



The study guide to "Rain Man" is designed to be used by teachers of English, Social Studies and Drama with older secondary schools and sixth form college students.

It uses drama and role play to involve students in issues raised by the film and open up the subject of mental handicap.

What follows is:

1. An introduction to the film "Rain Man"
2. An outline of work linked to the film
3. Detailed teacher notes and suggestions

Part 1: preparing to see the film;  
Part 2: arising from the film.

4. Teaching materials for use in the drama.
5. Website links and references for information about mental handicap and autism

## INTRODUCTION

Here is the synopsis of the film "Rain Man" taken from the publicity material prepared by United International Pictures, the film's distributors in the UK.

## SYNOPSIS

RAIN MAN is the story of Charlie Babbitt (TOM CRUISE), a smooth talking young man running from a background he barely remembers. Raymond Babbitt (DUSTIN HOFFMAN) is his autistic savant brother who has inherited three million dollars from their recently deceased father. While attempting to trick his brother out of the money, Charlie instead is taught life's lessons by Raymond, who ironically is incapable of understanding them himself.

It is their journey across America in a '49 Buick, when Charlie discovers the key to his past, that is the heart and soul of RAIN MAN.

Certificate 15 Running time 2hrs 14 mins

When the film opens, we see Charlie as a fast-talking young man, trying desperately to keep a money-making deal from collapsing on him. His girl-friend Susanna sits by, listening, but making little comment. Charlie is portrayed here as a self-centred young man on the make. Hearing of his father's death, he shows no emotion. Later, he reveals to Susanna that he has had no contact with his father since they quarrelled some years before. It comes as no surprise, then, when



we learn that the father has left his millions not to Charlie, but to someone unknown. All that Charlie is to inherit is his father's most cherished possession, a 1949 Buick Roadmaster convertible.

As the synopsis suggests, the bulk of the film concerns Charlie's relationship with his autistic older brother Raymond. As the film has them motor across America, and one fraught situation succeeds another, Charlie is obliged to modify his selfish intentions to meet his brother's anxious need to maintain his routines and rituals. He also discovers from his brother important things about his childhood that he has forgotten. In the process, Charlie finds himself beginning to shed

the protective layers of his personality., Raymond remains the same in spite of his new experiences, apparently still enclosed in his autistic world. He is unmoved even by his success at cards at one of the Las Vegas gambling tables. Money has no meaning for Raymond. Only once in the film do we see him smile - responding for once in a less than mechanical way to his brother's attempt to communicate with him.

Dustin Hoffman is reported to have spent a year researching autism. The distributors of the film have written:

"The actor found himself puzzling over Raymond's character. How was it possible for a single individual to be both blessed with sparks of genius and the tragic disabilities of autism, which made him self-involved and withdrawn into a world of psychotic fantasy and crippling emotional isolation?"

To create such a character, Hoffman's answer was apparently to spend long periods of time with several autistic savants and their families and to talk to psychiatrists and experts in the field of autism.

Like the majority of severely autistic people, Hoffman, as the character Raymond, displays these characteristics:

He has almost no facial expression.

He makes no eye contact.

His speech is limited mostly to single words and short phrases.

He tends to respond only to short simple commands and requests.

He shows extreme anxiety when unable to maintain his routines.

He has obsessive tendencies.



However, Raymond belongs to that 10% minority of autistic people with exceptional ability - in his case, an outstanding memory, and an extraordinary ability to compute arithmetically.

Exceptional ability in autistic people has been well-documented. Scientific papers have been written about it, books published to illustrate it, and theories suggested to explain it. Most commonly, these exceptional abilities are restricted to calendar

computations, mathematics, playing the piano by ear and drawing with great flair.

The majority of autistic people (90%) do not have these exceptional abilities. Raymond is an "autistic savant" - the name given to the exceptional minority, from the French savant = wise.

