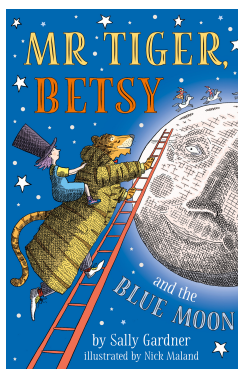


Mr Tiger, Betsy and the Blue Moon
Written by Sally Gardner, illustrated by Nick Maland.
Readers' Notes



Look at the cover. What sort of book do you think this will be?
What do you notice about the illustrations? Do you think Mr Tiger is a friendly character?
Once you have read the book, come back and look at the cover. Does it reflect what happens in the story?



Language

The author begins by explaining that the letters of the alphabet are telling the story. The letters are treated as ‘people’; this is called personification.

Discuss: Where else in the book is there personification?

We often think of letters by the common words that they represent. For example, A is for apple, B is for ball.

Activities: Can you write out the 26 letters of the English alphabet and attribute each a common word or object? Use nouns to do this.

Now try the alphabetical game of adjectives - the Philosopher’s Cat. Take the word ‘cat,’ and give each letter of the alphabet an adjective to describe it. E.g. Angry cat, beautiful cat. How many letters can you do?

In *Mr Tiger, Betsy and the Blue Moon*, the alphabet takes control of the story. It doesn’t let Princess Olaf write her sister out of the history books, and it takes over to explain some good things about Alfonso that he wouldn’t say himself.

Discuss: Why does Sally Gardner use the alphabet as her narrators? Why does Gardner say ‘they were needed for all sorts of other important things, like the daily news.’ (Page 7)

Why is language important?

Other than the news, in which other important communications is language used?

What methods of communication don’t use the alphabet? Are they equally as important?

Think about why people would rewrite history books. Does it matter from whose point of view a story is told?

Activity: Choose a character in the story and tell a chapter from their point of view. E.g. you may wish to tell Chapter 17 from Princess Olaf’s point of view.

Ivan the Giant sends a postcard of friendship to the Gongalongs.

‘Although once he did send a postcard but we couldn’t read his writing.’ (Page 68)

‘This, my dear Gongalongs, is a matter of a misunderstanding between a giant and yourselves.’ (Page 91)

Activity: Can you write Ivan’s postcard to the Gongalongs? What do you think it would have said?

Discuss: How might things have been different if the postcard had reached the Gongalongs?

Activity: Write your own story about an important message that goes missing.

Sally Gardner plays with language throughout her story. Some of the devices she uses are as follows:

- Metaphor - ‘Sometimes happiness is a red balloon, thought Betsy. Round and big enough to lift you off your feet.’ (Page 41)
What is a metaphor? Why does Gardner choose this image for happiness? Can you think of your own metaphor to describe happiness?
Can you write metaphors for the following emotions – sadness, envy, fear, anger, disgust, greed, irritation, hope, love?
- Extended metaphor. What is an extended metaphor? Betsy’s mother is a mermaid, and Gardner uses water and mermaid imagery throughout to extend her ‘sea/mermaid’ metaphor. For example, Betsy’s mother and father ‘agreed to a parting of the waves’ (Page 3). Betsy’s mother tries to remember something but it ‘had swum away from her’ (Page 13). ‘Mermaids, Betsy thought, always were a little watery’ (Page 27). Look at page 14 to see how Gardner uses extended metaphor in her ‘sweetshop of stars’. Pick out the examples.
- Homophones: What is a homophone? Gardner uses this for Mr Tiger’s ‘tail and tale’ (Page 62). Make a list of ten homophones.
- Alliteration: ‘the circus tent, festooned with flags, lit up with a funfair of fairy lights’ (Page 53). What effect does alliteration have on the reader?
- Simile: ‘as delicate as china cups, as strong as cement’ (Page 31). Gardner repeats this in the text – what effect does the repetition have? Does this simile work – it seems to be a contradiction? Can you find other similes in the text? Are they more straightforward?
- Malapropism. What is a malapropism? Gardner uses it for humorous effect, such as in ‘windy house’ (Page 4) and ‘Wait a minnow’ (Page 13). She also changes common expressions to suit her prose – why does she change the phrase ‘down in the dumps’ to ‘down in their cups and saucers’? (Page 76) Can you spot other changes or misappropriated adjectives?
- Maxim: this is a brief statement that contains a piece of wisdom or a rule of behaviour. Mr Tiger repeats: ‘Cats have their secrets and their whiskers, their tales and their tails.’ (Page 62)
And there are truisms in the text: ‘sometimes if you ask the right questions, you get the right answers.’ (Page 67)
Why do you think the author uses these in the text? Does it add to character? To the story?
Can you write your own maxim about your behaviour – a kind of catchphrase for the sort of person you are?

