

My Horrible Cousins

Teachers' notes and student activities

Goldie Alexander

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Introduction

These stories are suitable for students who are fluent readers. Nevertheless, there are the easier-to-read 'Lame Duck Protest' and 'Raising Ella' as well as other more difficult stories that aim to develop the reader's ability to deal with longer sentences and more complex vocabulary, comprehension and concepts.

These stories and exercises aim to help students:

- recognise mood and empathise with characters
- predict future occurrences
- read and access information for specific purposes
- improvise text and alter story lines
- call on previous knowledge
- form opinions
- make reference to authors and literary allusions
- think critically and evaluate
- recognise metaphors as both text and theme
- see reading as an enjoyable activity
- extend vocabulary
- identify setting, main characters, theme and occurrences in literary text, structures, orientation, complication and resolution.

These teacher notes offer:

- a summary of key facts
- a synopsis
- hints on relevant themes and issues
- quick assistance in introducing the story in an appropriate manner and may provide a guide to further resources
- suggestions for related activities

Why bother to read fiction?

At a time when so much information can be gained reading newspapers, magazines, watching TV and roaming the internet, some people argue that fiction no longer has a place in everyday life. Nevertheless, there are many people who enjoy reading about other people, other times and other ways of seeing the world.

Fiction can take readers into areas they may never be able to explore. It can make a reader feel less isolated, discover ways to overcome a bully, make a comment on the everyday life around us, and help extend our imaginations. It can force readers to look at things in new and unusual ways, and help us lose ourselves in a story when 'real' life becomes unpleasant and we need to escape. Reading fiction can help us find new and better ways to express ourselves and communicate with friends and family.

Why read short stories?

Short stories are pithy. Like poems, they make their mark with the least number of words. Short stories often seem to begin in the middle and end in the middle. Some short stories are so short you have to read them very carefully to get the point they might be making.

However, it is said that writing a good short story is very like creating an excellent life drawing for an artist. Writing a good short story will teach you how to write. And many short stories help you understand the world around you.

A final and excellent reason for enjoying a short story is that they are short and can be read in one sitting.

Why are these ‘stories about girls’?

Though all these are stories about girls, they were written for both girls and boys to read and enjoy. However, being a girl means that there are certain rules you are expected to follow in order to be accepted. Some of these rules are learnt from a very early age — like it’s cool to like clothes, magazines and pop groups, and hate activities that are regarded as ‘tomboyish’. Girls are ‘allowed’ to gossip and show their feelings. Boys are not.

Points for discussion

- Who makes these rules?
- What happens to you if you break them?
- What are you supposed to be good at?
- What are you supposed to be bad at?
- What’s the worst thing that can be said about a girl?
- What’s the best?

Some different ways of reading

Students could try:

- reading aloud to the class
- reading to themselves
- reading aloud to a small group
- acting out some of these stories

Creating a readers’ theatre

In a readers’ theatre, stories are shared aloud with others.

- Readers should sit on in front of the audience so they can be clearly seen.
- Don’t use props or sound effects.
- Movements are kept to a minimum.
- Readers should read slowly and clearly so the audience can hear.
- Readers should look up from time to time as they read

Moving from a short story to a play or film script

Many well-known films and even musicals began their lives as short stories or as novels.

Some famous examples of this are *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Lord of the Rings* and the Harry Potter novels.

The Great Googol

Text type: narrative

Text details: third person, present tense, fantasy

Synopsis

Stella's Mum and Dad run Seagrass Cafe on Oyster Pier. When Dad is hurt, the magician tGG (the GREAT GOOGOL) turns up to help run the cafe. The cafe is doing well until the family is threatened with eviction. Though Stella, her friends and tGG do their best to raise enough money to buy the building, it is only after Stella discovers that the pier and building are to be heritage listed that the cafe is saved.

Text type

In some fantasies, the trend is that the story:

- starts with the premise that this is a sustained and complex other world
- has some strong internal logic
- contains unusual but sustained characters with whom the reader can identify — and they do not always have to be people
- is often a quest
- has a strong moral message
- shows that good always wins out

Themes and issues

- The preservation of heritage buildings
- Fantasy acting out some of our wildest dreams
- The ability to find satisfactory solutions

Background

To conserve forests, seas and important buildings is a goal widely shared. This aim is to conserve materials and energy that protect our world.

