

Teaching Ideas for the CILIP Carnegie Medal Shortlist 2018

Title: *Wed Wabbit*

Author: Lissa Evans

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This is a sequence of sessions aimed at KS2. *Wed Wabbit* is a surreal adventure story that uses fantasy and humour to address complex and sensitive issues in a form that engages and entertains its readers. The fantastical element that comprises the main part of the book is sandwiched between scenes in the real world. Fidge (Iphigenia) has bottled up her feelings over the death of her father two years ago in her need to be the sensible practical one in the family, in the face of her mum's and sister Minnie's (Minerva) impulsivity and disorganisation. Fidge blames herself for an accident that puts Minnie in hospital and leaves Fidge temporarily in the care of her overprotective aunt and uncle and the company of their mollycoddled son, her cousin Graham. Hurling Minnie's favourite toys into the cellar in her frustration and pique summons a freak storm that sees Fidge and Graham deposited in Wimbley Land, the world of Minnie's favourite stories, where the Wimbley Woos speak in rhyme and are colour-coded according to their personality traits. But there is something rotten in Wimbley Land, as it starts to lose its colour and joy and life, with the King deposed and an army of aggressive Blues carrying out the draconian orders of a new dictator, none other than Minnie's beloved eponymous Wed Wabbit. Restoring order to Wimbley Land and Wed Wabbit to Minnie becomes a quest that unites Fidge and Graham on a journey of self-discovery.

Before You Start

Wed Wabbit addresses complex and serious themes with humour and some sophistication, and stopping points have been chosen to draw these out in discussion with children as the text is shared. It is essential for teachers to read the whole of the text before sharing it with the children. Teachers will also want to be aware of any children who have experienced bereavement, and show appropriate sensitivity as the book addresses this issue. Opportunities for exploring the themes of the story through drama and art have also been suggested, for which it would be helpful to have a variety of art materials and opportunities to record and display on a working wall the class's journey through the text. As a teacher-reader it is interesting to note that Lissa Evans is a great admirer of George Orwell's prose: the teaching ideas evoke *Animal Farm* (Orwell's powerful allegorical novella inspired by events leading up to the Russian Revolution of 1917 and into the Stalinist era of the Soviet Union) and *1984* (Room 101).

Session 1 (Chapters 1–5)

Using maps, art and drama to enter the world of the text; rereading

There is a long and rich tradition of books whose authors include maps in their endpapers (*Swallows and Amazons*, *The Hobbit*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *Rabbit and Bear*, *Goth Girl*, *Wildwood*, *The Girl of Ink and Stars*, *Oliver and the Seawigs*): what does it add to the story to be given a map of the story's geography, do you refer to the map while reading, does it make the story clearer or more "real"?

Wed Wabbit is partly a reaction against "soppy characters who speak in verse all the time", the author recalling rereading *ad nauseam* a picturebook that you would rather hide (much like in *Again!* by Emily Gravett, twice winner of the Greenaway Medal). Which books do you choose to read again? What makes you

return to a book once you have finished it, even though you know the story? What features of this or any story do you appreciate more the second time around? *Wed Wabbit* certainly lends itself to being read again: once you have finished the whole story, it's well worth coming back to spot what features of the story are prefigured in Chapter 1, and see how the author sows seeds of the plot from early on.

To deepen their understanding of the text, children could freeze-frame the accident in which Minnie is injured.

Freeze-frames are still images or tableaux. They can be used to enable groups of children to examine a key event or situation from a story and decide in detail how it could be represented. When presenting the freeze-frame, one of the group could act as a commentator to talk through what is happening in their version of the scene, or individual characters can be asked to speak their thoughts out loud. Thought tracking is often used in conjunction with freeze-frame. Individuals are invited to voice their thoughts or feelings aloud using just a few words. This can be done by tapping each person on the shoulder or holding a cardboard "thought-bubble" above their head. Alternatively, thought tracking can involve other members of the class speaking a chosen character's thoughts aloud for them.

