Norman and their parents. This activity should begin individually, giving each reader the opportunity to develop and record his/her own views and findings, and continue as a group discussion.
<b>Reflection</b>	Elsie Cameron is very much a product of her time and her upbringing. Religion and the recent war have made a strong impact on her family and continue to influence their view of the world. Ask readers to think about how the characters' ideas about marriage are formed by these factors.
<b>Development</b>	Ask readers to work in pairs for this activity. Using the information they have gleaned from Activity 1, create a dialogue between Elsie and Norman to fill the gap in the story between their first words and 'going out' together.

## Activity 2

### Take a letter

<b>Purpose</b>	<p>→ To develop readers' skills in reading sub-text.</p> <p>→ To introduce readers to some of the stylistic techniques a writer uses to build an effective story.</p>
<b>Resources</b>	<p>Copies of <i>Chickenfeed</i> or copies of Norman and Elsie's letters          Highlighter pens          Writing materials</p>
<b>Activity</b>	<p>A lot of the information the reader has about Norman and Elsie's relationship comes from their letters. As well as taking the story further, we learn to see how each one sees the same situation from a different point of view.</p> <p>As a whole group, read their first two letters, written on 30<sup>th</sup> January and 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1923. Then discuss the following: What has happened to Elsie? What does she want Norman to do? How does Norman respond to Elsie's letter? What advice does he give her?</p> <p>There is also a sub-text to these letters. It is clear to the reader that Elsie and Norman have different ideas about the future of their relationship. What is the <i>real</i> reason why Elsie is writing? What is the <i>real</i> answer Norman is sending back? Are they being honest with one another?</p> <p>How do we know this? Give examples of phrases from the letters that support your views.</p>
<b>Reflection</b>	<p>It is clear to the reader that the relationship between the two lovers is breaking down. Is this device of letter writing an effective way of telling the story?</p> <p>Ask the group to read through the remainder of the letters on their own. If possible, the tutor could make copies in advance and distribute this pack of letters, so they can be read separately from the rest of the text.</p> <p><i>continued</i> →</p>

<b>Reflection</b> <i>continued</i>	As they look through the letters, ask readers to trace the decline of the relationship. Using highlighter pens, identify the signs that tell us things are going wrong. As well as the incidents recounted by each of the writers, look at the language they use, including their opening and closing phrases to one another.
<b>Development</b>	Discuss the differences between Elsie's and Norman's attitudes to her pregnancy.  What do readers think about Elsie's pregnancy? Why does she make this false claim? Could Norman be as naïve as he appears? Could this situation arise today? How might it differ?



## Activity 3

### Is truth stranger than fiction?

<p><b>Purpose</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ To encourage readers to reflect on their reading and develop critical responses.</li> <li>➔ To introduce readers to some of the ways a writer uses fact to create fiction.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Resources</b></p>	<p>The Epilogue and Author's Note for <i>Chickenfeed</i> Flipchart and related materials</p>
<p><b>Activity</b></p>	<p>An author may want to include further points that are not strictly part of the story, but do give background information that helps to explain or expand on things that happen in the story.</p> <p>Minette Walters tells us at the very start of <i>Chickenfeed</i> that her book is based on a true story. She provides additional facts about the true story in the Epilogue. Finally, in her Author's Note, she offers her own suggestions about what really happened. She outlines medical details that offer an alternative verdict to murder, and expands on Elsie's psychological problems.</p> <p>Ask readers to stop their reading of the book before the Epilogue. Do they think Norman committed murder? What do they think happened? Discuss these issues as a group.</p> <p>Now ask them to read the Epilogue, or read it together. Ask the questions again: what do they think happened? Have they changed their minds? If so, why?</p> <p>NB: This activity can be expanded in the Development activity below.</p> <p>Finally, read the Author's Note. Because of the technical language and sensitive subject matter, some readers may find these pages challenging.</p> <p>Does this information add anything to the reader's appreciation of the book? Do the psychological explanations make any difference to how readers have viewed the characters or events?</p> <p>Discuss as a group whether readers think <i>Chickenfeed</i> is a work of fiction or of fact. Ask them to support their views from the text.</p>

continued ➔

<p><b>Reflection</b></p>	<p>Additional activities could focus on gender and personality issues, e.g. What are the differences between Elsie and Norman? Consider their behaviour, their goals, their life experience, their family relationships, their attitudes to sex and marriage. Contrast Elsie's romantic notions with Norman's more pragmatic approach to marriage.</p> <p>Ask the group to make two lists – one for Norman and one for Elsie – and record their findings on a flipchart or white board. To what extent are these differences linked to their gender and to what extent are they personality differences?</p> <p>How do their families influence their behaviour?</p> <p>How do these issues differ from today, particularly regarding attitudes to sexuality and marriage?</p>
<p><b>Development</b></p>	<p>Although she presents a lot of 'evidence', Minette Walters does not reach any firm conclusion about Norman's guilt or innocence.</p> <p>Ask the readers to form two groups – as defence and prosecution – to argue the case for Norman's innocence or guilt. The groups will first need to plan their case and note down the main points either on paper or on the flipchart. Support these views through the text where relevant.</p>

## Further development

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### More reading

To find out more about the real-life chicken-farm murder, look at the following websites:

[www.Murderfile.net/names/thorne25.html](http://www.Murderfile.net/names/thorne25.html)  
[www.realcrime.co.uk/Murders/MOTL.HTML](http://www.realcrime.co.uk/Murders/MOTL.HTML)  
[www.theargus.co.uk/the\\_argus/125/supplement/pdf/15.pdf](http://www.theargus.co.uk/the_argus/125/supplement/pdf/15.pdf)

Minette Walters' personal website includes a section called 'Tips and Tricks', based on a Masterclass given by Walters and a fellow crime author.