Marine conservation is the protection and preservation of ecosystems in oceans and seas.

Remediation refers to the removal of pollution or contaminants from the environment.

Recycling involves the collection of used materials to be broken down and remade into new products. *Heritage buildings* are those that are listed as worth preserving. Sometimes whole streets are considered to be heritage.

Discussion points

- 1 Stella has to grow up very quickly when she finds herself all alone in a strange city. Now it is up to her to prevent the café from being pulled down. Discuss any situation where you have had to take control. Did it work? If not, why not?
- 2 What is it that makes that person feel 'different'? Is it his/her appearance? Family background? Religion? Clothing? Behaviour? Anything else?

The Great Googol

Discuss

1. tGG is a housework/home magician. Bring him to your school. What would you ask him to do? For example: clean white boards, complete homework, fix tuckshop orders. Can you think of anything else?
2. Would you enjoy living at the back of a cafe or another kind of eating place? What would be good about it? Can you think of any drawbacks?

Write

1. Seagrass Cafe is described in the opening paragraphs. Write a description of your favourite eating place. Include the smells, tastes, sights, sounds, textures and something you do not like about it. This provides the contrast or conflict which makes the writing more dramatic.
2. 'Splendiferous' is a made-up word which suggest its meaning. Make up three new words that describe something good and three words for something bad. Now put them into a short dialogue between two people of different ages.
3. What is a heritage building? Who decides? Are there any in your area? Write a letter to the council arguing that a building should be given heritage listing.

Activities

1. When Dad is scalded with boiling water, he is taken to hospital. What first-aid do you need to treat scalds? How would you find out? Survey your school to find out who knows how to handle first-aid.
2. You've been asked to organise a concert to raise money for an important local cause. What would you call the concert? Who might help? Which acts could be listed on your program? Design a poster to advertise this concert.
3. Look up the history of the Parthenon.
4. Find out what a 'googol' is.

Debate

- The Parthenon is the most important heritage building ever.
- Going to cafes and restaurants is a waste of money.

My Horrible Cousins

Text type: blog

Text details: first person, present tense, social realism

Synopsis

Excited about her first trip overseas, Lorrie writes a blog describing her travels. Aunt Julia and twin cousins, Madison and Sienna, whom Lorrie hardly knows, are joining them. As the blog continues, however, it seems that all the twins want to do is shop. They are rude to their Danish relatives and tease Lorrie unmercifully. Only in London do the 'horrible cousins' become too ill to do any sightseeing. However, on the trip home a flight attendant remembers the twins' difficult behaviour. They are left in tourist class while Lorrie and her family are upgraded to 'Business'.

Text type

The aim of a mixed format story is to demonstrate to students the varying ways of telling a story. Stories that use different formats such as diary entries, email messages, letters, class lists, newspaper reports and blogs make a story more credible by appearing to be based on a real incident.

Characteristics of mixed format stories:

- Often a character's motivation will be left for the reader to figure out.
- The setting is usually familiar.
- Major character/s should be ordinary.
- The writing style must sound factual.

Themes and issues

- Pros and cons of family relationships
- Coping with unpleasant situations over which you have little control.
- Keeping a journal to record new experiences.

Background

Using letters and diaries to illustrate a story dates back to the 18th century. It is again very popular among present-day writers, and is often presented as an email or blog. The advantage for slower readers is the brevity of this form. The reader is encouraged to fill in 'the bits in between' for themselves. In this instance, where Lorrie has to cope with her horrible cousins, the girls finally learn that bad behaviour doesn't pay.

Discussion points

- 1 The major theme in this story is that of 'relationships' in families. If you were to encounter this kind of behaviour from a member of your family or a friend, what can you do to stop it?
- 2 Lorrie has the 'final word'. Describe what happens to the cousins. How might they feel as they watch Lorrie being upgraded?

