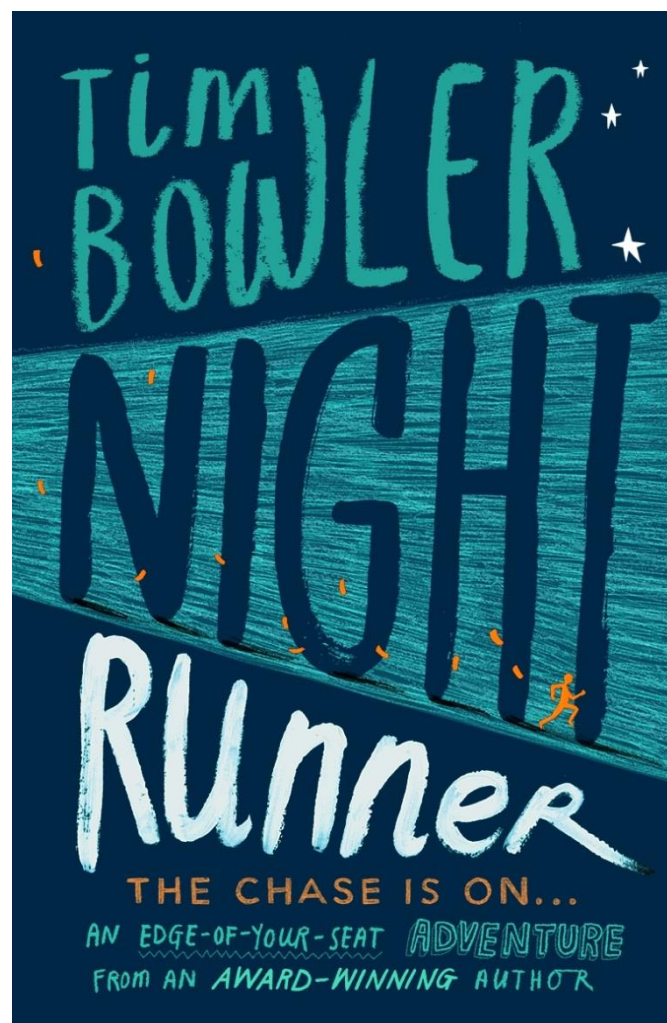


The World of
Night Runner

by **Tim Bowler**

**Themes and ideas for exploring the book with pupils
in Years 7-10**



Introduction

Zinny Okoro is an outcast, bunking off school and hanging around town while his parents — his dad a violent alcoholic and his mum involved with another man — struggle to make ends meet and pay the rent for their rundown house on Abbot Street. What seems like a normal day for Zinny suddenly takes an unexpected turn; there is an intruder in his house searching for something. Shadowy figures start following him. His parents are keeping secrets but he can't figure out why. Then his mum is shot and ends up in hospital, his dad disappears, and Zinny has to do whatever he can to save his family, even if this means helping the same men he's been running away from. He is blackmailed by the men to run packages all over the city, receiving orders from the school bully, his arch-enemy, Spink. As the clock ticks, Zinny knows it's only a matter of time before someone ends up dead — and it could be him.

Synopsis

Bunking off school one day, Zinny notices a man in a flash coat watching the house. The man breaks in and as Zinny hides in fear, the man searches the house, looking for something. Zinny's mum, Dana, and her secret boyfriend, arrive home and scare off the intruder. As Zinny leaves the house and tries to alert the police, he is pursued by three men, and saved from abduction by Mr Latham, his headmaster, who is driving past and stops, wanting to know why Zinny is skipping school. He delivers Zinny home.

Zinny's relationship with his mum is difficult — she has mood swings, smokes, and frequently slaps him. Tragedy strikes when she is shot after confronting a man who is watching the house. We learn more about Zinny's dad, who never talks about his work or where he has been, and who beats Zinny and is an alcoholic. However, despite their troubled relationships, Zinny appears to still love his parents, though he sometimes wonders why.

