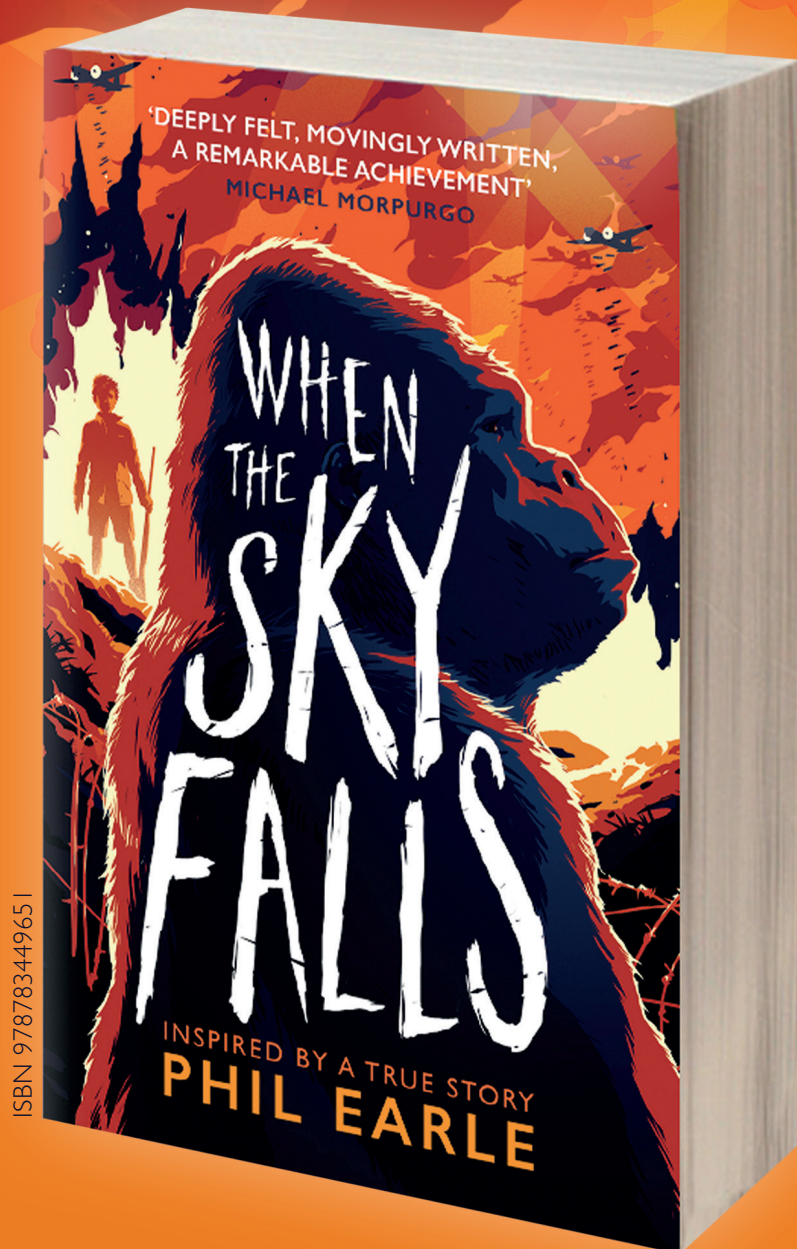


# TEACHING NOTES

for *When the Sky Falls* by Phil Earle



'An extraordinary story... Deeply felt, movingly written, a remarkable achievement'

**MICHAEL MORPURGO**

These notes have been written by the teachers at the CLPE to provide schools with ideas to develop comprehension and cross-curricular activities around this text. They build on our work supporting teachers to use quality texts throughout the reading curriculum. They encourage a deep reading of and reflection on the text, which may happen over a series of reading sessions, rather than in just one sitting. We hope you find them useful.