My Horrible Cousins

Discuss

1. What makes Lorrie different?
2. Lorrie's cousins tease her for looking wrong and not wearing the right clothes. Kids can be merciless if someone doesn't fit in. Do you agree with Mum's advice? What advice would you give Lorrie? If this situation happened to you, how would you handle it?

Write

1. Describe these characters in your own words: Lorrie, the twins, Madison and Sienna, Mum and Aunt Julia, the Danish cousins.
2. Think about some of your relatives. Do you get on with them? Why/why not? Write an explanation.
3. Have you ever flown to another city, state or country? If so, describe the experience to someone who has never been on a plane. If you haven't been on a plane yourself, describe a bus trip.
4. Blogging can be used as a way of venting feelings, much like a personal diary, or used to impart important information. It is also an excellent way of maintaining a travel diary that you can share with your friends. Blog all your activities for the next 24 hours. Emphasise any hobbies or interests, but try to record everything that happens to you in that time.

Activities

1. On a map of the world, trace Lorrie's journey to Denmark and back.
2. Look up the 'Tivoli Gardens' and the 'Hørsholm Midtpunkt' shopping mall on the net.
3. What are some other famous tourist sites in London, apart from the ones Lorrie mentions?
4. Look up some young people's blogs on the internet. How many are really interesting? How many are cheap ways of getting attention? Give them a 1 to 10 assessment for appeal.

Debate

- Family members should always try to get on with each other.
- Travelling extends your understanding of other people.

An UnHappy Story

Text type: narrative

Text details: third person, past tense, social realism + fairy tale

Synopsis

Three children challenge their unnamed elderly babysitter to tell a fairy tale with an unhappy ending. The babysitter recounts the tale of Princess Pamela, better known by her courtiers as 'Princess Bored'. Hero, the kitchen boy, rises to the challenge of showing her how to play. Things progress very well until one day Hero makes an announcement that results in an 'unhappy ending'. Then the babysitter produces her own 'twist to the tale'.

Text type

A fairy tale is a fictional story that may feature fairies, goblins, elves, trolls, giants, talking animals and, usually, enchantments, often involving a far-fetched sequence of events. The term is also used to describe something blessed with princesses, as in 'fairy-tale ending', though not all fairy tales end happily. These days a fairy tale can also mean any far-fetched story. Fairy tales mostly attract young children since they easily understand the archetypal characters in the story. In most fairy or folk tales, the trend is that the story:

- has some strong internal logic
- contains unusual but sustained characters with whom the reader can identify
- is often a quest
- has a strong moral message
- has a happy ending where good always wins out
- can appear in many different forms and in the folklore of many different countries.

Issues and themes

- 'Prince' and 'princess' is sometimes another way of referring to spoilt children.
- Do toys and games really make a child happy?
- Some children don't hear the word 'no'.
- Fairy stories have a strong moral message.

Background

Fairy stories are fun. What's more, they have been around a very long time. Once they were used to teach children that there were things to be wary of. These days we use the fairy tale to comment on some aspect of society. Thus the fairy tale will often become so changed or distorted, sometimes it is hardly recognisable.

Introductory activities

1. Have the class, or small group, draw up a list of those things that they think will make them happy. What might make them sad?
2. Play 'guess my occupation'. One person dreams up an unusual job and mimes it.

Discussion point

Parents who spoil their child, give too much, do too much and who cannot say 'No' to their child put their child at a disadvantage. Children who are spoilt are in for a shock when they enter the 'real' world as many are so used to getting what they want when they want it, that they expect others outside the family to cater to them in the same way. Do you agree?

An UnHappy Story

Discuss

1. What do we learn about the children being babysat?
2. Why is the princess known as Princess Bored? Does she live up to her name?
3. Hero, the kitchen boy remains a hero until ...
4. There are two surprise twists. What are they?
5. Do you think the hidden message in this story might be:
Beware of bored princesses
Anyone can get bored
Boys get more easily bored than girls
Girls get more easily bored than boys
Not all fairy stories have to have a happy ending
6. Being born a prince or princess carries enormous responsibilities. What in your opinion might some of these responsibilities be?

