TEACHER NOTES

By Janet McLean

Title: *Captain Congo and the Crocodile King*

Author: Ruth Starke

Illustrator: Greg Holfeld

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Author:

Ruth Starke is a full-time writer, with over 17 books published since she began writing in 1992. She also works part-time at the Flinders University of South Australia, and at Adelaide TAFE, teaching English and creative writing. Before becoming a writer Ruth worked in many different jobs - of which the most interesting, she says, were selling French perfume in Harrods, cooking on the radio, taking tourists to Kashmir, and interviewing Grand Prix drivers. Ruth's books include *NIPS XI* (an Honour Book (Younger Readers) in the 2001 CBC Awards), *Orphans of the Queen* (short-listed for both the 2005 NSW and Queensland Premiers' Awards, winner of an Aurealis award, and *Coming Out*, a CBC Notable Book (1998).

Illustrator:

Greg Holfeld was born in Canada and moved to Australia in 1991 after several years of travelling and country-hopping. He has spent much of his career as an animator and cartoonist. In between directing and producing his own animated films, he works as a freelance animator with an Adelaide production house, and a book illustrator. He has illustrated several titles by Working Title Press including *The Perfect Pet*, *Wolf's Sunday Dinner* and *You Must be Joking!* His latest book *Captain Congo and the Crocodile King* is partly inspired by Greg's love of the Tintin comics (and his ability to draw gorillas and penguins), and partly from his happy memories of being a *"comic-crazy 8-year-old",* and wanting to share the pleasure with today's young readers.

SYNOPSIS

Created in comic-book format this is a story of adventure and intrigue. The heroes, Captain Congo and his trusty assistant, Pug, accept a challenge from the Agency to search for Professor Parkinson Perky who has gone missing in Abyssinia while searching for the Treasure House of the Queen of Sheba. Captain Congo is well

prepared for any dangers they encounter along the way, and following a series of narrow escapes and exciting skirmishes, they rescue the professor *and* find some lost treasure. They leave Africa wondering where their next assignment will take them.

WRITING STYLE

Captain Congo and the Crocodile King is a graphic novel /picture book or, as the Illustrator of the book Greg Holfeld calls it, a comic book. He says, *"I don't like calling them graphic novels. It sounds pretentious to me, like calling lollies confectionary…*" Creating a comic book is very much a collaborative process between the writer and the illustrator, combining words and images in a very specific way. In a comic book devices such as image panels, gutters, speech balloons and boxes, are used to relate the story. Ruth Starke says before she wrote Captain Congo she had barely read a graphic novel, and she had *"never given a thought to writing one."* So this book was a challenge, forcing her *"out of her comfort zone".* For a writer a comic book is not just about putting words into speech balloons. *Captain Congo and the Crocodile King* is a sequential narrative incorporating plot, characters, and setting. Ruth Starke has created an exciting adventure story with heroes and villains, danger and courage, humour and a satisfying ending. Most of the language used in this book is carried in speech balloons indicating the conversation and thoughts of characters. In this way the reader gathers information about settings, personalities, feelings, what is happening, what may happen and what has happened in the past. For example: p15 *"From what I heard around town, Perky's driver and guides were frightened by giant crocodiles. They ran off and left the Professor to his fate."* Boxes provide space for captions that can show time shifts and transitions, (*Later…, At dinner that evening…, Several days later…"),* introduce new scenes, and provide information that isn't obvious through what the characters are saying or thinking. An example is the asterisked comment on page 43 about the international looting of ancient treasures and artefacts.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Greg Holfeld used Ruth Starke's written narrative as a blueprint to plan the layout for *Captain Congo and the Crocodile King.* Each page is divided into a series of panels. Gutters separate the panels. Each panel frames an episode or incident from the story. The artist works through a number of stages to develop the drawings for each

panel. First the pictures are sketched out roughly in pencil. The pencil lines are then drawn over with waterproof black ink. The final stage is to add the colour. This can be done by hand using watercolour or airbrush techniques, although today comic book artists often work on computers using digital imaging programs. The artist chooses which episodes to illustrate, although this is usually decided in close collaboration with the writer. The size and number of panels on each page varies depending on the specific incidents that are being depicted and the pace of the story. Greg uses different techniques to guide the reader's eye. For example: on page 6 five panels are used. The top row and the middle rows place two small panels between two wider panels. The smaller panels are close-ups, drawing attention to Pug's surprise at finding a scorpion in his bed. The last two panels are wider (the last panel spread across the whole page) as Pug frantically attacks the scorpions. Greg also uses a range of visual techniques to depict how the characters are feeling. For example on the same page, consider Pug's body language and facial expressions, and the action lines and jagged splats as Pug brandishes his umbrella. Using traditional comic book techniques Greg has created a variety of compelling characters, including a larger than life gorilla, the heroic and always-well-prepared Captain Congo; his *"occasionally sardonic but stalwart sidekick in the form of a King penguin"*(this is how Greg sees Pug); the gawky, fearful Professor who needs rescuing; and the sinister scoundrel who stalks them from the start of their journey.

DISCUSSION POINTS AND FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

- This story is set in Abyssinia, a country now known as Ethiopia. Find out more about Abyssinia / Ethiopia.
- The map on the endpapers helps you pinpoint where the action is taking place. As you read through the book refer to the map to plot the heroes' journey.
- Ruth Starke wanted her characters to have an African jungle adventure, with steam boats, rivers, and huge and dangerous crocodiles. However, in an early draft she sent her *"intrepid sleuths steaming down a river in a part of Abyssinia that was total desert, not a river in sight.* - Aksum in the north. At what point in the story did she send Congo and Pug off in a totally different direction? How did she do this?
- Find out more about the desert region in the north and the jungles of the south.
- Imagine what kind of adventure Congo and Pug could have had in the desert. Create your own story about an adventure in the desert.

- Choose one character to follow through the story. What do you find out about the character? Consider what the character says or thinks. Look carefully at the drawings. How does the body language and facial expressions add to your understanding of the character.

- Talk about and research the different graphic elements that are used in comic books
    - Speech balloons – different types are used to signify different kinds of language, eg speech, thoughts, screams, whispers.
    - Boxes for captions – what kind of information do these contain?
    - Panels – how does the artist use the layout, the size and the number of panels help to create the story
    - Gutters – these divide the panels
    - Lettering – different styles of lettering may be used for titles and sounds

- Make your own comic strip or comic book. Remember to include heroic deeds, danger, intrigue and of course humour.
    - Write a story with characters, setting, and plot.
    - Decide which scenes should be included.
    - Choose a panel layout for each page.
    - Sketch the scenes into the panels.
    - When you are happy with the sketches, go over the pencil lines with a black ink line.
    - Add colour. Use watercolour, felt tip pens, crayons, or coloured pencils.
    - Don't forget to decide where the speech balloons, boxes, etc will be placed – leave room for them.
    - Finally write in the words – dialogue in speech balloons, captions in boxes.

- Investigate how comics can be created using computer programs

- Talk about how Captain Congo uses his wits (and his amazing strength, of course) to get out of dangerous situations, and to rescue Professor Perky. In the end the only person who may have a sticky end is the scoundrel who has been stalking them so he could steal the treasure for himself.

- Find out more about the art of comic book writing and illustrating.

- Talk about your favourite comics