## **AN OUTLINE OF THE WORK RELATED TO "RAIN MAN"**

All of the work suggested in the section "Teaching Notes", is related to the film "Rain Man". The film is a basis for work on the subject of mental handicap

### **A WORD OF ADVICE!**

Teachers will find it helpful if they are able to obtain and read some of the material relating to autism before beginning the drama sessions. Very readable and very useful as an introduction is:

### **Thinking in Pictures : And Other Reports from My Life With Autism**

An animal scientist describes how she and other victims of autism perceive the world, and relates the ways in which she has been able to adapt and have a successful career.(See References for details.)

The work suggested attempts to engage students in constructing and taking seriously fictional contexts in which questions relating to mental handicap can be raised. What those questions

will be left to the students to decide. At the same time as some acquaintance is made with the "reality" of mental disability, role-play skills are used and can be extended.

## PREP WORK BEFORE SEEING THE FILM

Over three drama sessions, students are asked to role-play people urgently wishing to adopt a child. Offered only mentally handicapped children for adoption, they then have the opportunity of meeting similar prospective parents at the offices of the adoption agency.

Teaching materials:

i) a letter from the adoption agency. (See page 12)

ii) descriptions of children for adoption. (See pages 13-15) CINEMA VISIT TO SEE THE FILM

It is envisaged that seeing the film "Rain Man" will follow soon after this preparatory work. Parallels with the work in drama are to be found in the film, and the film should be that much more interesting and understandable following this preparatory work.

## WORK FOLLOWING THE FILM

Over three drama sessions, students are asked to role-play the magistrates who must choose the most appropriate person to care for Raymond, the autistic adult portrayed in the film. The context is a custodial inquiry, envisaged as an extension of the film's narrative.

## TEACHING NOTES: PART ONE

### SESSION ONE

For the moment, mention of mental handicap should be avoided. At this first session it is important for teachers to negotiate their students' agreement (and to motivate their interest) in role-playing people wishing urgently to adopt a child.

Students can be motivated in at least two ways:

1. By obtaining posters and adverts for adoption and fostering and displaying them.
2. Most importantly, by the question which students are asked to consider to open this first drama session -

Teacher: I want you to think of people who badly want to adopt another child into their family. What reasons might they have for doing so?

I'm going to ask you to act as families who wish to adopt a child. You can decide your reasons when you begin, but remember, the reason you choose must be one that you think will be quite a powerful one.

### **1ST TASK: (Students working in groups of 3/4)**

Re-create the moment when you decided, or realised, that adopting another child was the most important thing for you.

It is essential for this task that students have ample time to discuss ideas and then to work through their ideas in drama. The teacher should be available, if needed, with help and advice.

#### **SHARING THE THINKING.**

There should be some opportunity for each group to share their thinking.

What were the reasons they chose for wanting to adopt a child?

### **2ND TASK:**

Teacher: Can we agree that the families have approached a number of adoption agencies, and for one reason or another, have got nowhere? Finally they see an advertisement for another agency - CARE FOR THE CHILD.

With what sort of feelings are the families likely to approach this agency?

The task is for each family group to write a letter to CARE FOR THE CHILD which will express the feelings students have said would be appropriate. A first draft in rough is a good idea.

These letters will provide a way of opening the next drama session

## **SESSION TWO**

For this session, the letter from CARE FOR THE CHILD and the descriptions of children for adoption should have been photocopied from the teaching material included in the guide. Later in this session, each group of students will be given a description of ONE child (appropriate to that group) attached to the agency's letter.

### **1 ST TASK: (Students working in the same groups of 3/4.)**

Read aloud the letters written at the end of the previous session. Teachers should also check if students wish first to revise their letters or to practise reading them.

Teacher: In a moment, I'm going to give you the replies to your letters from CARE FOR THE CHILD. Read the letters to each other out of role to make sure you understand everything. Then we'll carry on with the drama!

### **2ND TASK**

Set up a family conference. This will be an opportunity for each member of the family to say what they think about the reply they received - and for families to argue the matter out and to come to a decision.

Again, it is essential for this task that students have ample time.