That night, Zinny goes outside to investigate his dad's van, wondering what he does during the day. Flash Coat and his sidekicks suddenly appear and threaten to kill Zinny and his parents if he goes to the police. Zinny is instructed to search the house for something that shouldn't be there, and then to contact Spink, the school bully, who appears to be an associate of Flash Coat's.

On the way to hospital the next day to visit his mum, Zinny's relationship with his dad is even more strained, and Zinny prefers to go to school rather than stay at home. When Mr Latham hears about Zinny's mum being in hospital, he is concerned for Zinny. Spink immediately singles out Zinny and physically intimidates him but when Zinny mentions Flash Coat, Spink changes tack. That night, Dad returns, already drunk, and he and Zinny argue.

Zinny leaves the house, meeting Flash Coat at a dilapidated old pub, the *Hunter's Moon*, as he has been instructed by Spink. Flash Coat orders him to run packages all over the city to dodgy neighbourhoods, avoiding people at all costs until each package is safely delivered.

The next day, Zinny and Dad visit the hospital again, and on the way there is some reconciliation between them. Zinny's mum is feeling a little better and Zinny gives her his prized possession, a nature book that he stole from the school library and likes to look at when he feels down. At school, Mr Latham quizzes Zinny about his connection to Spink, worrying that Spink may be bullying or pressuring the younger boy. After meeting Spink and receiving his next orders for the packages, Zinny decides to check out the locations beforehand, to try to find out what he is delivering and for whom.

Later, Zinny calls his dad's employer, a delivery company, and discovers that his dad was actually sacked three months ago. When his dad doesn't come home that evening, Zinny cries in despair but scrounges enough money to buy himself chips.

That night Zinny meets Spink who is terrified and has messed up the deliveries; now they must deliver all five packages by three o'clock in the morning. A few deliveries later, after encountering trouble on the way, Zinny returns to find Spink gone. He goes home without completing all the deliveries, only to discover Flash Coat's car waiting by his house. The house has been ransacked, and as Zinny watches, a man enters the house. This is 'Romeo', the man with whom Zinny's mum has been having an affair. He retrieves a package from behind the boiler, like the packages Zinny has been delivering, only much larger. Flash Coat, in hiding under a bed, shoots Romeo in a tense and violent scene, interrupted by a desperate phone message from Zinny's mum. The book reaches a thrilling finale as Flash Coat uses Zinny as a hostage, escaping the police surrounding the house. As they speed away, with Flash Coat on the point of shooting Zinny, the car crashes. Zinny blacks out.

He wakes in hospital, with his parents, Mr Latham, and the police at his bedside. The policeman reveals that Spink was killed during the night, but beforehand had phoned the police to tell them about Flash Coat and the packages. It is revealed that these contain counterfeit money which is being transferred all over the city. Zinny was saved by his dad who used his van to block the path of Flash Coat's car, which then careered into a wall. Zinny angrily confronts his parents, who are both sorry for what they have done. Dad tells them that the reason why he has been away is that he has been looking for work far from home. The book ends happily, with the family reconciled, as Dad reveals that he has found a job working for a farmer in Coniston, a beautiful place in the Lake District that Zinny has dreamt about since seeing it in his nature book.

Topics to talk about

Zinny

- Does Zinny lead an easy life? What are some of the problems that he has to face?
- Do you blame him for truanting, swearing, and behaving badly?
- What aspects of Zinny's character do you like?
- Zinny shows extraordinary bravery over the course of the novel. Do you think you would have his courage in similar circumstances?
- Why do you think Zinny clings to and is comforted by his dream of the countryside, represented in the nature book he cherishes?
- Do you think Zinny is a victim, or a hero?
- *'I've even had the landlord saying Zinny's not a proper name for a 15-year-old boy'*. Do you think your name affects and influences who you are?

Spink

- Spink boasts, *'Anybody would think I'm dangerous.'* Do you think he is?
- Do you consider Spink a bad person, or just a boy who has lost his way? What qualities or actions redeem him, if any?
- Why do you think Spink picks on Zinny?
- As with Flash Coat, Zinny thinks Spink has *'a smile without friendship'*. Do you think that Spink and Zinny, outsiders in different ways, could become friends? Do you think that each appears tough but has a softer side?