Idiom

Lastly, Gardner uses an enormous amount of idiom within the story.

Discuss: What is an idiom? There is even one in the title of the book. 'Once in a blue moon'.

Activity: What is the meaning of these idioms? Can you find out the origin of these idioms? The first is done for you:

To give a fig: 'it didn't matter a fig' (page 118) – a fig was regarded as a small, valueless thing, so to not give a fig means to not care or be worried about something.

Parting of the waves (Page 3)

Butcher, baker and the candlestick maker (Page 28)

Green with envy (Page 47)

Keeping everything ship-shape (Page 57)

Put on your thinking cap (Page 110)

Drag it through the mud (Page 131)

Feeling blue (Page 158)

A badge of honour (Page 159)

Turn of a sixpence (Page 170)



Structure

The alphabet chooses O to start the story, because it can begin 'Once upon a time.'

Discuss: What is the function of the phrase 'Once upon a time?'

Think about whether it offers familiarity, anticipation, comfort?

Look at the word 'time'. In which 'time' is the story set? Is it not our time? Is it not even in our history? Does it point to a fictional world – a transportation through time?

'Once upon a time' is a signifier that this is a fairy story.

Think about the components of a fairy tale:

- Good triumphing over evil
- Wishes granted
- Imaginary characters such as giants or unicorns
- Takes place in a distant or make-believe land
- Things happen in patterns, often 3s or 7s.
- Contains royal characters
- Features talking animals
- Magical elements
- A happy ending with the problem solved

Activities: Can you identify all these elements within *Mr Tiger, Betsy and the Blue Moon*?

Write a fairy story of your own that includes these elements.

A fairy story has elements that are familiar to our world too.

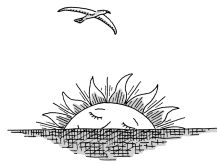
Activity: What in the story is ‘fairy-like’ and what is ‘real’? Draw two columns and fit the features into each.

For example, a toad that talks fits into ‘fairy-like.’ Betsy’s father making ice cream could happen in the ‘real world.’

Discuss: Why do fairy tales include some things that are familiar or ‘real’?

Not only does Sally Gardner use the device of a fairy tale, but she turns some of the elements on their head, subverting common tropes. For example, the giant is friendly (rather than mean), a princess rather than a prince is turned into a frog, another princess is the villain.

Discuss: Why does the author do this? Can you list fairy tales in which the giant is mean, a prince is turned into a frog, the princess is the heroine not the villain?



Setting

Discuss: Think about the setting of the story. The author refers to it as ‘an island left off the map of the world.’ (Page 1) What does it mean if somewhere is unmapped? Why has the author chosen to do this? Is there anywhere in our world that is unmapped?

The author also uses settings of a seaside town, and a circus. Why?

Think about where you live. Is it like Betsy’s house? How is it different? Are there any similarities?

How is the setting important to the story? Think about the use of the ‘island’, the ‘sea’, the ‘ships’. Which other stories are set on islands?

Activity: Look at the illustration on pages 4–5. Does it look like a friendly, enticing place? Try and write a description that matches the illustration. Which colours would you use to colour in this illustration?



Characters

Myrtle the Mermaid

Betsy’s Mum is a mermaid. She stays in the sea but comes to visit on Wednesdays, and eats meals with her tail in a bucket. (Page 8)

Discuss: If your parent/caregiver could be a magical creature, what would you choose and why? Think about how it would make your life different. What special allowances or changes would you need to make to your home?

Activity: If your mum/carer was a mermaid, she would need a bucket for her tail, but what else would she need? Write a non-chronological report about how your life and home would need to be adapted for a mermaid.

Mr Tiger

Mr Tiger is a key character in the book, even appearing in the title. In fact, his name comes first. Why do you think this is?

Discuss: At first Mr Tiger is a mysterious figure.

Activity: Track his character development over the course of the book. What do we find out about him when? You could draw a line graph with spikes to show our growing knowledge. Does he change over the course of the book?

Discuss: Mr Tiger is a circus owner. What difference does being a tiger make to his character? How would he be different if he was a human? How would the plot be different? ‘He wore a smart top hat through which two furry ears stuck out, a bow tie and a tiger skin coat, which was all his own.’ (Page 37)

Think about other tigers in literature. In what way is Mr Tiger similar to the tiger in *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* by Judith Kerr, or *Augustus* by Catherine Rayner, or Tigger in *The House at Pooh Corner* by AA Milne. Look at the poem *Tyger* by William Blake. List the shared characteristics.