Follow the link below to read more about Walters' ideas on writing:

[http://www.minettewalters.co.uk/about\\_minette/writing\\_tips.htm](http://www.minettewalters.co.uk/about_minette/writing_tips.htm)

### Other possible activities

Minette Walters' writing tips can be used to prompt further textual investigations, e.g.: 'get rid of the adverbs, especially after "said": if the words your character says aren't dramatic, using "she said dramatically" won't help.'

Such activities can lead on to creative writing if there are any budding writers in the group.

In pairs, ask readers to select two fictional characters they know from a TV soap or sitcom who have had some problems or misunderstandings in their relationship. They could then write a series of letters to each other as these characters, to explain their position to one another.

If the group includes ESOL learners or is otherwise culturally diverse, there is scope for discussion of differing cultural attitudes to sexuality and marriage. This would tie in with some of the issues explored in *The Book Boy* in the Quick Reads series.

## More reading

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<b>March title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>ISBN</b>
<b>The Thief</b>	Ruth Rendell	0091796865
<b>Woman Walks into a Bar</b>	Rowan Coleman	0099492288
<b>Blackwater</b>	Conn Iggulden	0091907039
<b>Star Sullivan</b>	Maeve Binchy	0752879545
<b>Hell Island</b>	Matthew Reilly	0330442325
<b>The Book Boy</b>	Joanna Trollope	0747582114
<b>Don't make me Laugh</b>	Patrick Augustus	1902934466
<b>Someone Like Me</b>	Tom Holt	1841494461
<b>Screw It, Let's Do It</b>	Richard Branson	0753510995
<b>How to change your life in 7 steps</b>	John Bird	0091907039
<b>Chickenfeed</b>	Minette Walters	0330440314
<b>The Team</b>	Mick Dennis with the Premier League	0552153729
<b>May title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>ISBN</b>
<b>Danny Wallace and the Centre of the Universe</b>	Danny Wallace	0091908949
<b>Desert Claw</b>	Damien Lewis	0099493535
<b>Cleanskin</b>	Val McDermid	0007216726
<b>Name You Once Gave Me</b>	Mike Phillips	0007216718
<b>Grey Man</b>	Andy McNab	0552154334
<b>I Am a Dalek</b>	Gareth Roberts/Dr Who	0563486481
<b>Poison in the Blood</b>	Tom Holland	0349119643
<b>I Love Football</b>	Hunter Davies	0755314700
<b>Winner Takes All</b>	John Francome	0755329481
<b>The Dying Wish</b>	Courtia Newland	0349119635
<b>Secrets</b>	Lynne Barrett-Lee	1905170300
<b>The Corpse's Tale</b>	Katherine John	1905170319

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See [www.quickreads.org.uk](http://www.quickreads.org.uk) for information on these and future Quick Reads

See First Choice library booklist at [www.firstchoicebooks.org.uk](http://www.firstchoicebooks.org.uk) for mainstream books selected against criteria for their suitability for emergent readers

Audio version of the Quick Reads are available from W F Howes Ltd as part of their Clipper Emergent Reader programmes ([www.wfhowes.co.uk/cerp/](http://www.wfhowes.co.uk/cerp/))

Other publications for emergent readers include those from Sandstone Press ([www.sandstonepress.com](http://www.sandstonepress.com)) and New Island's Open Door series ([www.newisland.ie](http://www.newisland.ie))

## Adult Core Curriculum References

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### Activity 1

#### Tell me a story

Rt/E3.1, .2, .4, .7, .8  
Rt/L1.1, .2, .5

#### Speaking and listening

SLlr/E3.1-.6  
SLc/E3.1-.4  
SLd/E3.1-.3  
SLlr/L1.1-.6  
SLc/L1.1-.4

### Activity 2

#### Take a letter

Rt/E3.1, .2, .4, .5, .7, .8  
Rt/L1.1-.5

#### Speaking and listening

SLlr/E3.1-.6  
SLc/E3.1-.4  
SLd/E3.1-.3  
SLlr/L1.1-.6  
SLc/L1.1-.4

### Activity 3

#### Is truth stranger than fiction?

Rt/E3.1-.8  
Rs/E3.2, .3  
Rt/L1.1-.5  
Rs/L1.1, .2

#### Speaking and listening

SLlr/E3.1-.6  
SLc/E3.1-.4  
SLd/E3.1-.3  
SLlr/L1.1-.6  
SLc/L1.1-.4