

Classroom Resources



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The Boy and the Elephant

Freya Blackwood

BOOK SUMMARY

The powerful new picture book from Greenaway Medallist and seven-time CBCA winner, Freya Blackwood.

The boy lives in a city, where everything is fast and loud. But amidst the bustle and the noise, the boy has a secret...

In the overgrown lot next to his apartment building, deep within the green, he has a friend.

But one day progress arrives, bringing with it plans for something new, and the boy must find a way to save his friend before it's too late...

From award-winning illustrator and storyteller Freya Blackwood comes a magical and tender wordless picture book about the world we live in and our ability to change it.

KEY LEARNING OUTCOMES

- ACELA1483
- ACELT1800
- ACELT1798

THEMES

- Belonging
- Identity
- Visual Literacy

Recommended Reading Ages: 3+

Resources Created For: Middle and Upper Primary

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Classroom Resources

Before Reading

The imagination, creating and creativity

1. Discuss this quote by Albert Einstein: 'Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution.'
 - a. What are your favourite imaginary stories?
 - b. Who are your favourite imaginary figures?
 - c. Why do we love imaginary stories and worlds?
 - d. How does our imagination help us?
 - e. What can we do in our imaginations and see and feel in imaginative stories that we can't in real life?
 - f. Why is the imagination important?
2. Ask each student to create a drawing of an imaginary figure and give the figure a special, magical power or object. The magic power or object could be:
 - o A wand
 - o A broom
 - o An invisibility cloak
 - o A time travelling machine
 - o An ability to heal an injury
 - o An ability to talk to animals
 - o Superpowers – run fast or fly

Ask each student to present their picture to the class and explain why they chose a particular power.

3. Inspiration for stories can come from anywhere and can strike at any moment. It can come from memory, and other stories. Writing and creating takes time and is a process that goes backwards and forwards as a creator constructs a new work that is made up of elements and ideas from the past and the present. Author and illustrator Freya Blackwood was inspired to write this story from sketches, and a book she had read in her childhood.

She said, 'In one sketch for "hide and seek", I hid an elephant in the form of a tree, or a tree in the form of an elephant. I liked the idea, and was reminded of a picture book from my childhood called *Anno's Animals* by Mitsumasa Anno. Slowly a story gathered shape, developed over a few years through many drawings, while working on other projects. At random moments, ideas and solutions occurred to me and eventually I had the book sketched out in storyboard form.'

Read the class a picture book that you loved as a child without showing them the pictures.

- a. Invite the class to create an A3 picture, based on one scene or idea from your story.
- b. Ask students what connections they made between the text they heard and the one they created.
- c. Following the discussion, ask them to do another draft of their picture – taking one idea from the discussion to create a new work.

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The importance of relationships

Relationships with family members, adults, animals, places, friends and other members of a community play a key role in building our identity. Relationships help us define who we are and what is important to us and ultimately how we belong.

1. Ask students to draw a picture of who they are and the relationships which are important to them. Ask them to draw and write about:
 - a. Who is important to you?
 - b. What place is important to you?
 - c. What place would you want to protect?
 - d. Do you have an important animal in your life? How do you feel about them?Write a 10-line poem about a place, person or animal that is important to you.

After Reading

Features of storytelling

People tend to remember stories, images, feelings, and sounds more than individual facts.

1. What are the most memorable aspects of *The Boy and the Elephant*?
2. What is the lasting image that stays in the mind of the reader?
3. What is the most important relationship in this story?
4. How do you feel after reading this story? Why?

Ask students to bring in an object from home, which represents an important story to them. Invite them to write a short 300-word story about the object. Illustrate the story and share it with the class.

Telling a story with no words

In most stories, even those told in picture books, words are an important part of how the narrative is conveyed. However, in *The Boy and the Elephant*, Freya Blackwood uses only pictures to tell her story. Despite this, it is easy to 'read' the story.

2. Ask students to write, in their own words, the story that is told in *The Boy and the Elephant*.
 - a. Try to be as descriptive as possible, while staying true to the original story.
3. Now, if possible, ask students to share their version of the story with someone who doesn't know *The Boy and the Elephant*.
 - a. Ask the person they have shared it with how the story has made them feel.
 - b. Then have students share the picture book with this person.
 - How has this version of the story made them feel?
 - Which version of the story has had the greater impact on them?
 - Ask them why they think the picture book had a much stronger impact on them.
4. As a class, discuss the responses they received during their 'experiment'.
 - a. What kind of responses did they get while completing Activity 3 in this section?
 - b. Why do students think that some stories are much more powerful when they are told through pictures rather than words?
 - Is it only to do with the skill of the illustrator, or is it also to do with the kind of story being told?

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Imagery, symbols and emotion

Images and symbols communicate feelings, emotions and ideas quickly and powerfully. Great communicators use them all the time. They are particularly important in a book like *The Boy and the Elephant*, which doesn't use any words to tell its story.