Discuss: Is Mr Tiger a good leader? Why? What are the characteristics that make a good leader?

The Moon

Gardner uses personification to make the Moon a character in the novel.

Activity: Does a Blue Moon really exist? ‘Blue moons happen sometime never.’ (Page 25).

Can you find out about the Blue Moon? What about other named moons, such as Harvest Moon, Hunter Moon, and Super Moon? What do these mean? And can you find other named moons?

Activity: ‘Gravity made their [the Gongalong acrobats’] bones weightless’ (Page 154). Why is this? Can you make a poster with non-fiction facts about the moon?

‘It makes me feel like waxing. It makes we want to wane’ (Page 155). What does the moon mean by this?

Activity: Research and then make a chart that shows the phases of the moon. Step outside one evening and see what the moon looks like. Can you track it over the course of a month? Take photographs (with a carer’s permission).

“‘Wait!’” interrupted the moon. “Are you about to say, one small step for a Gongalong and one mighty step for tiger paws?” (Page 151) Why does the moon say this? Who really said ‘One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind’?

Activity: Can you write a biography of Neil Armstrong? Or write a poem about moon exploration?

The Toad, or Princess Albee

Princess Albee has been turned into a toad.

‘They both watched as the toad flicked its long tongue into the ice cream.’ (Page 20)

One of the toad's distinctive features is a long tongue.

Discuss: Does a toad really have a long tongue? What is so special about a toad's tongue? Research the way in which it catches prey, and the 'catapult theory'.

Activity: Look at facts about the common toad. How is it different from a frog? Make a poster about toads, or about the difference between frogs and toads.

Think about other fairy stories that have frogs or toads in them. How many can you come up with as a class?

Ivan the Giant:

'They looked up and up and, finally, appearing out of the mist, was the face of a somewhat woolly giant'. (Page 83)

Discuss: In which other books is there a giant? Is the giant kind? Think about *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *The Selfish Giant* by Oscar Wilde, *The Big Friendly Giant* by Roald Dahl, *The Smartest Giant in Town* by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler. Looking in particular at this last title, can you see any similarities in the stories?

'Now that Ivan the Timid was no longer seated on top of the mountain, the snow-capped peaks could easily be seen from anywhere on the island. It was agreed that the cause of the mist must have been the giant's breath. For since he had come down, the sky had cleared.' (Page 96)

Discuss and investigate: Why does ice and snow form at the top of mountains? How does mist really form?

'We need a new word that will give Ivan strength.' (Page 110). Ivan the Timid is renamed Ivan the Bold.

Discuss: Why do we have names? How can names shape identity? The words 'timid' and 'bold' are adjectives.

Activity: Can you give adjectives to each of the characters in the book? e.g. Alfonso the Worrier.

Activity: Now go around your class and examine your names. Do you think you suit your name? Do you like your name? What would you change it to if you could? Find out if your name has a meaning. And ask your carers why you were given that particular name.

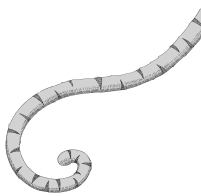
Discuss: Can you think about why the author refers to Betsy's parents as Mum and Dad rather than Myrtle and Alfonso. Does it make a difference to how you think about their characters?

Princess Olaf

'That's because you are not spoiled, said the toad. You see, all the yeses in the world makes no one happy. Not even a princess. It is the word "no", that makes the word "yes" all the more special. Because without a "no", you never realise how lucky you truly are.' (Page 102)

Discuss: Can you think of a time when a yes meant more to you because it had followed lots of no's? Write about what it meant when you were finally answered 'yes' to your desire.

Activity: Compare the character of Princess Olaf to Veruca Salt from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl. What happens to each of them at the end of the books? Do they deserve their fate? Debate with your classmates.



Themes

Size

‘My half-sister, Princess Olaf, believes that only a big person, with big feet, can rule Gongalong Island.’ (Page 24)

‘Ivan went a bit red. ‘It matters little what size you are,’ he said. ‘What matters most is how you feel inside’ (Page 130).

Discuss: Who is right? Does somebody’s size matter?

Activity: Imagine you are very small or very big. Draw a mindmap or brainstorm the words ‘big’ or ‘small’. What words/connotations do you come up with?

What about perspective? The Gongalongs see Ivan the Timid as being very large – a giant. But when Betsy queries them, it turns out the giant is only big in comparison to them. ‘I had a thought – how tall is a giant compared to a Gongalong acrobat?’ (Page 49). Look at the illustration on page 51.

Size can only be understood in comparison with something else. This is why we have measurements. Ivan is measured in comparison to Mr Tiger and a Gongalong.