Write

1. Describe this babysitter in your own words. Does the story give any hint about her age, personality or where she comes from?
2. Your ideal babysitter is ...
3. Rewrite 'Red Riding Hood' and 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' with unhappy endings. Give them your own twist (not just eaten by a wolf and bears).
4. Write a very short story with a sting in the tale — an unexpected ending.
5. Write a poem called 'Princess Bored'.

Debate

- Fairy stories HAVE to have happy endings.
- Fairy stories DON'T have to have happy endings.

The Stranger

Text type: narrative

Text details: first person, past tense, magic realism

Synopsis

Chloe has two major loves: milk-cow Daisy, and developing her artistic skills. However, Geribilt Farm is going downhill and she has no money to buy painting equipment. Also, her dad needs an expensive operation, and neither brother Luke nor sister Tara can find jobs. Then a mysterious stranger offers Chloe hundreds of dollars in exchange for Daisy's cow-pats.

Text type

In magic realism, the trend is that it

- starts with the premise in a familiar situation, then asks: what if something extraordinary happens?
- describes someone or something that is probably not possible
- has some kind of weird internal logic
- can contain unusual but sustained characters with whom the reader can identify.

Themes and issues

This story is not as simple as it might appear on first reading. There are several messages or themes. They include comments on 'the way we view art' and 'running a successful small business'. You might like to give the class some of your views on these subjects.

- Coping with drought on a farm
- Accepting an unusual stranger
- Running a small business
- What is art?

Discussion points

- 1 The Stranger only turns up when the sun is in Chloe's eyes. The Stranger wears clothes that cover him from top to toe. Then he speaks in a foreign language. We never know his name. Why?
- 2 Imagine you are the Stranger. Why are you here? Give a number of possible reasons not mentioned in this story.
- 3 Chloe's passion is art. She wants to become a famous painter. Which painting does she admire? Why?
- 4 What about Chloe's family? Do they help or hinder her business efforts?
- 5 Consider the story's end. Do we ever find out why the Stranger is so interested in cowpats?

The Stranger

Write

1. Design your own Stranger. What does s/he look like? What personality would you like s/he to have?
2. Write a story called 'A Stranger Has Come to Our School'.
3. What might happen after this story ends? Write the next 'chapter'.
4. You are an alien visiting Earth. What do you like about Earth? What do you dislike? What do you decide to change? Write a report to take back to your own planet.

Activities

1. Why is the farm called 'Geribilt Farm'? Do some research and see what you come up with.
2. Mock up an interview with the Stranger with you as the interviewer. Ask a friend to be the interviewer. Then change roles.
3. Illustrate a cover for this story.
4. Translate what the Stranger says.
5. Ask your librarian for any books about famous paintings. Why do you think they are seen as 'great works of art'?
6. Why not draw/paint/illustrate the street where you live. As Mr Griffin suggests, let your art show how you feel about your place.

Create a picture story book

1. Draw your own graphic story (comic) using a farm as your setting.
2. Create a story picture book for little children using farm animals.

Debate

- Very few small businesses are successful.
- One person's art is another person's trash!

Lucy's Instant Spelling Program

Text type: narrative

Text details: past tense, first person, science fiction

Synopsis

Lucy is a terrible speller. She can't remember how words work or what they look like. She's so bad, her class have nicknamed her Freaky Lucy. But when her teacher decides to hold a spelling bee, Lucy's dad invents a marvellous machine that helps Lucy spell every word she ever hears. Soon Lucy becomes famous enough to win world-wide spelling competitions. But things go wrong when the program begins to wear off.

Text type

In a science fiction story, the trend is that it:

- starts with the premise 'what if'
- describes a society that is scientifically possible and technologically based
- is future oriented
- uses other worlds
- is often a quest
- has some kind of internal logic
- contains unusual but sustained characters with whom the read can identify

Themes and issues

- The use of conventional spelling which changes all the time. This change is becoming more rapid with the advent of electronic messages. However, there is more to this story than just the problem of 'correct spelling'. Science fiction can suggest ways of overcoming certain obstacles that don't seem possible by using an 'instant spelling program'.
- Fame, particularly media fame and the influence it has on all of us.