## Before You Start:

- As you read the book it would be helpful to use a group journal to organise and store discussions and responses to the text. The length of the book means that you will need to consider how you wish children to engage with the text. You could use a blend of reading aloud by the adult; re-reading by the adult or the children and discussion of key passages; pupils reading sections of the text independently between sessions, depending on their experience, then summarising what they have read; revisiting specific passages and episodes and engaging in specific activities to deepen response and comprehension.
- This novel is set in London during World War 2 at the peak of the Blitz. Children's understanding of the text, including some of the vocabulary used, will be enhanced by a level of understanding of the historical period and, in particular, what it meant for the people who remained living in UK cities at the time. The population's experiences (of bombing raids, of rationing, of sacrifice, of taking on new roles and responsibilities and the impact on families being torn apart due to conscription or evacuation) are all evident in the pages of this novel. Therefore, you may wish to read this novel alongside wider cross-curricular study, or provide opportunities for children to share existing knowledge and ask questions and for clarification about any aspects of the period that are unclear to them during discussions. You could provide access to appropriate non-fiction texts and carefully selected websites or online documentary footage. Links are provided in the notes where they might be especially pertinent.
- Teachers should be aware this book also includes references to bereavement and teachers will want to make sure they have read the whole text before they decide how to share it with children. Understanding would need to be shown when introducing the book to a group in which a child may have experienced bereavement; although the book could provide a safe and supportive context through which children may be able to express their feelings.

## Cover and Chapters 1 to 4 (pages 1 to 33)

- Begin by discussing the cover, focusing children's initial attention to the choices made by the illustrator, Levente Szabó. *What can you see here? What is your eye drawn to? How does it make you feel? What interests you the most? Why might that be?* Children might note colour choices and layout, as well as features such as the flames, barbed wire, aeroplanes, searchlights and the boy, as well as the gorilla in profile around which everything else is framed. Invite them to discuss any finer details such as the clothes worn by the boy, the item he is holding and what it might be.
- Draw their observations together and start to make some early predictions about the story that they are about to read. *Where and when do you think the story might be set? What leads you to think this?* Record the children's responses around a photocopy of the cover and return to these as you read the book, comparing the children's initial thoughts to how the story actually unfolds.
- Now, read aloud and consider the title of the book, **'When The Sky Falls'**. *Does this phrase mean or suggest anything to you? What might it suggest about the tone, style or content of the story?* Children might discuss whether this is something that can literally happen; and, if not, what it might refer to. They might draw connections to the 'Chicken Little' traditional tale (also known as Chicken Licken or Henny Penny) and discuss whether the sky was really falling in that story.

- Before starting to read, the group might also discuss the other information we find on the cover and what it might mean to us. Consider the text under the title: “Inspired by a True Story”. *Have they read any other books inspired by a true story? What’s is the difference between ‘inspired by’ and ‘based on’? What do these things make you think about the story that lies ahead? Does it remind you of other stories you have read or heard, in books, films, TV or real life?*
- Read aloud the opening sentence while asking the children to close their eyes and picture the scene in their mind’s eye:
 

