

Teacher Notes

Bob Graham

Characteristics of his work

- Familiar settings
- Humour
- Endearing characters
- Stories with happy outcomes
- Pictures filled with observational details
- Simple, sequential texts
- Dialogue

Themes

- Family relationships
- Minutiae of everyday life
- Growing up
- Self-identity
- Difference
- Pets

Author and illustrator Bob Graham goes to the heart of children's experiences, creating gentle dramas from familiar situations. He creates an instantly recognisable world within which children immediately feel secure.

Everyday experiences

Most of his stories focus on a world filled with domestic clutter and peopled with sturdy characters - disheveled mums and dads, cuddly pets and boisterous babies. Going to school, acquiring a pet, needing a security blanket – these are just some of the everyday situations which he draws upon.

Words and pictures

The text is simple and linear, complemented by spontaneous, humorous pictures in a variety of shapes and sizes. Bob makes full use of the comic strip style. Figures, characteristically, are finely honed, reduced to essential features – dots for eyes, a line for a nose, an occasional splash of red for a mouth. Posture, gesture and, often, dress, provide emotive content and, most important, humour. Pace and narrative are conveyed through the pictures in a constant play on perspective - from close-up to middle distance and long shot—and an ever-changing number of frames per page.

Age range

The Red Woollen Blanket, Has anyone here seen William?, Brand New Baby and *Let's Get a Pup!* are more suited to Reception and Year 1 children while stories such as *Jethro Byrde Fairy Child, Rose Meets Mr Wintergarten, Grandad's Magic, Queenie the Bantam, Max* and *Buffy an Adventure Story* are also ideal Year 2 children.

The Red Woollen Blanket

A cuddly teddy, a knitted dog, a plastic duck and a red woollen blanket accompany new-born baby Julia home from hospital. The toys are gradually discarded but the blanket stays on, exposed to everyday hazards and assuming a variety of roles – at once a cape, a shelter, a slide and a companion. By the time Julia starts school, the blanket is reduced to a threadbare rag the size of a postage stamp.

On her first day at school, she takes the blanket with her for courage. She soon finds herself engrossed in the activities around her – and the blanket is forgotten.

The story treats a familiar experience with humour and sensitivity. Comic situations, such as the dog chewing the blanket or mum vacuum-cleaning it, are deftly – and gently – portrayed. Speech bubbles add further layers of interest.

Activities

- With the children, look at the end-papers for clues about who owns the blanket.
- Introduce children to the word ‘character’.
- Compare both sets of end-papers and encourage the children to describe and then compare them.
- Introduce children to the purpose of speech bubbles – a way of presenting dialogue.
- With the children, make a list of adjectives to describe Julia’s blanket.

Has anyone here seen William?

William is the toddler of the family, and just like any other child his age, he can’t keep still. He’s always on the go – whether crawling or taking a few faltering steps – accompanied by his wind-up toy bear. Of course, he’s constantly getting into mischief – from eating the daffodil heads to bringing down the saucepans. As he learns to walk properly, and goes farther afield, the situation deteriorates. ‘Where is William?’ is the family’s constant refrain. The story comes to a delightful conclusion as both William and his bear wind down.

Activities

- Predict with the children the outcome of the story.
- Read the story with a small group and encourage them to read the speech bubbles. Constant repetition of the words contained within the bubbles will help to build reading confidence.
- Point out the use of the question mark.
- Why, do the children suppose, the author places the questions at the bottom of the page? Does turning the page create suspense?

Brand New Baby

There's a great deal of expectation in the family. Mrs Arnold is going to have a baby. Siblings Wendy and Edward decide on names, and Dad prepares the baby clothes. Dad takes the children to the hospital to meet their new brother. In Wendy and Edward's view, the baby is unimpressive even though he manages to overturn everyday routines. Gradually the children learn to accept him and he becomes part of the family.

This humorous story encapsulates the gamut of feelings, often contradictory – superiority, hostility, boredom, impatience – that older siblings experience with a new baby.

Activities

- Look at the end-papers with the children and ask them to suggest what the story might be about.
- Ask the children, in small groups or individually, to use the pictures as prompts before they read the text. Suggest to them that the pictures convey a lot of information and expand on the text.

'Let's Get a Pup!'

Now that Tiger the cat is dead, Kate wants a puppy. Her parents are as enthusiastic as she, so off they go to the rescue centre where they find all manner of dogs – happy dogs and sad dogs, sniffers and snarlers. But Dave is the one that catches their attention. He is boisterous, cute, small and brand new – the opposite of old Rosy, who is large, dignified and exceedingly well-mannered. They choose Dave, reluctantly leaving Rose behind. But not for long!

Activities

- Ask the children for a list of adjectives to describe Dave and Rosy. For example from reading the text and looking at the pictures, we know that Rose is old, grey and broad as a table. What else might she be? Children can use adjectives used in the text or make up their own using the picture clues.
- Pick out the rhyming words to describe the dogs. Can the children compose their own rhyming descriptions?
- Ask the children to extend the story and write about life with the family, from Rose's point of view.
- Point out that differently sized type faces are used in the text. Why is the larger size used? When is it used? Does it help to emphasise key moments in the story?
- Does the larger type face affect the way we read the story aloud?
- Using the pictures as prompts, can the children describe Kate's parents?
- Why is the story title within quotation marks?