Background

Memory works this way:

- Automatic memory is what you don't even think about. Your brain runs all the body systems, so you can breathe, your heart will beat and all your organs will work.
- Short-term memory is what you use a lot.
- Long-term memory is for stuff you don't use all the time but which you can find when you need to.

Discussion points

- 1 Spelling is constantly changing. William Shakespeare's writing is hard for us to read today because his spelling is so different. Think about SMS. In view of this constant change, how should we define 'proper' English?
- 2 George Bernard Shaw wrote wonderful plays and left all his money to improve our current spelling. He wanted words to be written as they sound, for example: 'phone' becomes 'fone' and 'fight' would be 'fite'. Would this be a good idea?

Lucy's Instant Spelling Program

Discuss

1. What does the story suggest about the success of Dad's inventions and his interests?
2. How do we know that Lucy comes from a small town?
3. Why is Mr Griffin so keen on his students winning this contest?
4. Melissa calls Lucy 'Freaky Lucy'. Why? What can you do if someone calls you an unpleasant name?

Write

1. Do you think good spellers deserve to be famous? Write two lists, showing the arguments for each side.
2. Write the script to this story and act it out. Everyone can join in.
Cast: Lucy, Mr Griffin, Dad, Mum, Class – any number
Settings: shed, classroom, platforms
Sound effects: Instant Spelling Machine
Props: spelling machine, microphones, whiteboard, etc.

Activities

1. Invent and describe a machine that will help you overcome some personal obstacle: e.g. reading, bad breath, bad at games, poor maths.
2. You can exercise your memory and label the information in such a way that you can find it when you need it. Your amazing brain does a whole heap of this without you really noticing what it is doing. So if your mind can produce several memories all at once with just one trigger, then why can't you remember how to spell automatic? The trick is to give your memory more than one way of remembering.

Do some research on ways of remembering. Devise a system for remembering how to spell words – or some other task, and present it to the class.

Debate

- Singers, and pop groups deserve all the money they make.
- Good spelling isn't important.

Lame Duck Protest

Text type: narrative

Text details: first person, present tense, social realism

Synopsis

When Hannah and her little sister Rosie play in the reserve, they find a duck with a broken leg and take her home. Antonia adopts Rosie as her mum and follows her everywhere. However, when it seems that the reserve is about to be turned into a shopping centre, Antonia helps the locals hold a Lame Duck Protest.

Themes and issues

The major theme of this story is what a community can do to achieve some common goal. Hannah and Rosie live in a pleasant environment close to a reserve where wildlife flourishes and the locals meet. Thus the story revolves around keeping that environment safe from inappropriate development.

Background

- Ducks are mostly aquatic and can be found in both fresh water and sea water.
- Most ducks have a wide flat beak adapted for dredging.
- They eat a variety of food such as grasses, aquatic plants, fish, insects and worms.
- Many species of duck are temporarily flightless while moulting. They seek out protected area with good food supplies during this period.
- Some ducks, particularly in Australia where rainfall is patchy and erratic, are nomadic.
- Ducks are known to imprint or follow one person if found when very young.
- Wildlife management is the process of keeping certain wildlife populations at a sustainable level. It protects endangered and threatened species.
- Most wildlife management is concerned with the preservation and control of their natural habitats.

Discussion points

- 1 Saving the environment is a 'hot topic'. So is inappropriate development. Is there any place in your immediate environment that needs 'saving'?
- 2 Hannah describes both her little sister Rosie's response to finding Antonia and what happens in the reserve. Would the story have been different if it was told in the third person?

Lame Duck Protest

Discuss

1. Hannah has to learn to be more tolerant of Rosie bursting into tears. Both must learn to how to handle senior citizens. What advice would you give these girls?
2. Why are the girls told not to touch wild birds?
3. Find an area in your neighbourhood that needs preserving. Imagine that it will be taken over by a high rise development. Argue the pros and cons.

