Juliet loved the folk stories Paddy Old used to tell, and when he died nothing was quite right anymore. She fell out with Kitty Ann, her mother was expecting a baby, and Juliet got as cross as two sticks. Then Grandmamma takes Juliet on a journey - a long journey, by train and boat and train and boat, so Grandmamma tells stories to while away the time. They are different from Paddy Old's stories, and they all seem to be a little bit about Juliet, as well as witches and Christmas sunflowers and talking snails. And when Juliet and her Grandmamma finally arrive at a small fishing port in France, a sea-trout and an amazing toy maker give Juliet the courage and insight to start a wonderful story of her own...

All the really grand stories that Juliet has ever heard have come from her elderly friend Paddy Old. When he dies, she's not only unprepared for the loss of the storyteller's company; she mourns his words, In her grief she ruins her friendship with Kitty Ann, while her parents, who are expecting a second child, perceive her only as a sullen problem. Then, in swoops Grandmamma to take the girl on a trip, during which Juliet not only hears others' stories but finds a few of her own. In his first book for children, the well-known author retells old tales with the compact energy and tidiness of a master, anchoring them betwixt events as Juliet travels from her Irish home by ship and train, witnesses one man after another fall for pretty Grandmamma, and learns to be a prime mover in mischief. Brisk and bubbling with good will and the imaginings of a gentle girl. (Fiction. 11-13)

It should come as no surprise that the hero of William Trevor's first book for children is a toy maker. And, of course, not just any old toy maker: he's a craftsman of the highest order, fashioning clever mechanical devices out of the simplest materials, then selling them (and sometimes just giving them away) from a seaside boardwalk. Like his creator, he's not strong on the hard sell, but he knows his worth. ("You are the nicest man in France," the little Irish girl named Juliet tells him. Being both French and a perfect Trevor character, he solemnly agrees.) Better still, the stock in trade of this nameless entrepreneur suggests a narrative strategy the Irish writer has refined in 30 years' worth of novels and short stories: look for the truth of life in the details, but remember that what you see may be as randomly visible as the colors on a spinning top.

"Juliet's Story" is as fully stocked as F. A. O. Schwarz. It begins and ends in a small country town in County Tipperary, home of an only child who has, as her father puts it, "gone broody." But in between -- thanks to Juliet's family's attempts to ease her grief over the death of a neighborhood character named Paddy Old -- it rambles across Ireland, Wales and England, crosses the Channel into France and even bounces back in time to the days of myth and chivalry. That's because Juliet, unlike her best friend, Kitty Ann, would rather listen to Paddy Old telling stories than sit in front of the television screen: "When you listened to stories you had to fill it up for yourself, and that was what Juliet liked. . . . Juliet tried to explain all this to Kitty Ann, but Kitty Ann just said she preferred Bugs Bunny."

Mr. Trevor shows us enough of Paddy Old's storytelling style to demonstrate how much he is missed. Then, on the eve of Juliet's birthday, we are introduced to a storyteller who may be able to rival Paddy's powers: Juliet's wonderfully coquettish grandmother, who, in the course of whisking the child off for a much-needed holiday, is attended at every turn by love-smitten, marriage-proposing admirers. ("Grandmamma said she'd like the teasing man and the polite man and Monsieur Vapp to be their secret. Not a word to Juliet's mother and father, she requested, just in case they considered the whole thing unduly amusing.")

Paddy Old specialized in traditional Irish folk tales, the kind with a clever punch line or a nice final twist; Grandmamma favors a more open-ended, experimental form. In her stories, snails borrow sleeping humans' voices but apologize for the accents. ("There's a difficulty with the h. 'Ouse, 'im, 'it, 'urry. That's the way the jaunting-car man talks. On an occasion like this I find it embarrassing.") And Grandmamma's sort of witch is apt to masquerade as an actress "who wasn't quite famous." ("A woman, for instance, might be able to make lemons roll upward on a slope, but she'd keep it to herself, because men were frightened of stuff like that and wouldn't want to marry such a creature. A woman might be able to control ants or bees or hold conversations with horses, but the current fashion was not to admit it.")

Eventually, the two travelers settle into a hotel called Le Roc Blanc, and it is here that Juliet, enlisting the aid of the dignified yet mischievous French toy maker, has a real-life adventure that teaches her how to use the powers of her own imagination. Armed with newfound confidence (not to mention the subversive wisdom in the story the Frenchman tells her, about the King Who Married the Right Queen), Juliet returns home with a greater appreciation of the possibilities to be found all around her -- even in what had once seemed a boring and predictable Irish backwater. As we take leave of her, she has acquired her own knack for storytelling, and she has begun to use it in a deliciously Trevorish way: by presuming to give her grandmother advice about her love life.

It may seem tempting to write off William Trevor's “The Witch Who Came for the Weekend” as a silly little story about how an impressionable girl thought she met a witch. As they worked through the discussion process, however, your students ended up seeing a lot more in this story. For instance, students debated not only whether Miss Perego was actually a witch or not, but also her possible motivations for pretending to be a witch. One such motivation was that Miss Perego saw Frances' boredom with the weekend and decided to use her acting skills to humor Frances by sustaining her fascination with and possible belief in witches. Students then debated the ethics of all the characters adults create for the amusement/inspiration/entertainment of children.

For students who would like to continue thinking and writing about this story or related stories, some options for further reading and writing are provided below. As always, I am happy to provide constructive, non-letter-grade-based feedback on your students' writing. You can email pieces to me at laura.kane@gmail.com or have your student hand me his or her writing at our next meeting on Nov. 28. (Please note that Compass is closed on Nov. 21 for Thanksgiving Break.)

I hope that all of your families have wonderful Thanksgiving celebrations!

Juliet loves listening to stories and becomes depressed when her favorite storyteller, an old man in her small Irish village, dies. She finds that her best friend's interests are not the same as her own and something is going on with her parents. So when her grandmother shows up to take her on a holiday for her birthday, Juliet is mystified (she really wanted a puppy.) Juliet's grandmother is also a storyteller and a wise observer of life. This small book is a tribute to how we all find ourselves in stories and how we create our own memories and stories to share with others.

Charming and delightful. Juliet is a young girl living in County Tipperary who loves the stories told by the town's seanachie, Paddy Old, but when he does she becomes depressed. But then her grandmother (who has a way with a tale herself) takes her on holiday to France, and Juliet gets the experiences to tell her own story.