*“The platform was a battlefield: seventy yards of carnage transplanted straight from the coast of northern France.” (p1)*
- Discuss what they visualised and any aspects of the language that affected that visualisation. As part of this discussion, invite children to share any words or phrases that are unfamiliar and spend some time discussing and defining these together. Discuss whether, in visualising the scene, they were drawing on images they had seen elsewhere – photographs, documentary footage, or scenes from film or television. *What sort of platform are they picturing? Are they imagining a literal battlefield? Why specifically the northern coast of France? Why would that be significant?*
- Ask children to close their eyes again and this time read aloud up to the end of the third paragraph: “... *having just arrived.*” Now revisit their visualisations. *Did their images stay the same or did they change? Did they discover any new information that led them to adapt or modify their visualisation?* Children might draw on the addition of ‘station’ and ‘train’ to confirm the type of platform described in the first sentence; the use of the term ‘evacuees’ might have been a helpful connection particularly if they have previously studied aspects of the period. If children are unfamiliar with the period and the evacuation of many children from the cities at this time, at this stage you might share and discuss photographs of evacuees packing on to platforms to provide some context to our main character’s arrival. *What might it suggest to you about this character that he is arriving when so many are leaving?*
- Reread from the start and onto the end of “*A bobby, he was sure of it*” on page 2. Spend time discussing their first impressions of Joseph Palmer. *What words would they use to describe him based on his actions and behaviour as he arrives at the station? What do we know about him? What do we suspect? What puzzles are set up? What would we like to find out?* They might consider phrases such as “*It didn’t take much to light the end of his fuse*” or “*He seethed under his breath, then over it, not caring who heard.*” and consider what they imply about his character and his experiences.
- Capture the children’s responses and insights by completing a **Role on the Wall** poster. To do this, have a simple prepared template of the outline of a child to represent Joseph onto which the children can record their ideas. Ask the children to write words or phrases sharing what they know about his outward appearance, actions and speech on the outside of the outline. Then, use these to begin to infer his internal feelings and characteristics and note these on the inside of the outline.
- Explain that you will now read aloud the rest of the first chapter and for them to consider what more they discover about Joseph as it is read. Continue to read aloud to the end of the chapter on page 9, and give children space and time to discuss their response to the first chapter, including what we have learned about the period and setting of the story and our growing understanding of Joseph and our first impressions of Margaret Farrelly (or Mrs F).
- Add to the Role on the Wall for Joseph, then use the same technique to start a Role on the Wall poster for Mrs F. Encourage the children to continue to return to the **Roles on the Wall** as you continue to read the story, using a different colour each time to highlight the knowledge they gain as they read on
- At this stage, you might decide to watch short interviews with people who experienced the Blitz (such as: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkhDzUVmY0g>) to support children’s knowledge of the period, visualisation of the setting and its potential impact on the characters we’ve met.

- Ask the children to read the next three chapters (Chapters 2-4, page 10 – 33), then allow time and space for the group to reflect on what they have read and summarise the main events (likely to include arriving at Mrs F's home; Joseph's breaking of the window and Mrs F's response to that; and the visit to her workplace – the zoo – and the introduction of Adonis). It would be useful to keep a shared storymap to log the key events as you go, to recap on as you move through the story.
- Encourage the children to note any key vocabulary that they may not be familiar with, such as 'wireless' or 'macabre'. Discuss children's own ideas for potential definitions drawing upon analogy with known words or context, as well as bringing unusual words to life using photo or video sources. Children may want to create a glossary of unfamiliar or impactful language that appears in the text as they continue to read.
- Finish the session by returning to that final piece of dialogue from Mrs F: "*It's all about trust*" (p32). *What do you think Mrs F means by that? Do you agree with her statement? Who needs to trust and who needs to be trusted? Does anyone lack trust? Why might 'trust' be important for these characters and the situation which surrounds them?*

## Chapter 5 to Chapter 10 (pages 34-69)

- After reading the next six chapters, ask the group to summarise this section of the book, working towards a shared interpretation of events: Joseph explores the zoo and we learn more about the impact of war on animals in captivity; an air raid siren means rushing to the garden shelter followed by a chase across the city ending at the zoo; Joseph discovers Mrs F aiming a rifle at Adonis (an action that remains a mystery).
- Invite children to make a note of the key events, adding these to the shared storymap (they might also create a timeline in their reading journal) to revisit and add to as the story progresses. Come back together to discuss:
  - *How does Mrs F react when Joseph arrives at the zoo? Why do you think that might be? As a reader, do you view Mrs F's choices or behaviour differently to Joseph – or are you seeing the character only through his eyes?*
  - *Why do we think that Mrs F was pointing the gun at Adonis during the air raid? Why might she avoid explaining her actions? Do you feel Joseph is owed an explanation? Why do you think the author chooses to hold this information back from the reader? What effect does it have on you as you read?*
- Add any new reflections or insights they have about Joseph and Mrs Farrelly to their respective Role on the Wall notes. They might also make notes of any questions they have about these characters at this point in the novel and their predictions for any possible answers to those mysteries.
- Reread together from "*Right on cue...*" (p67) up to the "*...started his languid movements again.*" (p69). *What are our impressions of Adonis from this description? What words would we use to describe his behaviour, his personality? What words or phrases in the text might influence our impressions? Are our responses and feelings about Adonis based on reading about gorillas in other books – including non-fiction texts – or seeing them in film or on television?*
- If possible, you might give out copies of these pages for them to **text mark**, highlighting examples of how Phil Earle has used language which influences their impression of the character. They might draw out verbs and phrases used to describe his movement such as *lope; stalking; strode; muscles...rippling; "eyes piercing, seeking any danger that dared invade his eyeline."* They could note adjectives such as *gigantic* or *majestic*; as well as considering the implication of a phrase such as "*Adonis's kingdom.*"
- They might also highlight the impact on Joseph and how that affects our response – *is our view of Adonis affected by how Joseph feels about him? Do we feel the same way as Joseph? Why/why not? Do you think the description would be different if we were given insight into Mrs F's point of view?*
- As part of this discussion, invite children to share any knowledge they have of gorillas – either in captivity or in the wild – including their appearance, size, strength and diet. Engaging in observational drawing of gorillas

