

Don't *Read* This Book!

It just isn't ready yet. At least that's what we're told by the king in this metafictional fairytale, which offers a playful way to explore story structure with your class, says Judy Clark...



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Only joking, you absolutely must read this book as it is guaranteed to have your class hooked, intrigued and laughing out loud. An unbelievably impatient king, a forgetful court story writer and an array of guest appearances by a host of favourite characters makes for a refreshing take on a traditional fairytale, and a foray into the engaging world of metafiction for young readers.

As we see from the blurb on the back of the book – an exclusive taken from the *Giant Times* – the story centers on the King and his story writer who have a major problem: one of their best stories has disappeared. The King is definitely not amused.

What ensues is a romp through the land searching for the missing pages of the story. We follow the indignant and seemingly paranoid King who thinks, quite rightly, that he's being watched by an outside presence, causing him to continually break out of the story and chastise the reader. The story just isn't ready to read!

Don't Read This Book! provides a wealth of opportunities for response, drama, writing and discussion, not just about the story itself but about the nature of stories, the relationship between the author and the reader and how books and stories are crafted and constructed. It's a perfect multilayered gem to explore a few pages at a time. ▶

1

KEY STAGE

Search the cover for clues

The cover provides a host of clues as to the nature of the book and is just where we need to start.

Use a visualizer to zoom in on the cover illustration. Ask children about the title. Why do they think the King is furious? Are there any clues that hint at the reasons why he doesn't want them to read this book?

The cover is a clever introduction to the concept of metafiction. A team of miniature workmen are still putting the finishing touches on the illustration, painting the border and the title. We also see the first cameo appearance from the Gingerbread Boy who is helping out by watering the beanstalk - this provides a background visual, but still needs to grow further to cover the page. Of course, the King bursting through the cover may be the biggest clue!

2 Develop children's ideas

Reading the book in tandem with a teaching assistant or parent helper works brilliantly. One person can take on the role of the narrator (and the story writer later on), and the other the role of the King. It's a great way to reinforce the different voices in the book and a definite source of hilarity for the children.

Use post-it notes to start an 'our thoughts' flip chart page and record children's ideas, which they may change and clarify as the book progresses. It is always a good idea to record each child's name by their post-it as this will affirm and validate their individual responses.

Start a communal 'role on the wall' for the King and the story writer. Draw a body outline of each character and, on the outside of the body, note all the facts and details children observe about their appearance (the King's

wildly curling eyebrows; the story writer's notebook tunic, etc). On the inside, write down what the children think about the characters' personalities. Use these notes to discuss and compare the two main characters. Of course, we find out so much about the characters from what they say and how they say it, and there are opportunities for drama and role-play around - the enraged King on the phone at one end and the poor confused story writer on the other. An old mobile phone or a microphone add that extra spark of fun.

Begin to draw the children's attention to the different layout features and tools used in the book. To add to the border we now have lettering, graph paper and a strong sense of the story within the story.

3 Play with

The story moves on as the story writer mentally retraces his steps back to Beanstalk Crossroads, the last place he left. Perhaps the missing story pages are there? Our two characters set off on horseback.

On the journey, the King suggests what the title of the lost book might be: The Princess and the... Incredibly Handsome King? Amazingly Clever King? Unbelievably Brave King?

Can the children come up with other possibilities? Create a synonym wheel or spider diagram and collect as many superlatives as they can think of. Extend children's vocabulary by adding some of your own: fantastic, astounding, superb, awesome,



astonishing, tremendous, stupendous, extraordinary, etc. Then show the children how to add a 'ly' suffix to create additional emphasis. The King will be very pleased to hear their new titles!

As our intrepid story searchers come to a signpost, encourage the children to think of other places they might come across in this land. So far we have the palace and Beanstalk Crossroads. Create a list of fairytales and traditional characters and another list of possible places - a bridge, a lake, mountains, a well, a forest, etc. - and create an imaginary map by putting the two together: Billy Goat

Bridge, Wolf Forest, Goldilocks Gate, Woodcutter Way, The Mountains of Giants.

Draw and label the maps planning a route for the King. Where else might the story writer have left some missing pages?

4 Construct y

There is a brilliant double page spread in which our two main characters (and their horses) just stare from the page at the reader. What on earth do the children think is going through their heads? Their expressions could be shock, surprise or even worry. However, the King explodes on the next page into a blaze of colour and we are left in no doubt as to his fury. Look at the use of colour to represent emotion with the children and paint a watercolour sea of emotions from calm to fury. Luckily, the King's anger is averted as the story writer, assisted

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judy Clark is Leaders Network Manager at the National Literacy Trust (literacytrust.org.uk). She has worked alongside Pie Corbett to develop Talk for Writing in practice and deliver training to schools.





by a few fairytales friends, begins to find more pages. He finds a dramatic opening and some characters: a princess, a prince, a queen and, naturally, a king - well, it wouldn't be a good story without one, the King reminds us. They then go on the search for some props; 15 mattresses to be precise. They need just one more thing... and I think you can guess which fairytale star is missing.

The pages provide an excellent opportunity to explore with children the key ingredients of story. As more of the fairytale is discovered, a team of miniature workmen match the content by structuring pages and illustrating

how the different elements of a story come together - a good opening, strong characters, and a central plot. The story writer is delighted they even have a beginning, middle and end.

At this point, our story makers are running out of time and space and all the characters have to work together to finally complete the story. In groups, help the children to plan, organise and make their own version of the final story. Go back through the pages and gather a list of all the things they have noticed throughout, which combine to create a book. Can they spot some of the design features: the different borders, the

lettering, fonts, backgrounds? Can they list tools that will help them: scissors, graph paper, quill and ink?

Children may even want to add simple pop-ups or flaps just in case a few of their characters want to break out of their own story and talk directly to the reader.

Extending the story

A whole host of follow up activities come to mind as the final story emerges, which is, of course, *The Princess and the Pea*.

- > Read and then story-map the *Princess and the Pea*. Learn an oral version for the children to internalise, retell and then dramatise.
- > Can the children retell or rewrite the story, perhaps with a different bias? In the King's version - funnily enough - he gets a huge amount of credit for everyone living happily ever after.
- > Can the children devise other tests that a real princess might need to overcome to prove her worth? Perhaps she needs to kiss a few frogs, or design a glass slipper?
- > Use the stimulus on the back cover, the *Giant Times*, to create a news report on the story and interview different story characters for their views and comments.
- > A final thought might be to think of the last page of the book where the star character bounces towards a waiting limo, perhaps on his way to the after show party or his next acting job. What will the Pea's next blockbuster be, I wonder?

Books about books

Other wonderful books to compliment more work on metafiction:

- > *Chester's Masterpiece*, by Melanie Watt
- > *The Pea and the Princess*, by Lauren Child
- > *The Monster at the End of This Book: Starring Lovable, Furry Old Grover*, by Jon Stone