1. What is so powerful about this image? Why?
2. What feelings does it convey? How?
3. What feelings or qualities do trees symbolise or evoke? Why?
4. What feelings or qualities do elephants symbolise or evoke? Why?
5. Do you think that adding words to this would have added anything to the strong sense of connection and belonging that is communicated in this spread? Why/why not?
6. Does the image remind students of any other image?



Madonna and Child, Leonardo da Vinci



Photo by Hu Chen on Unsplash

Ask students to describe the relationships in these pictures and what feelings they evoke.

1. How important is gaze, size, position and bodily connection and why?
These words will help generate discussion: tender, kind, love, caring, compassionate, gentle, humane, protective, nurturing, wisdom.
2. Ask students to create a similar image using these pictures above as inspiration.

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3. Have a class discussion about the following questions:
 - a. What do you think is Freya Blackwood's purpose in telling this story?
 - b. What would she like readers to think about or feel while reading this story?
 - c. What do images and symbols add to the story?Invite students to write a 200-word news story about a grove of trees being cut down on a block of land in a city.
 - o Compare the news story to *The Boy and the Elephant* – which one is more powerful? Why?
4. Ask students to select the spread or image from the book which best demonstrates key relationships in the story. Once that has been determined, as a class examine the following:
 - o Shape – familiar shapes, geometric shapes
 - o Colours – primary, secondary, how colour is used to contrast between day/ night – real world/imaginary world
 - o Lines – curved, straight, wavy, zigzag, broken
 - o Space – background, foreground
 - o Symbols – crosses, elephants, trees
 - o Relationships – the distance between people and objects; gaze; the relative size; one character looking up (or down) at the other (power relationships) or at the reader; facial expressions and body gesture; extreme close ups.Ask students to write a short paragraph on how Freya Blackwood uses colours, formation, framing, gestures, symbols, positioning and the landscape to convey ideas and encourage feelings about relationships and connection?

Invite students to create their own page in a style similar to Freya Blackwood's to communicate a key relationship in their life.

The boy and his environment

Throughout *The Boy and the Elephant*, we see a contrast in the types of environments that the boy interacts with. There are the highly urban streetscapes and schoolyard, and then there is the wild beauty of the vacant lot next to his home.

1. Compare the spread of the boy in the schoolyard with the spread of the boy entering the vacant lot.
 - a. In which spread does he look more 'at home'?
 - b. How does Blackwood demonstrate the boy's sense of belonging?
 - o Comment on the use of colour, facial expression and gesture, and framing in your response.
 - c. In the spread that makes the boy appear more isolated, what techniques does Blackwood use to show this? (Refer to the techniques discussed in your previous response.)
2. Go back through *The Boy and the Elephant* and look for all the clues that show the reader that the boy feels a strong connection with the natural environment.
3. Have a look at the spread where the boy discovers that his friends in the vacant lot are in danger. Identify the techniques that Freya Blackwood has used to reflect the change in tone (feeling) about how the boy feels about his special place. (You might like to focus on the techniques students have been asked to comment on previously.)
 - a. Compare this spread to the spread where the boy is trying, in vain, to save the elephant. How is the tone continued here?
 - o Are the same techniques used?

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Classroom Resources

- b. Now move on to the two spreads where the boy realises that the elephant has come alive and left the lot. How does the tone change?
 - What techniques does Blackwood use here?
 - Are they the same or different as the previous spreads?
 - What is the effect of this?
- c. Finally, look at the spread of the boy guiding his friends to safety through the city at night.
 - This could have been a scary scene, and yet it's not. How would you describe the emotions depicted in this spread?
 - Identify and describe the effect of two visual techniques in this spread.
4. Turn to the final two spreads, where it's revealed where the boy has led his friends.
 - a. Describe the emotions that are created, and the techniques that are used to convey them.
 - b. Why do you think the boy has chosen to bring his friends here?
 - Write a paragraph giving evidence to support your ideas.
5. What do you think Freya Blackwood might be trying to say about the importance of nature and green spaces in the urban environment (and/or the importance of the natural environment in general)?
 - a. Write an essay giving evidence to support your ideas.
 - Students might like to look at their previous answers for this section to help them compose a response.

About the Author and Illustrator

Freya Blackwood is a multi-award-winning illustrator and writer. Her picture books are beloved for her warm and perceptive drawings. Since publishing her first picture book in 2003, Freya has worked with writers such as Libby Gleeson, Margaret Wild, Jan Ormerod, Nick Bland and Danny Parker.

In 2010, Freya won the UK's most prestigious prize for illustrators, the Kate Greenaway Medal, for her book *Harry and Hopper*. And in 2015 she did what no other creator has ever done, taking out three CBCA Book of the Year awards in a single year. *The Unwilling Twin* was shortlisted for Picture Book of the Year in the 2021 CBCA Awards.

Freya lives in Orange, New South Wales, with her daughter, Ivy.

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