from video or photography will support children in developing their visualisation and vocabulary related to this animal.

- Finish the session by drawing the group together to consider, now that they've read more of the book, what they think might happen. Look back at their early impressions, expectations and predictions for the story. *Have your predictions for the story changed? What has happened, or what have you read, that has led to new insights or ideas?*

## Chapter 11 to Chapter 22 (pages 70-145)

- Prior to the session, ask children to have read Chapter 11-19 (page 70-120). Start the session by allowing time for the group to summarise what they have read, to enable them to arrive at a shared understanding of the events described, the impact these have on Joseph, and how the plot has been advanced, noting key events on the shared storymap.
- Discuss:
  - *What were your first impressions of Syd when she was introduced in Chapter 11? Has your view of the character changed during the chapters you have read? If so, why? How do you think she feels about the characters we already know – Joseph, Mrs F and Adonis? How do you think they might feel about her? How do you know? Does she remind you of characters you have encountered in other stories? In what way is she similar or different to Joseph?*
  - *How did you feel about the school that Joseph starts to attend in Chapter 14? Could you visualise the exterior, the corridors or the classroom? Did anything particularly interest you about the school? Was there anything about the school that you found puzzling or unusual? What would you like to find out? How does Joseph feel about attending school? What more do we learn about Joseph in this section of the book? Children might also briefly summarise their impressions of the new characters they meet in Chapters 14 and 15: Mr Gryce, Miss Doherty, Bert Conaghan, and Jimmy Rodwell.*
  - *Why does Mrs F need to rush to the zoo during air raids? How do you feel about this? Is this what you had predicted? Do you think it is the right thing to do? Do you think Mrs F would be able to shoot Adonis if she had to? What makes you think that? Look back at the dialogue on page 116 ending with “Sometimes doing the right thing feels completely wrong.” Can something feel wrong but still be the right thing to do? Have you ever felt that way?*
- Give time to children to annotate their Role on the Wall posters with any further insights for Joseph and Mrs F. They might respond to new information they have learnt about their background, any changes in their relationship with one another, and the way in which they each interact with Syd.
- When discussing unfamiliar vocabulary, children might draw out the term “*imperious*” used to describe Adonis. *What might this mean? How might it relate to our earlier impressions of Adonis? How do you imagine Adonis sitting on his ‘muddy throne’ if he is imperious? Does it remind you of other words that you know (e.g. imperial, empire, impervious)? Do you think ‘imperious’ is a positive or negative description? You might support their response to this word choice by looking at synonyms (e.g. domineering, authoritative, arrogant, superior, commanding), by trying to act it out and bring it to life physically and by looking back at photographs of gorillas.*
- Hand out copies of the text from pages 99-102 to each child. Ask them to sit with a partner and work together to prepare a rehearsed **performance read** of the direct speech in this section. Give them time and resources so that they can highlight the dialogue and consider how they will read the text to demonstrate how the characters are thinking and feeling at each stage. After sufficient discussion and rehearsal time, give each pair the opportunity to share a self-selected portion of the scene.
- Afterwards, come back together as a group and discuss the choices made by the author that supported their

interpretation. As well as speech tags like *sighed* and *grinned*, children might draw out verbs such as *shrugged*, *scowling*, *blushed* and consider how body language and facial expression can influence our understanding of emotion and tone. They could also look at the ways in which Phil Earle communicates character through not only what his characters say, but also his punctuation and layout of that dialogue, such as his use of questions, ellipsis, italics, dashes, deliberate repetition and interruptions.