There is a good chance that letters from CARE FOR THE CHILD, (which offer for adoption a mentally handicapped young person) will produce a strong reaction from the students - which is, of course, the intention. It poses the students (in their roles) with a dilemma. Are they prepared to contemplate taking on a mentally handicapped child? An autistic one? There is risk involved here for the teacher, because how students may handle this dilemma is very unpredictable. It is possible that some students may not be able to handle it at all! But, hopefully, the majority of students will be able to express their feelings within the drama of the family conference.

### **3RD TASK**

Construct a frozen picture (tableau) which illustrates the individual attitudes within your family to the dilemma with which you have been faced. If necessary, each student can be allowed one sentence which will clarify their attitude.

Discussion. At the end of this session some structured discussion is vital.

1. What did you find difficult about this session?
2. What can we say about these families' responses to the letters they received?

## **SESSION THREE**

It is in this session that the Prospective Parents Meeting mentioned in the CARE FOR THE CHILD letter is to take place - bringing all students together in the drama. Again, some risk is involved for the teacher, since how students will act at this meeting is unpredictable. But at least the teacher has a role within the drama at this point and can therefore help it along in whatever way seems appropriate. As potential "ammunition", the teacher should have copies of the families' original letters to the agency. Students should have the relevant descriptions of the children offered to them for adoption.

### **1 ST TASK:**

How can we make this room look more like a room in which the adoption agency CARE FOR THE CHILD would hold a Prospective Parents Meeting?

It may be necessary to remind students here that the agency had written that the meeting was for "talking informally to other prospective parents" as well as for getting answers to their questions. So what will help create an informal atmosphere and still be like a room in the agency's H.Q.?

## 2ND TASK:

Decide what arrangements your characters would have to have made to enable them to spend a whole day travelling to and back from the CARE FOR THE CHILD headquarters in Birmingham? Then, position yourselves in the room with whoever you like - as if the informal part of this meeting has just begun.

Teacher: I should warn you that I intend playing two roles within the drama myself. Dressed as I am now, I shall be Mrs. Brown, the agency's officer, who will welcome you. Wearing a white coat (!?) I shall be Dr. Silver, a child psychologist, who may be able to deal with questions. Alright? Let's start!

The idea here is to allow time for the students to introduce themselves to each other in role and to open whatever conversations seem appropriate to them. The teacher's job, as Mrs. Brown, is only to welcome the prospective parents and to tell them that Dr. Silver will be arriving soon - and then to leave them to get on with it.

This is a very open situation in drama and the students must be able to make of it what they will. It is up to the teacher to decide when, and if, to arrive as Dr. Silver. If the meeting falls flat, it is always possible to stop the drama, to discuss what is amiss, and to start again.

DISCUSSION: How did the meeting go?

N.B. The teacher could choose other roles within the drama. For instance, a mother (or foster mother) with experience of bringing up an autistic child. This might well be a more useful role than a child psychologist.

## SESSION FOUR

This is the time for looking back over the work done, in an attempt to evaluate it. Two questions are important for the students:

1. Looking back over the three drama sessions, what were the most important decisions you had to make?
2. In what ways (if at all) do you feel your thinking about mental handicap has been changed?

This might also be an appropriate time to watch the National Autistic Society's video - "Autism: Behind an Invisible Wall".

And then hopefully, it will be time to look forward to seeing "Rain Man".

## TEACHING NOTES: PART TWO

### SESSION ONE

If students clearly want to talk about the film in an unstructured way, and make this clear, then time has to be made for it. Otherwise, it is the teacher's choice to push on with the drama work.

Teacher: At the end of " Rain Man", Charlie makes it clear that he intends applying for custody of his brother Raymond. Dr. Bruner, head of Wallbrook, the home for the mentally handicapped, where Raymond has lived most of his life, will obviously contest Charlie's application. He believes Raymond is better off in Wallbrook.

#### TASK 1: Class Work.

Who do you think would stand the best chance of getting custody of Raymond at an official hearing? And, most importantly, why?

Teacher records students' suggestions on a large chart where they can be clearly seen.