Write

1. Write a letter to the council arguing that this development should never take place.
2. Write a description of Hannah, her little sister Rosie, and some of the seniors that appear in this story
3. Write a newspaper column offering:
 - advice for handling younger brothers and sisters
 - advice for handling older brothers and sisters

Activities

1. Draw a map of your own neighbourhood. Show built-up areas, parks, reserves, farms and/or uncultivated bush.
2. Survey animals that come to your school and your suburb (include birds). How many species are tame? How many are wild? Have the numbers of wild animals increased or decreased?
3. Find out how the RSPCA and other such organisations care for sick animals.
4. Is there an issue in your community that that people could get together to fight for or against? What is the issue? What action could people take?

Design

1. Draw and colour as many wild birds as you can find: in your neighbourhood, in your state, in your country.
2. Design a poster for advertising the Lame Duck Protest.

Debate

- Development is more important than conservation.
- Wild ducks have to stay wild.

Space Gypsies

Text type: narrative

Text details: first person, past tense, science fiction

Synopsis

This story is very loosely based on Shakespeare's tragedy 'Romeo and Juliet' where two families have been feuding for generations. A nameless girl recounts what happens when four refugee stowaways are found on board her family's spaceship and her older brother (Rom Montague) falls in love with the stowaway teenage daughter (Julietta Capulet).

Themes and issues

The major theme of this story is about the displacement of people from their homes. Other themes include the effect of hatred on individuals, family solidarity, and what the future might hold for us (which is probably not too different, even with more technological advances).

Background

- 'Gypsy' is the term is used for groups of people with a nomadic lifestyle, traditionally including but not restricted to the Romani people who officially carry that name.
- A refugee is a person who, owing to the well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality. This includes those who have fled war or other violence in their home country.
- The last 100 years have been remarkable for two major wars, countless minor conflicts and the death and destruction brought upon millions of innocent people. However, warring between small and larger groups and the impact on individuals is not confined to modern times. Shakespeare knew that focusing on one young couple would bring home the destructive message of hate. In 'Space Gypsies' the story is told through the perspective of an onlooker.

Discussion points

- 1 In Shakespeare's play 'Romeo and Juliet', a boy and a girl from families who hate each other fall in love but everything goes wrong for them. They kill themselves rather than be parted. Is this a realistic plot?
- 2 The father reacts extremely violently to finding this family. Why might someone have this reaction to refugees?

Space Gypsies

Discuss

1. The unknown narrator loves her brother Rom, but she hints that he's not always easy to get on with. Can you find these hints?
2. Who makes up this family? What has happened to the mother? Describe the other members.
3. How come this ship never needs to dock at a Star-Port? How is it 'self sufficient'?
4. Why would a spaceship's occupants need to exercise?
5. Was it a good idea for Rom and Julietta to try for freedom?

Write

1. Why is the ending sad? Can you write a different ending?
2. Write the next 'chapter' in this story – what happens to Rom and Julietta once they leave the spaceship?

Activities

1. Watch Baz Lurhmann's modern film version of 'Romeo and Juliet'.
2. Watch the musical 'West Side Story', where the plot is based on this play.
3. Read the original play.
4. Can you paraphrase this exchange from the original 'Romeo and Juliet' in your own words? It comes from the first meeting between the lovers.

ROMEO: [To JULIET] If I profane with my unworhiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

JULIET: Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

ROMEO: Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

JULIET: Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

ROMEO: O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do;
They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

Debate

- Not all laws are good.
- You should be prepared to risk everything for someone you love.

Raising Ella

Text type: narrative

Text details: third person, present tense, social realism

Synopsis

When Layla comes across Ella, a humpback calf washed up on a beach, Dr Peter Stonnington, a marine biologist, has Ella transported to a special aquatic marina to be cared for until she is old enough to be released back into the sea. Layla and Ella form a strong attachment when Layla persuades the whale to eat by singing to her. But, short of funds, Dr Stonnington sells Ella to 'Ocean World'. Layla's friends attempt to rescue Ella, but their efforts just land them in trouble, and Layla is convinced that Ella will be miserable until she visits and finds a happy whale.

