

# The Island

## SYNOPSIS

On a beautiful island lives a tribe of people who don't smile or laugh much. Only a small blind urchin notices the wonderful things on the seashore. He tries to share them with the tribe, but they don't notice.

One day a sea creature comes to the shore. Together, the boy and the sea creature play in the water. The people of the tribe warn the boy that it is a monster, but they change their minds when they hear him laughing. They join in.

However, afraid that the sea creature will leave and they will lose the happiness they have found, the tribe capture it and put it in a small pool.

The sea creature soon begins to fade and die. The boy rescues it and the people of the tribe are left behind, wondering if they will ever be happy again.

## WRITING *THE ISLAND*

John Heffernan originally wrote *The Island* as a part of his novel *A Horse Called Elvis*. It was a story that Nick reads to his younger brother, Matt. After talking with his editor, John decided that *The Island* could become a picture book in its own right.

*The Island* is about recognising and treasuring what really matter in life—moments of happiness. John observes that 'happiness tends to creep up on us. It tickles us when we least expect. Often we aren't even aware before the moment has passed.' It is the little things in life that so often bring joy. John says, 'We need to savour those moments in a society like ours that tends to bombard us with stimuli. Those fleeting moments can be easily drowned out by the static of daily existence.'

As John was consciously writing a story with a message, he wanted it to feel a bit like a traditional morality tale. The characters in the story don't have names; they stand for all of us. They belong to a 'tribe', though this doesn't mean it has no relevance to a society from the industrial age, rather that it has meaning for the central, human part of us that hasn't changed through time. We still have the same needs as people living long ago.

The language that John uses is gentle. Although the people of the tribe are sour, their attitude doesn't overwhelm the story. The descriptions of the sea creature and the attitude of the boy fill the text with warmth.

John decided to make the main character (the only one who knows happiness) blind because he feels that beauty isn't only something we see, it is something that we hear, touch, taste and smell as well. The people of the tribe can see, but they aren't paying attention. They are too busy to see anything. Even when they do experience happiness, they treat it as if they can own it. They don't see that what they are doing is killing the sea creature. The boy may be blind, but he is sensitive to all of life around him.

By showing happiness as a living, breathing thing such as the sea creature, John hoped to show that happiness can come from unexpected sources, not necessarily from things we aim for, or dream about doing and having. In fact, the boy already knows happiness as he sits on the shore. John sees the sea creature as 'an embodiment of



all those things, and more. It's a kind of composite, as though the driftwood and the sand and the welcoming sun, and everything else that makes life special, have all come together in this enormous thing from the sea.'

### **ILLUSTRATING *THE ISLAND***

Peter Sheehan was delighted to be asked to illustrate *The Island* because of the ideas it expressed about the way that people try 'to hold onto happiness as if it is a tangible thing'. He was attracted to a story where he felt that the tangible and the mystical were entwined.

When Peter began to work on the illustrations, he divided the story into pages and then did rough pencil drawings of what he would show on each page. At this stage, he made many changes, moving things about and developing the landscape, the people and the creature. These roughs help him to make sure that there are no gaps in the story that the pictures haven't filled and to make sure that the rhythm of the story flows as each page is turned.

The illustrations were drawn in pencil, with some coloured pencil included. Then they were scanned and then coloured on the computer. Peter feels that this allows him to use the drawing techniques that he loves, but also allows him to make any necessary changes quickly. For instance, when he decided to take the glasses off the boy, it was easier to delete them and replace them with closed eyes than it would have been by hand.

Coming up with the sea creature took many roughs. Peter knew that it had to show happiness, but it also had to be a creature that the tribe saw as a monster. He felt that his first attempts were too cute. He finally took his inspiration for the creature from a small, twisted piece of driftwood that lay on his windowsill. He felt that it gave the creature just the right 'organic weirdness'.

As he drew the people of the tribe, Peter was conscious of not making them like a tribe from a stereotyped village on an island somewhere. He wanted to avoid the story being too much like a traditional folktale so that it would be seen as a story as relevant to our present society as to any other. The people of his tribe dress in grey, striped suits. They are pasty-faced and white as if they don't get out in the sun much. The village they build is a mixture of city structures with pavement and a streetlight, as well as oddly shaped huts on stilts. Peter deliberately made it look like no place in the world so that the story wouldn't be identified with any particular time and place.

The boy is gentle-looking and delicate, but at the same time he is full of life. He has thick curly hair that contrasts with the hanging straight hair and bald heads of the people of the tribe, his limbs move freely in contrast to their stiff limbs and his face carries a wide range of expressions. To make him even more engaging, Peter made sure the boy was doing something different on each page and that he appeared in a different poses and from different viewpoints (from close up to far in the distance). At first the boy was drawn wearing sunglasses to show his blindness, but Peter thought they made him look like a pop star, so decided to simply make his eyes closed. This makes the boy look different and at the same time doesn't make him look too worldly and sophisticated and out of touch with the natural world.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

1. John Heffernan feels that happiness is to be found in the little things in life, such as ‘floating on your back in a lake, or seeing a friend for the first time in years, or hearing your child’s voice’. Talk as a class about the little things in life that can make people happy. Then have the students write one sentence, or a phrase, or even one word about what makes them happy in large letters on a sheet of art paper. They can then illustrate their moment of happiness. Create a ‘moments of happiness’ art gallery wall in the classroom.
2. The author uses many words that describe the things that happen in the story. For instance, instead of just saying that the boy and the sea creature laughed, he says that ‘a strange sound tumbled from their lips’. Find some other descriptive words in the story and discuss why they are rich and powerful. Ask the students to look up any unusual words that they aren’t sure of the meaning of, such as ‘urchin’ or ‘sculptured’.
3. Talk about the ways in which the blind urchin is different to the other people of the tribe. Consider how the illustrator has shown them as well as what the author has written about them.
4. We use our eyes all the time and don’t pay as much attention to what things feel like. To help students realise how much their sense of touch tells them about the world, play a blindfold game. Blindfold the children and give them an object each. Have them describe what it is like, without worrying about guessing what it is. Then take the blindfold off and have them describe it again.
5. In *The Island* happiness comes in the form of a creature from the sea. The blind urchin thinks it is wonderful but the rest of the people think it is a monster when they see it. Discuss why the author might have chosen to talk about happiness as a living, breathing creature. Talk about the way that the people treat happiness the sea creature, and the way the boy treats it.
6. Happiness is a sea creature in this story. Using craft materials such as toilet rolls, strands of wool, margarine tubs, old socks and paint, students can make their own happiness creature. They can either work on their own individual creatures or make a big one as a group.
7. In the book, the sea creature doesn’t have a name. Do you think it needs one? Why? Why not? Students could make up a name for it.
8. In this book Peter Sheehan draws the ‘hardworking tribe’ and their village in black and white. The boy, the land, the sea and the sea creature are in colour. Why might he have done this? Do the people of the tribe look different to the boy in any other way?
9. Students can experiment with black-and-white illustration contrasted with colour illustration. They can either draw or paint a scene or figure in black and white (using charcoal, ink, pencil or felt pen) and then draw or paint the same scene or figure using colour. Or, they can add a small patch of colour to their original black-and-white picture to see how it changes.
10. On the last few pages of the book, can students see any similarity between the shoreline and the sea creature? Ask them why the illustrator might have made them look alike. What relevance could their similarity have to the message of the book?