Family

- What do you think are some of the problems faced by the Okoro family? Who is responsible for the situation in which the family finds itself?
- Why do you think Zinny continues to love his parents, despite their problems? Is he right to do so? Should he forgive them?
- How important do you think it is to have a close-knit family, and what does this novel show us about the strength of family ties?
- When Zinny's dad returns home drunk, Zinny looks after him. How do you feel about this role reversal? Is it shocking to see an adult so vulnerable, and a child forced to take responsibility?
- The book touches on the problem of alcoholism through Zinny's dad. What are the realities for Zinny's dad as a result of his drinking? How does his alcoholism affect family life?

- How do you feel at the end when the family are reunited and reconciled? Is this a good ending, and do you think it will last?

School life

- What is Zinny's school like, and how does it compare with yours?
- How important is it to fit in at school?
- Why do you think Zinny plays truant? What are some of the likely outcomes and problems for students like Zinny if they miss school?
- Does Mr Latham, the Headmaster, remind you of any of the teachers at your school?
- Mr Latham is concerned about Zinny. Is he right to try to talk to him, or do you think he is interfering? How involved should schools be with the lives of their pupils beyond the school gates?
- The novel explores the issue of bullying in school. Consider some of the ways in which bullies and bullying can be dealt with in schools.

Flash Coat

'They're extremely dangerous individuals who see revenge as a matter of honour. People who cross them or fail to do as they're told come to a bad end.' Flash Coat is the villain of the novel, and he is characterized as a cold, ruthless, and dangerous man.

- What qualities and physical attributes make Flash Coat a convincing villain?
- Would you consider Flash Coat to be 'evil'?
- What do you think motivates a villain like Flash Coat?
- Do you think justice prevails at the end? Does Flash Coat get what he deserves?
- Do you think the novel would work well as a film, and if so, who would you cast as Flash Coat?

The city

The city, unnamed throughout the novel, is the setting for the story, and is described in great detail by the author, especially Abbot Street and Zinny's neighbourhood.

- Would you like to live in the city in the novel? Give reasons for your answer.
- Why do you think that Tim Bowler locates his novel in a city?
- How do descriptions of the city and settings for the action reflect aspects of the lives of the characters in the book?
- Does the urban setting remind you of anywhere you know or have visited?

Activity: Draw or describe the *Hunter's Moon* pub as you imagine it from reading the novel.

Nature magic

Zinny's precious nature book, with its photographs of *Lark Ascending*, *Badgers at Dusk*, and *Moon over Coniston*, offers comfort to him, and he later gives it to his mum when she is in hospital.

- 'When I can't take the city any more, I think of the nature pictures in that book'. Why do you think the book and its contents mean so much to Zinny?
- Do you have a prized possession like the nature book for Zinny? Why is it important to you?
- Why do you think Zinny gives his mum the book even though it means so much to him?
- Do you think the book has more or less value because Zinny stole it from the school library?
- In what ways can the natural world be soothing for people caught up in city life?

Activity: Write or discuss the next chapter for this novel, imagining what you think might happen to the Okoro family when they move to Coniston.

About the author

Tim Bowler is one of the UK's most compelling and original writers for teenagers. He was born in Leigh-on-Sea and after studying Swedish at university he worked in forestry, the timber trade, teaching, and translating before becoming a full-time writer. He lives with his wife in a quiet Devon village and his workroom is a small wooden outhouse known to friends as 'Tim's Bolthole'. Tim has written nineteen books and won fifteen awards, including the prestigious Carnegie Medal for *River Boy*. His most recent novel is the atmospheric *Sea of Whispers* and his provocative *BLADE* series has been hailed as a ground-breaking work of fiction. He has been described by the Sunday Telegraph as 'the master of the psychological thriller' and by the Independent as 'one of the truly individual voices in British teenage fiction'. His books have sold over a million copies worldwide.