- Revisit the moment when Syd tells Joseph: “*You’ll have to trust me.*” (page 102). Consider how this might relate to our earlier discussions about ‘trust’ in this text. *Why do you think Joseph finds it so difficult to talk about his struggles with reading? Who do you think Joseph trusts the most? Do you think he can trust Syd? What makes you think that? Why might he find it difficult to trust others? How might a lack of trust affect him?* Children might make connections to other mentions of trust within the book read up to this point, e.g.: “*He couldn’t imagine how it would feel to be inside the cage with Adonis. The trust they must have in each other... it was a trust Joseph had barely felt in his whole life.*” (p106); or “*Friendship and trust counted for nothing. He knew that.*” (p118).
- In discussing Joseph’s struggles with reading, children may wish to share their own experiences learning to read. Words appearing to move on the page can be an indication of dyslexia. However, dyslexia challenges different readers in different ways; and although recognised by science from the 1890s wasn’t widely understood by the 1940s. Discussion around Joseph’s difficulty could provide a space for children to talk about their own reading challenges and how it makes them feel; or other aspects of learning that are challenging or cause anxiety.
- Finish the session by reading together and discussing Chapter 20-22. Allow children time to reflect and discuss what we discover about Syd’s parents and the response of the characters when sharing/hearing this information: “*Both of them were quiet with their thoughts...*” (p128). As well as her family background, we discover a lot more about Syd in these three chapters, through the choices she makes (defending and then offering to help Joseph) and her dialogue, as well as the way in which Phil Earle describes her behaviour (e.g. “*a detective poring over clues*” on p143). Following this session, children can draw on this discussion as well as any observations from the earlier chapters to sketch out a **Pen Portrait** of this character. A pen portrait is an informal description of a person or a group of people, a character sketch in words. A pen portrait may discuss ‘hard’ facts, such as age or gender, but it should also focus on ‘softer’ aspects, such as attitudes and appearance. Information you could include in the pen portrait might be name, appearance, background, relationship to other characters and role in the story, likes and dislikes, as well as any other ideas they have expressed and the children’s own inferences about them from what they have read
- Before the next session, ask children to read Chapters 23 – 27.

## **Chapter 23 to Chapter 30 (pages 146-201)**

- Complete these activities after the children have read the next five chapters (Chapter 23-27) so that they can effectively summarise, discuss and respond to this section of the story. Allow time and space so that they can reflect on what they have read and support each other in interpreting the events described and how these affect our core characters and advance the plot, adding key events to the shared storymap.
  - After Adonis saves Joseph from Bert and Jimmy, Joseph wonders: “*But had the ape meant to help?... the idea... felt far-fetched*” (p163). *Do you agree? What makes you think that?* As part of their reflection, return to another question raised by the text: “*Did animals have a sense of right and wrong?*” (p163). *Do you think the book has a clear point of view about this question? Do you?*
  - *Do you think it is significant that Joseph ends the chapter thanking Adonis? How is their relationship evolving?* Mrs F, Syd and Miss Doherty have all in different ways shown support to Joseph since his arrival in London: *why do you think it’s only Adonis that has been thanked?*
  - *How do you think Mrs F felt during the confrontation with Bert’s dad, Mr Conaghan?* Encourage the group to look back at the dialogue and description on pages 170-173, drawing on the techniques they used when exploring the dialogue between Syd and Joseph previously. *Are her feelings explicit in her dialogue and*

actions, or are some feelings hidden behind a show of strength? The children might note the way the dynamics between Mrs F and Bert's shift. When does she seem to have the upper hand? When does he? Why might her tone change near the end ("*she sounded weakened*" - page 173)? What has happened to 'weaken' her stance? What might be the impact of a verb like '*blurting*'? How would you deliver that piece of dialogue?

