

TEACHER'S NOTES

HUNTING FOR DRAGONS by Bruce Whatley
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SYNOPSIS

There are generous white spaces, with just a child and a house in Bruce Whatley's new picture book, *Hunting for Dragons*, but the deceptively simple imagery opens up a whole world of the imagination.

The narrator on the cover is clearly on a mission. It's not absolutely certain whether it is a boy or a girl, although there are some clues and when the helmet comes off in the last two spreads it is clearly a girl. She is never named, so she becomes a kind of everychild on a quest. And that quest is for excitement and magic, in the form of dragons.

But there aren't many of those in a suburban house. And in the opening lines of the text we learn that the story takes place on a weekend. Weekends can be surprisingly lonely if there are no friends around, and you've played with all your toys and haven't got much money to buy new entertainments. So, suited up in armour that she has constructed from household objects in the kitchen and garage, the narrator explores the garden and all the corners of the house, looking for adventure.

Along the way, there are dragons hiding in the illustrations, but the biggest surprise of all comes in the final scenes, where we see a dragon playing on the narrator's bed. The reader is left enjoying the joke, but wondering about the nature of reality and the imagination.

THEMES

Different ways of seeing and the reality of the child's imagination are favourite themes in children's picture books. Many adults can remember that when they were children, 'telling stories' and 'imagining things' were euphemisms for telling lies. But today we understand the imagination differently. What we imagine can often seem more 'real' than the everyday life around us. (And conversely, filmmakers, photographers, illustrators often show us how 'unreal' our familiar environment can appear.)

Changes in technology have heightened the irony. By framing and cropping an image, by Photoshopping, by switching the context, we can change the properties of an image and create a new reality.

But one important theme in Bruce Whatley's work is that we don't need to own expensive technology in order to imagine a new reality. We simply need to use our eyes. They can transform the most mundane experience into magic.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce Whatley seemed to literally burst onto the children's literature scene with the exuberant comedy and brilliant draughtsmanship of his first book, *The Ugliest Dog in the World* in 1992. This was no apprenticeship early work: it demonstrated all the confidence of an artist who had been producing picture books for years. Actually, at the time, Bruce was working in television

and advertising, but he says that, looking back now, he realises that from the beginning he was writing children's stories – he was just in the wrong medium.

Perhaps best known for his collaboration with Jackie French on the contemporary classic *Diary of a Wombat* and other books, Bruce has illustrated stories he has written himself, or with his wife Rosie Smith, or stories by other writers such as French, and his picture books are read and loved around the world. There are so many that it's difficult to choose the best, but among the many titles that have attracted praise from the judges are *Looking for Crabs*, *Detective Donut* and *The Wild Goose Chase*, *The Ugliest Dog in the World* and *Pete the Sheep*.

BRUCE WHATLEY SAYS

'In many ways *Hunting for Dragons* is a sequel to *Clinton Gregory's Secret*, exploring childhood dreaming, imaginings and adventures. Adding the thought of seeing things that aren't there – possibly because you really would like them to be. This adds a puzzle element to the interpretation of the text with a "can you spot the dragon?" element on each page.'

'The pleasure in creating books like this is to make kids smile (hopefully) and to encourage creativity. With a little imagination things aren't always what they seem and all kinds of things are possible.'

'A constant theme in my work is low-tech. I love using the textures of rope and wood and everyday items. The medieval theme was perfect for this story, especially as it featured a dragon! Originally it was set in modern day, but the pull to giving it the whole knights-and-castle feel was too great.'

'The illustrations are done in watercolour, or at least gouache used thinly like watercolour. In some ways it is my natural medium, one that I have grown up with and used for a long time. It's the same technique I used in *Alpha Quest*.

'In the past I have found it easy to get wrapped up in technique and lose sight of the function of the illustration. Getting each hair just right or the proportions accurate. Sometimes a drawing can be technically spot-on, but somehow still fall apart and just not work. So now I tend to concentrate on the narrative content of the illustration and less on each brush stroke.'

'My favourite illustration in the book is the laundry scene. Possibly because it was the first illustration I did to establish the character and show the concept of the book. Also if the reader hasn't picked up on the fact that there are dragons on each page by this point - this is where you realise.'

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Show your students the front cover of *Hunting for Dragons*. Ask, 'Where do you think this book is set? What kind of story are you expecting?'
2. Now show them the back cover and read the blurb. Ask, 'Can you see any dragons? If so, where are they?'
3. Tell your students that this is a book about someone who is looking for an adventure on the weekend. Ask them what they do if there is no one to play with and there are no new games and they are bored.
4. From the title, this is clearly a book about dragons. 'What other books have you read about dragons or what movies have you seen? What happens in them? How do they make you feel?'
5. Ask, 'If you went hunting for dragons, where would you look? Would you expect to find any? What would you do with a dragon if you caught one?'

6. As you read, stop at the fifth double spread (the one with the words ‘But those ones are hard to catch.’) Ask, ‘What is happening in this picture? What has happened to the magic here?’
7. Read the book up to the point where the narrator stops outside the bedroom door. Ask, ‘What will there be in the bedroom?’ Read right to the end and ask the students whether there was really a dragon in the narrator’s bedroom. If they say no, ask them why we can see a dragon on the girl’s bed. She has taken her helmet off in this picture, and we can see the truth – that the narrator is really a girl. So does that mean that this picture of the dragon on the bed is also the truth that has been there all along?
8. Read the book through again, letting the students look closely at each picture. Use the smartboard, or blackboard, to make a list as the students brainstorm the objects in the book that they would describe as toys or entertainments.
9. Now choose one double spread and get the students to make a list of the ordinary everyday objects that become part of a dragon or the dragon’s world.
10. Ask your students who guessed that the narrator was a girl. Say, ‘Which parts of the illustrations gave you the clues?’
11. Although we recognize some images in *Hunting for Dragons* from ordinary suburban houses, some features of the narrator’s house are a bit unusual to start with – even before her imagination gets to work on them. Ask the students to help you make a list of those features.
12. Ask, ‘What other books have you read where ordinary objects change their appearance, where there are surprising images hiding in the illustrations, or where ordinary objects are used to tell a story of the imagination?’ (*Bamboozled; Changes, Changes; Private Zoo; Drac and the Gremlin; Whistle Up the Chimney; The Mysteries of Harris Burdick; Piggybook* – there are lots of them!) Read one to the class, and ask them to compare the ways illustrations are used in both books.
13. Ask the students to draw a picture of their room at home, or some other room, and use their imagination to make new images out of the ordinary objects they can see there.
14. Assemble a collection of ordinary found objects – bits of bark, rocks, wood, scraps of fabric, lids, packets or boxes, string, wool – whatever you like, along with glue, wire, pipe cleaners, Velcro dots and other resources.

Ask the class to look at them and make suggestions of a sculpture they can imagine constructing out of these objects. It might be a giant, a monster, a dragon – or something more contemporary. Get the class to appoint a project manager or art director and that person will allow each student to select a piece and add it to the sculpture.

OR

Assemble a collection of found objects, such as those suggested above, and allow each student to select one. Ask them to look at the object for several minutes in silence, and then write an imaginative poem inspired by the object they have chosen.