Themes and issues

- The rescue and care of wild animals and marine life
- The children trying to 'rescue' Ella, but in fact endangering her
- How certain words – eg 'raising' – can have multiple meanings

Background

- The sea covers 71% of the Earth's surface. More than half of this area is over 3000 metres deep. A continuous body of water encircling the Earth, the world's oceans are divided into the Pacific, Atlantic, Indian, Arctic and Southern.
- The humpback is a baleen whale. Adults range in length from 12–16 metres and weigh approximately 36,000 kg. The humpback has a distinctive body shape, with unusually long pectoral fins and a knobby head. It is an acrobatic animal, often breaching and slapping the water. Found in oceans and seas around the world, humpback whales typically migrate up to 25,000 km each year. They feed only in summer, in polar waters, and migrate to tropical or subtropical waters to breed and give birth in the winter. During the winter, they fast and live off their fat reserves. Their diet consists mostly of krill and small fish.
- Like other large whales, the humpback was a target for the whaling industry, and its population fell by an estimated 90% before a whaling moratorium was introduced in 1966. Stocks of the species have since partially recovered; however, entanglement in fishing gear, collisions with ships, and noise pollution are ongoing concerns. Once hunted to the brink of extinction, humpbacks are now sought out by whale watchers. Some are still slaughtered for 'scientific' purposes. Current estimates for the abundance of humpback whales range from about 30,000 to 60,000 – approximately one third of pre-whaling levels

Discussion points

- 1 Describe Layla. Given the description of her baby sister Chay, what do you think Layla might look like?
- 2 Ella has lots of personality. How are her actions influenced by her personality?
- 3 Can Ella really sing? Or is this part of Layla's very vivid imagination.

Raising Ella

Write

1. This story plays on the word 'raising' as:

- raising (lifting) a heavy animal
- raising (finding) money to keep the animal happy and safe
- raising (helping) the animal grow up

Write another story using 'raising' in all three ways.

2. Answer these questions in full sentences:

- a. Why has Layla gone to the beach?
- b. How is Ella lifted and carried back to the aquarium?
- c. How does Layla help care for the baby whale?
- d. Why is the aquarium planning to sell Ella?
- e. What is special about Ocean World?

3. Imagine you are Ella. Describe your adventures after being beached on Layla's beach until you reach freedom.

4. You are a journalist. Write an item with the headline: 'Young humpback washed up on beach'.

5. Imagine you are a whale that is endangered or becoming extinct. Argue your case for preservation.

6. Write a mock celebrity interview with Layla and then Ella. Get them to describe what they like about each other

7. Write a different end to this story.

8. Write your own animal story

9. Write a story about the strangest sea animal you have ever come across.

Debate

- Animal rights and laws don't protect enough animals.
- The seas and oceans should be open to everyone.

Birdie Byte

Text type: narrative

Text details: third person, past tense, social realism

Synopsis

Thalia and her mum move to a warmer climate, and Thalia wants a new pet. However, their apartment is too small for a dog or a cat. When she buys a roller canary called Birdie Byte, the shop owner suggests she enter him into a competition. Though Thalia and her single mum struggle financially, Thalia does her best to look after Birdie Byte and in the end all her care pays off.

Themes and issues

- The caring of pets
- Entering pets into competitions
- Keeping a pet in a restricted environment
- Showing strength and resourcefulness

Background information

- The canary is a domesticated form of a small songbird in the finch family originating in Madeira and the Canary Islands. Canaries were brought to Europe by Spanish sailors. Monks began breeding them and sold only the singing males. This kept the birds in short supply and drove the price up. Eventually, the Italians obtained hens and were able to breed the birds themselves. This resulted in the birds being bred all over Europe. First the birds were only owned by the rich, but eventually local citizens took over. Many breeds arose through selective breeding.
- Most roller canaries are about 12 cm in length and have a rather flattened head and straight back. The roller canary's song is produced with the beak closed. This gives it a lower timbre and less shrill sound than the songs of many birds, but they do have the ability to produce high-pitched tones. Many enthusiastic breeders and owners enter their birds in competitions that are taken very seriously.
- Miners' canaries were used as an early form of warning system for the detection of poisonous but odourless carbon monoxide in mines. Canaries were taken down new shafts, and if they behaved oddly, the miners knew that the shaft was unsafe.