The children could also be asked to visualise the characters of *Wed Wabbit* or the various Wimbley Woos from their descriptions in the opening chapters. Drawing characters focuses attention on them: how they look; what they say; how they behave. To build their ideas of what a character is like, children have to refer to the text. They can also be encouraged to draw on the language of the text in making annotations around the drawings.

It would also be useful to create a Role on the Wall for Fidge and Graham.

Role on the Wall is a technique that uses a displayed outline of the character to record feelings (inside the outline) and outward appearances (outside the outline) at various stopping points across the story. Using a different colour at key stopping points allows you to track changes in the character's emotional journey. You can include known facts such as physical appearance, age, gender, location and occupation, as well as subjective ideas such as likes/dislikes, friends/enemies, attitudes, motivations, secrets and dreams.

The role on the wall could also be used to populate a comparison grid that points up similarities and differences between Fidge and Graham (or between Fidge and Minnie, between mum and dad, and so on).

Session 2 (Chapters 6–14)

Using rhyme and colour to reinforce an imaginary world

Wed Wabbit joins an illustrious vein of stories in which protagonists find themselves in imaginary worlds of books that become real (Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Piers Torday's *There May Be a Castle*, Chris van Allsburg's *Jumanji*, Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, Lauren Child's *Beware of the Storybook Wolves*). What is the effect of setting the story in a fantastical setting, where different rules apply? Do you find Wimbley Land believable? How well does the author bring it to life for you? How is it different from the real world in which Fidge and Graham begin the story?

Wimbley Woos speak in rhyme, and Lissa Evans has said how she enjoyed the challenge of using this device, and contrasting with the speech rhythms of Fidge and Graham. What is the effect of having the Wimbley Woos speak in rhyme, and what does it add to the story? Ella and Dr Carrot — and indeed Wed Wabbit — have quite distinctive speech styles, how does the author use their speech patterns to convey their personalities?

Wed Wabbit centres on issues of colour and monochrome, of joy and of its absence. Do you find the author's colour symbolism effective, where each differently-coloured Wimbley Woo has specific personal characteristics? Children may compare the symbolism here with that in the film *Inside Out*.

Perhaps using the map to support their efforts, ask the children to visualise what Fidge sees from the top of the tower in Wimbley Town.

Session 3 (Chapters 15–22)

Using humour to address serious matters; using free verse to explore a text

Fidge and Graham are reunited and both have met the characters of Dr Carrot — Graham's plastic toy transitional object — and Ella — the elephant life coach. The author pokes gentle mockery at cod and pop psychology designed to support children (and adults) through traumatic events. Children may wish to discuss and debate, however, whether the advice and strategies espoused and advocated by Ella and Dr Carrot are effective, since they do ultimately achieve their desired results, through their championing of kindness, teamwork, positivity, and being open to new experiences.

Although it is handled with humour — and Wed Wabbit is portrayed as an entirely ridiculous figure, with his immature speech replicating Minnie's own inability yet to pronounce the letter "r" — Wed Wabbit's overthrow of the King of the Wimbleys, and his use of the Blues to institute a joyless totalitarian régime relying on imprisonment without trial and draconian control of its borders and those who breach them, smacks of past and present dictatorships. Children could be invited to identify parallels between the events of the story and events in the real world, both historically and in the present day.

The dungeons contain Minnie's greatest dislikes and worst fears. Invite the children to discuss what would populate their own dungeon, and write these out on strips of paper. They can then bring their strips together to create a collaborative free verse poem, negotiating the order and form of the lines, and rearranging and editing the whole to achieve the greatest impact. These poems could be written out for display, or text-marked and prepared for performance.

When Fidge finally meets him, the King of the Wimbleys is that distinctive sludgy brown that plasticine turns when blended. It would be useful to give the children a selection of brightly coloured plasticine (ideally, orange, pink, purple, blue, yellow, grey and green) that they can blend into the regal hue before moulding it into their own figurine of the King.

