

The Short and Incredibly Happy Life of Riley

Teacher's Notes

This thought-provoking but funny picture book will be thoroughly enjoyed by older students as they reflect on their own lives and see the contrast with the simple uncomplicated life of the sweet and endearing rat called Riley. Colin Thompson shows how Riley is born happy and is never anything else during his short life. He has enough to eat, a numerous and supportive family, all of whom are as beautiful as he is. His aspirations are always fulfilled as he is content with what he has and the way things are. Humans, however, want and think they need everything—they are never satisfied. The text presents the folly and shame of the way we live. The satire and gentle humour that the story is imbued with makes for a truly unusual picture book with many messages that are really lessons for life.

Amy Lissiat's beautifully considered illustrations add a good deal to the interpretation of the text. They have been executed with a great deal of thought and add a further dimension to the story. Pupils will enjoy both the text and the illustrations and have a lot of fun talking and thinking about this sophisticated picture book that sets out so many things for consideration.

READING

- What does the author say people want?
- *None of this bothered Riley.* None of what?
- Why wasn't Riley bothered about all this?
- What was Riley's life like?
- Why was he happy?
- What are people mainly concerned with?
- What is the problem with people?
- In what areas are they dissatisfied?
- Is it true that *people... want to be everywhere?*
- According to this book why do people get depressed?
- What is *one of the silly things about life?*
- What's *really, really sad?*
- How can this be remedied, however?
- How does the text read?
- Look at the language used in this book and talk about it.
- Find portions that you found humorous and state why you chose these particular parts.
- What is the tone of the story?
- What type of story is it?

WRITING

- Make a list of the things people are always seeking and are dissatisfied with.
- Make up three columns and head them: 'Basic needs', 'Humans need' and 'My needs'
- Choose one page and write about it in detail, referring to both the words and the pictures separately. Indicate why you chose that particular page.
- Jot down words to describe people.
- Do you fit in with the way people are shown in this book?
- Finish this sentence: *The Short and Incredibly Happy Life of Riley* by Colin Thompson illustrated by Amy Lissiat shows us as ...
- Write about people in general and you in particular
- Make a list of the silly things in life and the good things in life.
- Write a review of the picture book *The Short and Incredibly Happy Life of Riley* by Colin Thompson illustrated by Amy Lissiat for your local newspaper.



SPEAKING/LISTENING

- What are the main things in life?
- How can they be attained?
- What does happiness consist of for you?
- Is it difficult to be happy?
- Look at the use of contrasts in this book and their place in writing and illustrating.
- Discuss wants and needs and the difference between these.
- Look at emotions and how they are portrayed.

Talk about:

- being happy and healthy
- perspective
- messages contained in this book
- the philosophy of life.

Colin Thompson's book contains elements of satire

- Look at what satire is and discuss where and how it is used in this book.

ILLUSTRATIONS

The illustrations for this book are unusual and graphic, and add a great deal to the understanding of the text and hence to the story as a whole.

- Study Amy Lissat's illustrations and make some observations and comments about how they have been executed and what they contribute to the book.
- Examine the illustrator's use of colour and discuss this.

Symbols

Many objects become symbols for things as they stand for something or we associate them with other things.

- Look for such symbols in this story and discuss them and their purpose.

Interpretation

- How does Amy Lissat depict Riley's life?
- Why was he so happy?
- Compare Riley's life with that of humans by drawing up two columns.
- Where does the title for this book come from?
- What does it mean to be under a cloud?
- Find instances of this from the text.
- Find examples of being comfortable and laid back.

Design

Look in detail of the layout and design of *The Short and Incredibly Happy Life of Riley* – the way the text and pictures are set out on the page and talk about the effect and the impact of the placement.

- Who is responsible for the design of this book?

Look at the cover.

- What does the cover depict?
- By looking at it what do you expect the book to be about?
- What does the cover of a book tell you?
- Find the title page and comment on it.
- Look at the last page and jot down what you can find out from it.