Activity: Measure your classmates’ heights. Who is the tallest, and who the smallest?

Can you do a measurement activity? Guess which objects in your classroom are smaller than half a metre. Or smaller than a rule? Make a chart of your estimation, and then the real measurement.

“‘After the show is over,” said the moon, “I might be able to climb higher still into the night sky and by doing so become smaller.”” (Page 145)

This is called perspective. The further away something is, the smaller it appears.

Activity: Can you draw a picture that shows perspective? One way of doing this is to split the paper horizontally with a horizon line. Everything above the line is smaller, and everything in front of the line is bigger.



Ice cream and Invention:

Betsy's dad makes ice cream, and creates new flavours. 'Chocolate Cream Wizards', 'Ribble Raspberry Wonder' (Page 5) and 'Myrtle's Minty Mumbo Marvel' (Page 9).

Activity: Can you write a description of each of these flavours?

'It tastes of wishes, of raspberries and cream tea on hot summer days. Then slightly of lemon. Now of macaroons and cakes.' (Page 166)

Activity: Now can you create your own ice cream flavour? And then describe it. Does your ice cream have magic powers? What does it do?

On page 134, Alfonso is given instructions for how to pick the Gongalong berries for his ice cream.

Activity: Can you write your own instructions for making your new ice cream flavour? Think about whether there is any fruit in your ice cream – how would you go about picking it?

Alfonso creates a new machine to pick the berries, and makes up a poem about it. (Page 136 and 138)

Activity: Can you also come up with a new machine? What does it do? Can you draw it?

Now make up a poem about your invention. See Alfonso's for your inspiration. Think about the parts of the machinery - nails, engines, chains. Can you use these types of words in your poem?

Alfonso is worried about getting ice to make his ice cream. 'Dad lay in his cabin, wondering where on Gongalong Island he would find ice. Without it you cannot make ice cream.' (Page 63)

Discuss: How do you make ice. Can water exist in different states of matter? What are these different states? What happens to the particles in water at the different stages?

With your teacher, look at the three different states of matter.

Research: Why does ice feel sticky?

Activity: Try making your own ice cream. With an adult's help, can you make flavoured ice lollies? How about ice cream itself? Look at this resource from the Science Museum and follow the instructions:

<https://learning-resources.sciencemuseum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/SMG-Learning-Activities-Instant-Ice-Cream.pdf>



Appearance and Clothes

'They were much, much smaller than her. Perfect in every way. They were shy and beautifully dressed. All their clothes were brightly-coloured. They had fancy stitching on their shoes and pointy hats.' (Page 42)

Discuss: Can clothes signify somebody's role or job? What about Mr Tiger's silver-topped cane? (Page 54) Or Mr Glory's striped jacket and hat (Page 53).

Activity: Can you make a list of clothes that signify somebody's job. E.g. A pirate's eye patch, a doctor's white coat.

Discuss: Does what someone wears make a difference to them? Does it make a difference to how they feel, or how they are perceived?

'He was dressed in his best suit and Mum wore a sparkle gown, with glitter starfish in her hair. Betsy wore a dress made for her by the Gongalong costume designer. On her feet were gold twinkly pointy shoes.' (Page 177) The characters dress up for special events. Look at the illustration at the chapter head. Can you draw one of these characters larger and colour it in?

Discuss: How it feels to dress up in something special? What would you wear to a party? Do you have a special outfit?

'On her head she wore a crown of red rubies. She made a colourful sight, what with the blue of the circus tent, the green of her skin, the red of her crown.' (Page 116) Princess Olaf wears the blue circus tent as a kind of cape or gown.

Discuss: Why do we dress up royalty? Can you look up the history of the crown?

'Then a jacket with even more pockets, as a jacket without pockets is pointless. Then socks that had been specially knitted for him by sheep. Last, he put on his comfy boots.' (Page 94).

Activity: Look at the two illustrations of Ivan – one on page 85 and one on page 95.

Can you write a comparison of the two images? Why do you think changing what Ivan looks like changes attitudes to him, and alters his own feelings?

'Mr Tiger went back to his cabin and came out with the box of thinking caps that he kept especially for emergencies like this.' (Page 110).

Look at the illustration above the chapter head.

Activity: Can you draw your own thinking cap?

The phrase 'thinking cap' is an idiom. People don't really wear thinking caps. But what is the origin of this idiom? Look up the phrase.



Teamwork:

One of the over-riding messages of the book is teamwork, and courage (which stems from being part of a team or having the support of others).

Discuss: Can you identify different teams within the text?