CHARLIE		DR BRUNER	
In his favour	Against Him	In his favour	Against him

Teacher: Purely on the basis of what we have here in the table, what do you think would be the magistrates' decision?

The teacher should now negotiate the students' agreement to the following fiction, as an extension of the film's narrative -

Dr. Bruner, in an effort to prepare his case for keeping custody of Raymond at the forthcoming custody hearing in Cincinnati, has contacted a lawyer, who, on her own initiative, has hired a firm of private detectives. She wants to obtain evidence from people who have had contact with Charlie and Raymond when they were driving across the USA. She believes that statements from these people may help Dr. Bruner's case.

## **TASK 2: Class Work**

Teacher: Let's look first at who these detectives might have tracked down (admittedly with some difficulty!) and interviewed. We need a list of possible witnesses. For example:

- i) the lawyer who told Charlie of his father's will;
- ii) the hotel security officer who watched Susanna, Charlie's girl-friend, via closed circuit TV, trying in the lift to teach Raymond to kiss.

It ought to be possible to make up a list of at least 10 possible witnesses.

## **TASK 3: Pair Work**

Work in pairs:

A. You are a private detective.

B. You are one of the people from our list of possible witnesses.

Decide first where the interview will take place and what questions the private detective will ask. Then go ahead. Avoid two versions of the same witness!

## **TASK 4: Class Work**

Teacher: If the detectives have now returned to their offices after interviewing their witnesses, how are they likely to be feeling about the job they have just done?

Let's suppose it is report-back time at the detective agency. Start with an informal atmosphere, with the detectives chatting to each other. Those of you who acted previously as witnesses will have to decide what other work you might have been doing, but you won't need to talk about it in any detail. Then, when you feel you are ready, move to a more formal reporting back on your interviews.

# SESSION TWO

In this session, the main aim should be to give students all the help they might need for them to prepare the witnesses' statements.

## **TASK 1: Class Work**

Teacher: It would be normal practice for private detectives to prepare a draft statement for their witnesses to sign as a true record of events - a "sworn statement." Can we look at what a model statement would have to include?

Teacher should note and display students' ideas for a model statement.

## **TASK 2: Pair Work - Same Pairs as Before**

Write a short draft statement together, using what we have agreed a model statement would include.

## **TASK 3: Class Work**

Students read their statements to the rest of the class DISCUSSION

Teacher: On the basis of these statements, what (if anything) do you think Dr. Bruner will be able to claim at the hearing?

Will he then supply the magistrates who will conduct the hearing with copies of these statements?

Can we review Dr. Bruner's position:  
Have his chances of keeping custody of Raymond increased or decreased?

What other claims is Dr. Bruner likely to make to persuade the magistrates that he is the better person to keep custody of Raymond?

## **SESSION THREE**

This session is for the "hearing" to decide Raymond's custody. If students decided at the last session that the magistrates would be supplied with copies of the statements, then these should be photo-copied and be available. It is important to keep the structure of the "hearing" as simple as possible - no courtroom drama with lawyers etc. Just the students all acting as the magistrates and Dr. Bruner and Charlie. The object is not to construct a so-called realistic courtroom drama.

Teacher: For this drama session I want all of you to agree to act as the magistrates who have to decide custody of Raymond. Remember - Charlie has applied for custody of his brother, whereas Dr. Bruner believes Raymond will be better off if he remains in the home for the mentally handicapped.

For the hearing, I'd like you to agree that I shall act as Dr. Bruner, and \_\_\_\_\_  
(teacher elects one student) as Charlie.

Before we look at Charlie's position, let's see how Dr. Bruner presents his case - and how you, the magistrates, handle him!

Teacher: How can we arrange the room as the room for the custody inquiry? What else do we need?

Class arranges the room accordingly, and provide themselves with whatever they think they would need as the magistrates.