- Finish the session by reading together and discussing Chapter 28-30 (pages 174-201). Pause at key moments to allow children to respond to what we discover about Joseph's background, including his mother leaving and the impact that has had. They might also consider the ways in which Mrs F behave towards Joseph at this stage. *Does her conduct towards Joseph change during the events in the book so far? If so, in what way? What impact might this have?*
- Look back at Mrs F's speech on page 180-181. *What is she suggesting that Joseph might need? Do you agree with her? Why/why not? Do they agree that "Mrs F was as stubborn as he was" (p181)? Do they think that sentence is Joseph's point of view or the narrator's? They might also draw connections with this sentence from the following chapter: "Joseph's stubbornness was also his greatest strength" (p190). Do they agree or disagree? Why? Is stubbornness a strength? Why/why not? Consider other words we might use as synonyms for stubbornness, e.g. wilfulness, obstinacy, perseverance, determination, resolve, etc.*
- Develop this discussion about the shared trait of 'stubbornness' to draw out other connections between Joseph and Mrs F. Drawing on all of their discussions so far, and the annotations made on their Role on the Wall posters, the children can work together to consider the similarities and differences they have observed so far – in terms of both external *and* internal characteristics, i.e. experiences and behaviour but also personality and character traits. Within their group, children could use a simple visual organiser to capture their ideas, e.g. a Venn diagram.
- This session would be a useful point for the group to summarise the entire story so far and discuss the main obstacles or challenges faced by Joseph and the other characters at this stage. These might include the secret of Joseph's dyslexia and Mr Gryce's upcoming reading test; the bullying behaviour of Bert and Jimmy; the dangers of living in London during the Blitz; his worries for his father in the army; and his fear for what may happen to Adonis. *Do you think all of these issues will be resolved by the end of this story? If not, which do you think are the main obstacles that the book will need to deal with? Why do you think that? What potential resolutions to these problems can you imagine? What would make a satisfying ending for you? Which predictions discussed make most sense in the context of the story, setting and characters so far?*

## Chapter 31 to Chapter 46 (pages 202-304)

- Before the session ask children to read Chapters 31-34 (page 202-230). After reading, allow time for the group to reflect on what they have read, summarising and interpreting the events and how these affect our core characters and advance the plot as we approach the ending. Add key events to the shared storymap and consider:
  - *How do Joseph's feelings about Adonis continue to evolve during this section of the novel? Look again at the passage in which Adonis accepts food from Joseph's hands (page 205-206). Are there any words or phrases that particularly demonstrate their connection? How might this connection affect the end of the story? Why might it be significant that Adonis trusts Joseph? Children might look back at their character notes to consider some of the similarities between Joseph and Adonis. If Adonis can learn to trust Joseph, can Joseph learn to trust too?*
  - *How did you feel reading the scene in which Joseph was being tested? Did you think Joseph and Syd's plan was going to work? You might reread the scene from page 221-224, looking at any words or phrase the children found particularly impactful and discussing some of the ways in which Phil Earle builds tension in that scene, e.g. Gryce leaving him until last; the physical description and figurative language: "*Forcing his tongue into what felt like a knot that he could never untie*"; the intimidation when Gryce "...tap(s)*

*Clarence's tip on his calf, just once*"; Joseph's nerves betrayed by *"wiped at a stray bead of sweat on his nose"*; the rhetorical questions: *"How long until Gryce called him off?"*; and Gryce's reaction to Joseph's achievement - *"smiled thinly"* and *"circled endlessly"*