Activity: Can you explain the importance of being part of a team. Brainstorm with your class the qualities you can get from being part of a team.

Identify which teams you belong to – perhaps a sports team or a group at school?

The Gongalongs are a team, both in terms of their role as acrobats, but also as a people oppressed by Princess Olaf.

‘I’m afraid Princess Olaf has big feet. She has left footprints of destruction everywhere.’ (Page 76).

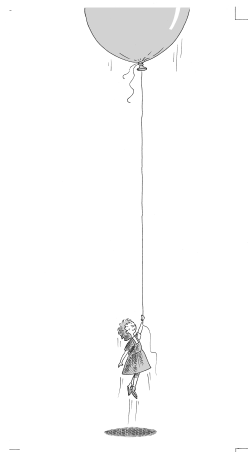
Activity: Look at all the things that Princess Olaf has done to the Gongalongs. Can you write a persuasive letter from them to Princess Olaf, asking her to rethink her actions, and to take down the fence?

‘Loneliness, said Mr Tiger, is a terrible thing and it strikes me, old top, that you have been lonely for too long.’ (Page 88)

Discuss: Who in the text is lonely? Why is that, and how do they become less lonely?

Activity: Can you pair up and take part in partner drawing. This helps communication skills. Stand back to back with your partner. One person gives directions on what to draw, while the other person takes directions and draws. Keep taking turns and see how close you can come to drawing what your partner had in mind.

Activity: Draw outlines of Ivan the Timid and then Ivan the Bold as a class. Make the images big. Use post-it notes to add adjectives that describe his emotions as Ivan the Timid and Ivan the Bold. See if you can track the emotional journey the giant takes. How do his emotions change as he interacts with the different characters in the book?



Wishes:

Part of the fairy tale trope is having magical wishes. But Betsy’s mother does warn ‘Be careful what you wish for.’ (Page 10)

Discuss: Who in the text doesn’t take this advice?

In the story, the characters can make wishes on the Gongalong berry ice cream.

And Betsy wishes upon a star:

‘Closing her eyes, she said, “I wish Mr Tiger and his circus would come tomorrow.”’ (Page 14)

Activity: How many ways do you know to make a wish? Are there superstitions in your family? Can you make a list?



Illustration:

The book is illustrated throughout in black and white.

Discuss: Do the illustrations add to the story? Do they just illustrate the words, or do they add more description and details themselves? Give examples.

Which is your favourite illustration? Is there anything that isn't illustrated that you wish was? There are two distinct types of illustrations in the story. Compare pages 32-33 with the illustration of Betsy on page 30.

Discuss: What is the difference? How many times has Maland done this? What effect does it have?

The illustrator uses cross-hatching in his illustration.

Discuss and Activity: What is cross-hatching? Can you do a drawing that uses cross-hatching?

Look at the illustration on pages 18-19. It shows Alfonso's ice cream vehicle and the ship in the distance.

Discuss: What are the similarities between the two vehicles? Why has Maland done this? Maland has illustrated Gardner's metaphor of happiness (Page 41).

Discuss: How does the illustrator give extra emphasis to the metaphor?

One of Nick Maland's inspirations is the illustrator Edward Gorey.

Activity: Can you look up Gorey's illustrations. Compare with Maland's. Are there any similarities? Can you find Gorey's illustration of a tiger? How does this compare to Mr Tiger?

Look at the pages in which the characters sail to Gongalong Island. The publisher has chosen to show full page seascapes with no words. (Page 58-59, page 70-71)

Discuss: Why do you think this is?

On page 79, the author mentions only the safety features of Mr Tiger's top hat, but it is up to the illustrator to demonstrate them.

Activity: Can you draw another test for the hat?

There is a beautiful full-page illustration of the circus on pages 152-153.

Activity: Can you write your own descriptive passage of watching the Gongalongs perform, based on this illustration? Or you could write a newspaper review of the circus.

Note to teachers:

The original hardback was printed in blue ink and in dyslexie font. The paperback is printed in black ink but the dyslexie font is retained in the paperback as it is an important element of the book.

Page numbers in this document refer to the paperback edition.

Further Reading

Mr Tiger, Betsy and the Sea Dragon by Sally Gardner, illustrated by Nick Maland

The Smallest Girl Ever by Sally Gardner

The Legend of Kevin by Philip Reeve, illustrated by Sarah McIntyre

The Thirteen Clocks by James Thurber

Nell and the Circus of Dreams by Neil Gifford and Briony May Smith

A Boy and a Bear in a Boat by Dave Shelton

Leon and the Place Between by Angela McAllister and Grahame Baker-Smith

Readers' Notes written by Clare Zinkin, Children's Reading Consultant