Here is a possible scenario for the hearing:

1. Dr. Bruner presents his case, then "withdraws".
2. Magistrates discuss his presentation and decide what questions they wish to put to him.
3. Dr. Bruner is invited back into the hearing. The magistrates put their questions.
4. Charlie presents his case, then "withdraws".
5. Magistrates discuss Charlie's presentation and decide what questions they wish to put to him.
6. Charlie is invited back into the hearing. The magistrates put their questions.
7. Dr. Bruner and Charlie "withdraw" while the magistrates discuss Charlie's applications and come to a decision.
8. Dr. Bruner and Charlie are invited back. Magistrates tell them their decision and explain their reasons for it.

## SESSION FOUR

Evaluation time! It is important now to give students time to look back over their work and to say what was good about it, and what they think could have been better. And then, again, to address this question:

In what ways (if at all) do you feel your thinking about mental handicap has been changed?

**CARE FOR THE CHILD**  
107 Golden Lion Street  
Snow Hill  
Birmingham

\_\_\_\_\_ 2002

Dear Mr and Mrs \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for your recent letter expressing an interest in adopting a child. Because of the success of recent adoption campaigns, rather few children have been referred to us by the usual care agencies. However, there is a desperate need for families wishing to adopt or foster mentally handicapped children. We are therefore attaching details of a young person in the hope that you will be interested.

If you are interested in this particular child, we should be glad to invite you to come to our next prospective parents meeting in three weeks time. The meeting will be at our headquarters in Birmingham. You will then have the chance of talking informally to other prospective parents and of putting your questions to one of our adoption workers.

Do write and let us know what you intend.

Yours sincerely,

Dorothy M Blackwell  
Secretary, CARE FOR THE CHILD

### **SALLY: Date of birth: 3rd November 1976**

Adopted parents are needed for Sally, an attractive 12-year-old girl who has a mental handicap with autistic tendencies.

Sally is physically healthy and loves playing outdoors. She enjoys swimming and horse-riding and particularly enjoys playing with water and sand. She loves painting pictures and has an unusual sense of colour.

A very affectionate child who loves to have a cuddle, Sally has a mischievous sense of humour and a very rewarding smile. At present she lives in a children's home, but she lived with a family for a long period and would grow and develop best within a secure family situation. She needs parents who will understand her moods, habits and limitations and encourage her to develop her skills, especially in regard to communications.

Sally has no speech, but understands a lot of what is said to her and obeys several commands. She occasionally has moods and tantrums, linked to her frustration in being unable to communicate. She cries when she is frustrated in extreme situations may bite, but this happens very rarely.

Sally has an excellent appetite and usually sleeps well at night, though a change in routine can upset her pattern of sleep. She washes and dresses with a little help and is able to feed herself and go to the toilet on her own. She will continue to need special schooling and speech therapy.

Looking after Sally can be exhausting and demanding, but she is very rewarding to care for. She is a lovable, affectionate girl who makes all the effort worthwhile.

### **JOHN: Date of birth: 27th September 1978**

Ten-year-old John was born autistic. He came into care when he was four, his parents feeling unable to cope with a child with a handicap. They have had no contact with him since.

John remained in residential care until he was six, when he went to live with a long-term foster mother. She gave him excellent physical care and a great deal of affection, but as he grew older she realised she couldn't give him the firm and consistent handling he needs, and in June 1987 he moved to his present children's home.

Over the past 18 months, John has continued to make steady progress in looking after himself and getting on with other people. Like most autistic young people, John has a strong tendency to withdraw into himself if left alone. He needs the stimulation of people who will involve him in a day-to-day activities, helping in the home, and playing with other children. He has no interest, however, in competitive games. John needs constant supervision and firm handling within clearly defined limits.

John is making excellent progress with his speech, and has begun to read with some ease. He likes to study railway and bus timetables and maps, and is able to remember in detail times and connections. He loves going on outings and enjoys particularly travelling by train.

John's health is good and he eats well. He will continue to need therapy for his speech. His understanding is good, but he sometimes chooses to ignore instructions.

John needs a stable, loving adoptive home with two parents.

### **TRACY: Date of birth: 17th June 1975**

An experienced family with tons of energy, patience and love - and a good sense of humour - is needed for Tracy, a physically healthy 13-year-old black girl with special needs. Tracy has a learning disability and autistic tendencies and cannot speak or communicate as others do.