Discussion points

1. Thalia and her mum form a family unit. Can you describe their relationship?
2. Does the idea of the need for a close family extend to Birdie Byte?
3. Moving interstate means Thalia has to make new friends. How successful is she?
4. This story shows how even one person's determination can create a successful outcome. Thalia might be shy, but the care and attention she gives Birdie Byte pays off in the end.

Byrdie Byte

Write

1. Write a script describing the roller competition from Birdie Byte's point of view.
2. Compose an email from Cookie and Blog to their son. What does he write back?
3. You have lost your pet. Write and design a missing poster describing your pet and where it was last seen.
4. Write a story called 'My Best Pet'.

Activities

1. Many children live in families where there is not much money. Though this can be hard, there are positive sides to this as children can use their initiative to earn their own pocket money. List some ways you can do this.
2. Research some animal competitions in your city or state, such as the Easter Show.
3. Create a language called 'birdtalk'. Remember that all languages have their own vocabulary and syntax (way of arranging a sentence). Maybe 'birdtalk' syntax doesn't follow the usual rules? Can you write a short paragraph in 'birdtalk'?
4. Reporting on competitions is very much part of our media. Write a report on a competition, for example:
 - best dancer
 - best singer
 - best acrobat
 - best musician
 - best hip-hop performer
 - best magician
 - best cake
 - best friend

Debate

- Pocket money has to be earned.
- Entering animals into competitions is exploitation (using them unfairly for your own profit).

Ferals

Text type: narrative

Text details: past tense, third person, social reality

Synopsis

Lara is visiting her grandmother who lives in dilapidated house in a run-down suburb beside a family of motherless children. Observing the way these kids bully the youngest serves only to remind Laura of how she herself is being bullied at her new school. When offered the part of Frenchy in the school production of 'Grease', Lara doesn't dare take it on. Nor does she feel any empathy for the neighbourhood 'ferals'. Only after she watches how badly one child is treated does she show any compassion.

Themes and issues

The major theme behind this long short story is bullying, which is prevalent in many schools. However, it isn't restricted to youngsters. Adults can experience bullying in the workplace and at home. Bullies are often weak, insecure people who only feel secure when they are overpowering someone else. The key to combating bullies is standing up to them, but this can be difficult if there are too many major obstacles such as differing size and positions of authority.

Background

Bullying is defined as 'a person coercing other by fear/ to persecute or oppress by force or threats.' Mostly we talk about bullying as being inflicted by outsiders. However, some bullying can take place within families; for example, adults abusing children through either physical force or language, older children bullying younger, weaker members, boys bullying girls and girls bullying boys.

Discussion point

Discuss what could be added to this list of ways to overcome bullying:

- Create many highly accessible safe, 'shame-free' zones.
- Talk candidly about the gender straightjacket.
- Create trusting bridges.
- Mentors should connect with kids through actions as well as words.
- Empower kids: train them to be mentors too.
- Bully-proof your neighbourhood and schools.
- Seek appropriate chances to share your own feelings and experiences

Ferals

Discuss

1. What could Lara have done to make her stay with her grandmother a little more enjoyable?
2. Why did Laura change her mind about taking part in the concert?
3. Should Laura have used ice-cream to help the child feel better? What else could she have done?
4. In 'Ferals', Lara has not learnt how to stand up to Skye's bullying behaviour. She has only shown weakness and lack of self-confidence. If you were her friend, what advice would you give?

Write

1. Write a letter from Lara to her father, explaining why she wants to go home.
2. Write a radio play portraying their telephone conversations.
3. Write notes on Grandma's thoughts.
4. Tell the story from a bully's point of view.
5. Write an alternative, perhaps a more selfish, ending.
6. Write a script showing someone who successfully stops the bullying.

Debate

- Bullies should be tolerated – it's only natural.
- Bullies should be punished very severely.