

## **TEACHER'S NOTES FOR *LEAF***

**By Stephen Michael King**

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**STEPHEN MICHAEL KING** has always loved drawing. When he became partially deaf at nine he found communicating with people difficult. Drawing and daydreaming became his escape.

Stephen worked as an assistant in the children's section of a library. He often read to groups of kids and parents, and as a result always imagines kids and parents together reading his books. He also worked in animation and in the art department of a publishing firm. These days, he lives on a coastal island near Sydney with his family and pets and fits his freelance work in around them.

He is inspired by people and animals he knows, and the work of illustrators such as Maurice Sendak, Bob Graham, Edward Ardizzone, Quentin Blake and E H Shepard.

Many of Stephen's books have been published overseas, and two have been made into theatre productions. Several have won and been nominated for awards, including the Children's Book Council of Australia, Australian Publishing Association, BILBY and YABBA and the Bologna Book Fair.

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### **SYNOPSIS**

A carefree boy is doing cartwheels when a grownup tries to cut his long hair. He runs off and hides in a bush with his dog. A passing bird drops a seed into the boy's hair.

The seed sprouts, and the boy cares for the seedling, watering it and sheltering it when the sun is too hot. He dreams that it has all sorts of enemies.

Eventually his hair, along with the tiny plant, is cut off. But the boy continues to care for his plant and watches it grow. And one day a seed from the now magnificent tree is dropped by a bird onto his dog's pup, where it too begins to sprout.

### **CREATING *LEAF***

Stephen Michael King had been thinking about growing up as an artist and illustrator for a while before the idea for *Leaf* came to him. He had been pondering the way the books he had created had gone out into the world beyond their original existence. For instance, two of his books had been turned into theatre productions and others had been translated into other languages. In order for them to be adapted to the theatre and translated into other words, he had to let his original creative work go.

The actual idea for the book grew out of some drawings Stephen made of a boy with a leaf popping out of his hair. He presented his idea for a book, not yet a complete story, to his agent and editor and talked with them about the directions it could take. Stephen developed the book from there and found it took on a life of its own. While creating it, he had to ‘be quiet, contemplative and ready to listen when it spoke to me.’

Stephen wanted the pictures in *Leaf* to speak for themselves. He tried adding words but found he preferred the simplicity and openness of the story without them. The drawings, done in black and brown ink and watercolour, add to this fluid, open feeling. Stephen found staying true to his goal of simplicity hard. The writing on the endpapers is a kind of mantra he wrote, ‘to reassure myself that I didn’t need to overuse words.’

Although Stephen didn’t tell the story in words, he included strong, distinctive sound effects. But in the last third of the book, from the ‘snip’ when the seedling is cut from the boy’s head, stillness and quietness take over. The leaf, the boy’s creation, takes on its own life, though he silently continues to water it, care for it, and watch it emerge.

Stephen knew creating such an open book meant people would bring their own experiences and ideas to it, and would interpret it in different ways. For example, Stephen sees the bird as intuition, but other people have thought of it as spirit, which he loves. He also cites the example of the image of the boy with his newly cut hair. Ana Vivas, Stephen’s editor, thought the boy’s harsh haircut was like a Holocaust image, however, a friend of Stephen’s was reminded of a Buddhist monk. Stephen’s son, aged eight, was quite distressed when the boy’s hair was cut. Other people have seen it as a straight environmental book – plant a seed, grow a tree; nurture yourself, nurture the world.

Fundamentally, Stephen sees *Leaf* being about the journey of creativity as we grow. Sometimes along that journey people seem to take things from us. He remembers his class at school making fish out of clay. ‘I added bits onto mine. I gave it arms. The

teacher ripped them off and said we were just making fish. My idea for a fish wasn't the same as hers, and I had to ignore my creativity.' Stephen believes when this sort of thing happens, we have to trust our intuition, the bird in *Leaf*, is still there to work its magic.

To prevent children being cut off from their creativity, Stephen believes they need time to develop their own minds. 'Don't organise them into things all the time. Let them get bored. Provide them with tools for play – pencils, paper string, and a patch of dirt. This will prompt them to develop their creative worlds.' He advocates having specialised art teachers right through school and for art to be a focus in the primary years. 'If kids can be free with their drawing and art, their abstract thoughts will have a chance to develop and flourish.'

### **CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES**

- When showing the story to a group of children, turn the pages slowly, pointing slowly to each picture in turn. Don't forget the sound effects, or have a child read them out. Resist the urge to tell them what is happening in your own words.
- Ask the students to think about the book, and say what they think happened and what their feelings about the story are. There may be a number of different interpretations of the story. For older students, you could ask them to write their ideas down in a short paragraph then read them out to the class. This means they can form their own ideas before they share them.
- Talk about where we get ideas from and about our imagination. What happens when we share our imagination with other people? Do they get ideas of their own using their creativity? How do ideas get passed along in the story?
- Children could make portraits of themselves with a plant growing out of their heads. Would birds or insects come to live there? Make a gallery of the portraits.
- Children might like to work out short plays based on the story. They could act it out, without using any words, but having fun with the sound effects.
- An art activity Stephen uses with students to free their creativity and help them 'get over their fear of paint', is to spread the largest sheets of paper you can find on the ground, set a timer to a two minutes, then letting kids go with paint and

brush or fingers, then reset the timer and move onto a new sheet. They must fill the page and they can't paint anything real.