Tracy has been in care since December 1983 when her mother, who was in a difficult personal situation, decided she couldn't cope any longer with Tracy's disturbed behaviour.

At present Tracy lives in a hospital unit and attends a special school. She has been referred for speech therapy and, although she can't speak, she's beginning to make different sounds and to communicate in this way by pointing. She has a good understanding of what's said to her.

An attractive girl with a nice smile and an appealing face, Tracy loves running and climbing, listening to music and playing with mud, sand and gravel. She's full of energy during the day and sleeps well at night. Tracy has a flair for drawing and is a wonderfully accurate caricaturist.

Responsive, affectionate and lively, Tracy is a rewarding and lovable child. She used to be rather aggressive towards other children, but this tendency is coming under control. Now, when she pushes other children, it's for attention rather than to show bad feeling.

Tracy needs a stable, strong, two-parent black family. Caring for her will be time-consuming and hard work. Her appearance and behaviour don't at present set her apart from other children, but her handicap will become more apparent as she grows older. However, the foster family Tracy sometimes stays with, feels she has the potential to make a lot of progress.

### **RASHID: Date of birth: 10th December 1977**

Eleven-year-old Rashid is a Muslim child born in England to parents who come from Pakistan but have been living here for many years. He needs adoptive parents who are Muslims themselves.

Rashid is an attractive boy with dark hair. He is small for his age. Two years ago, Rashid was diagnosed as autistic and only then began to receive the special schooling he needs. As yet, he has little speech, but is making progress with the help of sign language.

Rashid likes outdoor activities, and after being nervous at first of the water, has recently learned to swim. Recently, he was introduced to computer games, and, if he had the opportunity, would spend all day with the computer. He already shows unusual ability in this respect.

Rashid is affectionate with those people he knows and trusts. Younger children find him an easy playmate. On the whole, he is a quiet boy. He has tantrums when he doesn't get his own way, but these are soon over. His foster mother finds it best to be firm and ignore this behaviour.

Rashid came into care nearly four years ago and has lived with the same foster family ever since. As a result, he has become very attached to them. He no longer has any contact with his own family.

Rashid understands that a new family is being sought for him and is keen that they are found as soon as possible. They need to be very patient as he learns to get used to them. One other thing: Rashid is as yet very afraid of most animals such as dogs, cats and horses.

## LINKS/REFERENCES

[www.nas.org.uk](http://www.nas.org.uk)

In 1962 a group of parents, frustrated with the lack of provision and support for children with autism and their carers, and whose children had been labelled 'ineducable' came together and formed The Society for Autistic Children which later became The National Autistic Society (NAS). Their aim was to encourage a better understanding of autism and to pioneer specialist services for people with autism and those who care for them.

[www.mencap.org.uk](http://www.mencap.org.uk)

Mencap works with children and adults with a learning disability and their families and carers to improve their lives and opportunities.

[www.drc-gb.org](http://www.drc-gb.org)

Disability Rights Commission. From September 2002, a new legislation came into effect to make sure schools do not discriminate against children with disability. Find out more by visiting this website.

[www.dfes.gov.uk/sen](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/sen)

The Department for Education and Sport's website devoted to Special Educational Needs

[www.childpsychotherapytrust.org.uk](http://www.childpsychotherapytrust.org.uk)

An organisation which provides help and advice for specific emotional and behavioural problems.

[www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)

RNID is the largest charity representing the 8.7 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK. As a membership charity, their aim is to achieve a radically better quality of life for deaf and hard of hearing people.

### **Winslow Catalogues**

**Goyt Side Road, Chesterfield, Derbyshire S40 2PH Tel 0845 921 1777**

An excellent catalogue of resources for those concerned with the 'special care of all people'. The catalogue is split into two sections: Education and Special Needs and Health and Rehabilitation.

**Thinking in Pictures : And Other Reports from My Life With Autism by Temple Grandin**  
222 pages (October 1996) Vintage Books USA; ISBN: 0679772898