- Now read together from Chapter 35 until the end of the book. Ensure that you allow time for children to respond to key moments at the end of Chapter 36 and 39 when Joseph learns about his father's death as well as Mrs F's bereavements during and after the First World War, and add key events to the shared storymap.
- As you read the final few chapters, children might wish to pick out and discuss phrases or insights that they find especially effective, or that build on their Role on the Wall observations, or that pick up on the patterns or themes observed in the text so far, such as the imagery of Joseph building a fortress around himself (page 240), or the use of figurative language to describe the ferocity of the bombing at the start of Chapter 38 and again at the start of Chapter 42. They might draw out the impact of Joseph's stubbornness that we explored during the previous session as he commits to his self-appointed role in guarding Adonis *"That was his job, whatever it might cost him"* (page 285) and his assessment of the morality of war time *"This was simply what the war did."* (p284)
- Allow them time and space to summarise and reflect on the way in which the story ends, how the resolution of the story has affected them, and how they feel about the book as a whole:
  - *How do you feel about the way the story ends? How does the author draw everything together? What thoughts are you left with by the resolution of events? Do you have any unanswered questions?*
  - *Do you feel this is the right outcome for Joseph and Mrs Farrelly? Was this an inevitable ending for Adonis? Did you think this was the right place for their story to end? What do you imagine is next for these characters – where do they go from here?*
  - *Looking back on the story as a whole, how do you feel now about the title 'When The Sky Falls'? What does it suggest about the characters, setting, emotions, experiences and events we've been reading about? On the title page, Phil Earle suggests an alternate title: **A is for Adonis**. What elements of the story might this connect with or suggest?*
- In drawing together their overall thoughts, invite children to respond to Aidan Chambers' Basic Questions. These questions give children accessible starting points for discussion about the text as a whole:
  - *Did you enjoy this story? What did you like or dislike?*
  - *What puzzles did it contain?*
  - *What links do you see to other stories you already know, or things that you know about from real-life experience?*
- You might also suggest that they look back through the book and draw out favourite moments and what they particularly like about them. For example, they might pick out the moment when Joseph chooses to enter the cage and physically interacts with Adonis. *Why does he choose to enter the cage? Does he need to or does he want to? How does the author allow us infer Joseph's range of emotions, rather than simply tell us? As a reader, how did you feel when Joseph entered the cage? Were you afraid for Joseph during this moment? Why?*
- In reviews, author Gill Lewis has described the book as **'a story about love and friendship and how animals can connect people in the darkest of times and allow them to heal.'** *Do you think this is an accurate description? If you had to summarise the book succinctly in this way, what would you say about it? Collect the children's ideas on sentence strips to display around a copy of the front cover to display in the class reading corner or school library. Who do you think would enjoy this book? Why? What would you tell them about it to encourage them to read it? What would you hold back, so as not to spoil their reading experience?*

## **After reading:**

- Read the afterword to learn more about Phil Earle's inspiration and process in creating this story. *Why do you think he chose a gorilla as the animal in his story rather than keeping the lion element? How would that change the*



narrative? Is there something significant about the human qualities of an ape?

- Children might express particular interest in the impact of war on zoos and maintaining care of animals in those settings at a time of rationing and reduced staff numbers. If so, they could engage in discussion and debate about keeping and caring for animals during the war, leading to engagement in wider independent reading and research, for example using selected online sources such as the Zoological Society blog about London Zoo during World War 2 (<https://www.zsl.org/blogs/artefact-of-the-month/zsl-london-zoo-during-world-war-two>). The website for Paignton Zoo offers a variety of supportive documents and resources for accompanying a study of World War 2 at KS2 or 3 (<https://www.paigntonzoo.org.uk/education-clubs/wild-at-home-education-activities>)
- Having read the story, children might return to the song lyrics quoted after the dedication page from 'Vane Tempest' by The Lake Poets. Read them aloud. *How do the words make you feel? What do you like about the lyrics? What words or phrases do you find particularly engaging or evocative? How might the ideas in the song connect with the ideas in the book?* You might also choose to listen to the song and respond to the melody, dynamics, tone and emotional resonance of the performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yooouushNys>

### **Other recent and Classic Children's Novels set during World War 2:**

- *Goodnight Mister Tom*, Michelle Magorian
- *Letters from the Lighthouse*, Emma Carroll
- *My Secret War Diary* by Flossie Albright, Marcia Williams
- *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Shirley Hughes
- *War Boy*, Michael Foreman
- *Blackout: 1944*, Tony Bradman
- *Now or Never*, Bali Rai
- *After the War*, Tom Palmer



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