Session 4 (Chapters 23–28)

Considering artistic approaches to deepen immersion in a text

The leaching of colour from Wimbley Land corresponds to the growth of Wed Wabbit's power as he sucks life and joy from the land: do you think this visual feature of the narrative would make *Wed Wabbit* better as an illustrated book? Who would be a good illustrator? Which scenes would you depict?

Dr Carrot and Ella enable Graham to gain insights into characteristics of bullying behaviour, some of which he is embarrassed to realise mirror his own. This part of the story would be a good opportunity for PSHE work on bullying, for example creating “Wanted!” posters outlining Wed Wabbit’s “crimes”, which would help to identify what are the defining characteristics of a bully, and why bullies behave as they do.

Lissa Evans also uses great humour in inventing tedious activities that fixate the Wimbley Woos when they lose their colour: what boring topics or activities would you add? The publisher has also used a sans serif typeface to indicate where a character has lost their colour and interest. How does the book’s visual style – its cover image by Sarah McIntyre and map by Tomislav Tomic, its use of colour (the hardback is bound in the colour of Wed Wabbit’s deep maroon fur), and choice of font size and style, support the narrative?

Session 5 (Chapters 29–35)

Using discussion to decide who or what a story is about

Session 2 examined the impact of having the Wimbley Woos speak in verse. Why do you think the author has the Oldest and Wisest of the Greys embracing brevity as the story progresses, and the King of the Wimbleys’ apathetic attitude to rhyme having him making up nonsense to complete his lines? Readers might like to attempt their own rhyming couplets.

Returning to the discussion of colour, the climax of the action sees colours exploding and splattering freely across the piece. Children could be asked to visualise a key scene from the finale and capture it in a colourful medium such as oil pastels, or to design the cover for *A Festival of Theatre in Wimbley Land* with the variegated Wimbley Woos and including the new characters of Ella and Dr Carrot.

Although the death of Fidge (and Minnie)’s father is central to the story, we have no details about how his family lost him. His death has left Fidge unable to hug, so that the hug she finally gives Wed Wabbit resolves the story; how does Fidge’s response to her father’s death compare to Graham’s reaction to the “traumas” in his life? Do you consider Ella and Dr Carrot to be good counsellors? What do they say and do that helps?

Compare what we know of the family’s temperaments: both Fidge and her dad are responsible, forward-thinking organisers, yet Fidge also bottles her emotions. Mum and Minnie are impulsive and emotional, with a taste for poetry and hugs that rivals the Wimbleys’. Is it better to be more like mum or dad, or to be a combination of the best aspects of both, to be both Minerva and Minnie, both Iphigenia and Fidge?

Lissa Evans uses the device of an epilogue set “six months later” to reveal the fates of the characters some time after the events of the main story. What is the effect of this device, does it tie up loose ends for you, or do you prefer to draw your own conclusions about how the protagonists may go on to develop? What other stories with epilogues do you know?

Lissa Evans cites as an influence on her book Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*, in which sickly, spoiled and selfish orphan Mary Lennox is sent to live with her reclusive uncle; she discovers a secret garden which improves her health and attitude, and with the aid of the garden she is able to offer the healthy active outdoor life she now enjoys to her similarly sickly, spoiled and selfish cousin Colin Craven. Given time, children may wish to read all or part of Hodgson Burnett’s novel, or to watch a dramatization of it: Agnieszka Holland’s 1993 film is especially accessible. Do you think there are parallels between the two stories? How do the time and adventures they share in Wimbley Land affect Fidge and Graham, can they be considered as “healed” by the experience?



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Lissa Evans has said the book is “difficult to summarise”, with “not too many obvious lessons”: can you summarise the book, and if not, why is this difficult? What, if any, are the lessons you can draw from *Wed Wabbit*?

Lissa Evans has previously worked in comedy, and has trained her ear to the rhythm and timing needed for good comedy. Did you find the book funny, and if so, what does comedy bring to the story?

The story is called *Wed Wabbit*, but who is the hero, and who is it about? How do the relationships between the main characters shift during the story? Do you like the ending of the book — with or without the epilogue — and the fate of protagonists in whom you have invested? What is the book's message?

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