Jethro Byrde Fairy Child

Annabelle's Dad doesn't believe in fairies. But this doesn't prevent Annabelle from looking for them. One sunny Saturday while she is in the garden, among the weeds and the concrete, a fairy falls on her toy taxi cab. He introduces himself as Jethro Byrde, a fairy child. Next, a tiny van containing his family falls from the sky. Annabelle invites them to tea, and the two families meet – only Annabelle's father still can't see them. After a music and dance performance, the Byrde family set off for the Fairy Travellers Picnic, much against Jethro's wishes. As a memento, he gives Annabelle a watch telling fairy time. Sadly, Annabelle sees them off in their van, flowers spluttering from the tailpipe as it takes off into the sky.

This charming story juxtaposes two worlds – Annabelle's, peopled with fairies and adventure, and her parents more mundane existence, with no room for fairies!

Activities

- Ask the children to describe the setting - a garden full of weeds and concrete - would they expect fairies to visit there?
- Ask the children to change the ending of the story so that Annabelle accompanies the fairies to the picnic. What happens there?

Rose meets Mr Wintergarten

Rose Summers and her family move into their new house and immediately set about turning it into a haven of laughter and happiness, colour and flowers. Early every morning the family greets the sun as it spills its light over their plot. Oddly, the sun never reaches the large house next door, which remains dank and cold, surrounded by hostile, spiky foliage. It belongs to old Mr Wintergarten, who – rumour has it – owns a dog as fierce as a wolf and a saltwater crocodile to frighten trespassers. But is he, in reality, as miserable as people suggest?

Reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's *The Selfish Giant*, the story is perfect for raising moral issues such as being kind and the effects of prejudice on other people's lives.

This is a beautifully crafted story with larger than life characters and a fully developed plot in which symbolism of words and pictures is central.

Activities

- Look at the significance of Rose Summers' name. What sort of person would the children expect her to be? And Mr Wintergarten?
- Explore with the children the way Graham uses colour. Glowing reds, yellows and green when depicting the Summers family, greys and browns for Mr Wintergarten.
- Discuss the settings – empty rooms and dreary garden for Mr Wintergarten, decorative rooms and flower-filled garden for the Summers family.
- Ask the children to look beyond the story and think of possible reasons for Mr Wintergarten's meanness.
- How does the reader know that Mr Wintergarten is happier after his encounter with Rose and her mum?
- Ask the children to describe, either orally or in writing, the changes that Mr Wintergarten makes to his house and garden.

Grandad's Magic

Grandad knows how to make a napkin appear from thin air and chocolates from under Rupert's collar. Julia is so impressed that she too wants to learn a trick or two. One Sunday lunchtime, after showing off her new accomplishment of juggling three toys in the air, Grandad responds in kind. He attempts his best trick of all - whipping the tablecloth from a laden table. Unfortunately, his feat doesn't quite go to plan!

Activities

- Look at the cover together and predict the story.
- Familiarise children with the language of time. Point out that the story takes place over a period of time, indicated through words and phrases such as 'Then', 'the following Sunday', 'Just before lunch', 'Later'. Encourage the children to use these connectives in their own writing.

Queenie the Bantam

Caitlin's Dad rescues a bantam from the lake and takes her home. The family names her Queenie, and she soon makes herself comfortable in the basket of Bruno the dog. Shortly afterwards, the family returns Queenie to her proper home – the farm over the hill from the lake. Bruno retrieves his basket, and life returns to normal. Or does it?

Running parallel to Queenie's story lies another – that of Mum's developing pregnancy and the birth of Caitlin's brother.

Pace and vitality are conveyed through pictures of varying sizes, ranging from full-page to eight per page. Humour comes across through the humdrum details of family life – Mum in the bath or with her feet up, Dad awkwardly holding a pair of knitting needles, toys scattered all over the floor.

Activities

- Queenie has a long way to go to reach her proper home. What might she be thinking along the way?
- Encourage the children, in small groups, to retell the story from Bruno's point of view.
- Using a whiteboard, chart the changes in Bruno's feelings towards Queenie.

Max

Baby Max lives in an ordinary street in an ordinary town. But there ends the similarity with other babies. He lives in a bright yellow house shaped like a streak of lightning – and, more important, he's the son of superheroes. Dressed in red boots, a cape and a mask, his parents fly around the world, tracking down thieves and bullies. Max is expected to follow in their footsteps. Alas, no amount of cajoling and bouncing him into the air convinces him to learn to fly. Only when a baby bird falls from its nest does he change his mind.

Skillfully interwoven into this very funny fantasy story are issues of identity, bullying and difference. Bravery and heroism, the author points out, are equally valuable, whether applied to large-scale or small causes. Suspense is built through the pictures – in the juxtaposition of large full-page scenes and sequences of frames which demand to be read either from left to right or from top to bottom.

Activities

- Discuss in small groups, in what ways Max is the same as other children and in what ways he is different.
- Ask the children to imagine other super heroic actions Max might accomplish, apart from rescuing birds.
- Why are the pictures depicting Max at school lacking in colour?

Buffy an Adventure Story

Buffy the circus performer is a scrap of a dog, but able, nonetheless, to perform wondrous tricks. He can make magic, tap dance and play the harmonica. He is so talented that his master, Brillo the Magician, becomes jealous and throws him out into the big wide world. Buffy sets off to make his fortune. He fails miserably at all he tries - being a sheep dog, a cattle dog, a kitchen dog, a guard dog – until he realises that he must do what he does best, be himself.

Characterisation is superb, portrayed through both words and pictures. His will to succeed never falters while his disappointments - and joy - are fully captured in the illustrations through gesture, posture and ever-changing facial expressions.

Activities

- Predict with the children the content of the story, based on the end-papers.
- Ask the children to describe, in words or pictures, Buffy's adventures.