

Some Silent Book Reviews

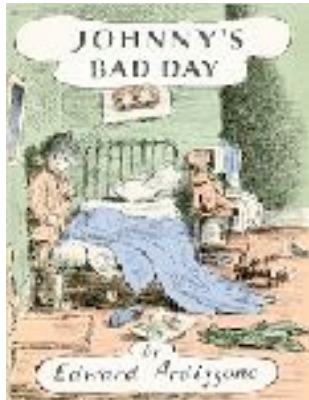


After hosting IBBY's Silent Book Collection in January 2018, staff and students at the University of Glasgow's School of Education wrote brief reviews of a book they had particularly enjoyed in the hope that they might inspire other readers to find pleasure and meaning in them too.



Johnny's Bad Day (1970)

by Edward Ardizzone, (London: Jane Nissen Books)



Review by Julie McAdam

Edward Ardizzone had a prolific career as an artist and worked as an official war artist during the Second World War. He was the first recipient of the Kate Greenaway Medal. He used a distinctive pen and ink style. He is known for his *Little Tim* series, published by Francis Lincoln and later narrated by Stephen Fry.

For further information on the author/illustrator see his website. <http://www.edwardardizzone.org.uk/>

The front cover shows a cross looking child in his pyjamas standing on the wrong side of his bed in a very messy bedroom. The book narrates his day, which keeps going wrong. Ardizzone uses techniques such as imagination bubbles to show Johnny's reactions to the grown ups he meets through his day. The day gets progressively worse, until finally, having ripped his trousers and covering himself in mud, he finds money in his pocket and decides to buy his mother some flowers to make up for his early surliness. The narrative ends with him sitting on his mother's knee, hugging his mother.

I was drawn to the pen and ink illustrations on the front page because they reminded me of Sendak's Nutshell Library collection published in 1962, but given that he illustrated Clive King's *Stig of the Dump*, it is more likely that I was drawn to these illustrations because they reminded me of my childhood.

Activities I would plan:

1. I would like to look at his war illustrations and look at the ways in which he pays attention to everyday details across all his work. These **small details** provide lots of ways to get hooked into the text even when the overriding narrative is unimaginable.
2. I would copy the illustrations and use them to use the idea of narrative order and coherence, perhaps in a jumble and re-order task. This would help children think about planning.
3. I would use this book as a prompt for children to re-tell their own bad days.
4. I would perhaps think about the happy ending and whether alternative endings could have existed.

De Boomhut / The Treehouse (2009)

by Marije Tolman and Ronald Tolman (Lemniscaat: Uitgeverij)



Review by Elisabeth Arnett

Evanescence and constancy, encounters and community: *The Treehouse (De Boomhut, 2009)* traces the discovery of a treehouse by a contented polar bear, joined by a brown bear, soon to be bosom friend. This unlikely trio becomes the anchor in an ever-altering landscape: the ocean through which the polar bear swims to reach the tree disappears gradually to become a sea of vivid pink flamingos. These bring with them various welcome visitors: a rhinoceros (whose excess of zeal nearly topples the treehouse), a benign hippopotamus, a pair of playful pandas, a curious peacock, three lazy, if grudgingly social, owls. Then from the sky – a black bear in a helium-balloon-powered boat! A flock of black birds (crows? Jackdaws? Choughs?) comes to roost and partake in the fellowship of the treehouse.

Evening washes the page in peach pink. The day has been eventful, each page tracing the various discoveries and interactions of the animals in the magical hut. Magical, because although the treehouse appears two dimensional and transparent to us, its surfaces, depths, reaches, nooks and crannies are all explored and filled by the menagerie. Now, a newly installed lantern is lit, and the visitors depart by wing, hoof or boat.

Two distinct scenes follow: a richly textured sky, dotted with flamingos, accompanies the reverie of our duo. Pastel, watercolour, etchings and sketches give relief and movement to the clouds above their heads. Snow then falls thickly over the hut and into the waiting net of Brown Bear, while Polar Bear watches from the lit interior of the treehouse.

The seasons, the day and the book come to an end. The bears are perched on the roof, the moon is full. The night is falling. Although still an empty sketch, the treehouse is now lit up from within.

Is *The Treehouse* about the transience of community in a global village, the ambiguous status of the ocean in a polluted and warming world? Is it about the constructive power of the imagination, allowing what simply appears to be an empty sketch to become a living home? Or the unexpected pleasures of friendship? Is it a book about reading, where the bears' choice to open themselves to a book brings the world to their front door?

Whatever the questions it raises, the evocative artwork and cheerful ease of its characters makes each page of the *The Treehouse* a landscape one wants to dwell in, a two dimensional space one can travel into, a space one can fill.

Het Eiland/ The Island (2012)

by Marije Tolman and Ronald Tolman (Lemniscaat: Uitgeverij)



Review by Elisabeth Arnett

The Island (Het Eiland, 2012) plays with its readers. Its cover makes it seem as though it will be about a single point again, like *The Treehouse*.

Nope.

A close-up wisp of cloud on the title page becomes a vast ocean view, the cloud a dramatic mountain perched over a distant island. Suddenly we've zoomed in again. And our polar bear climbs out of the cloud on a string ladder!

Polar Bear meets a multitude of puffins; she then meets a single duck while swimming under a very Japanese-looking wave.¹ Like the artists, she can move seamlessly from multitude to individual. She joins schools of fish and dolphins, aquatic cassowaries, pelicans, squirrels and an intrepid sloth in exploring an artificial structure jutting out of the sea.

Her day is spent in exploration. She and various other animals voyage from island to island, be they natural landmasses or simple scaffolding. The artists' lenses shift from the most affectionate details to vast, bleak seascapes. The twilight is lit up by Polar Bear's discovery of music: a racoon on a violin, on a structure beyond the island on which most of the other land animals have settled.

Once more, the story is wrapped up in the blanket of the night. The violin is laid to rest, now a two dimensional sketch. Racoon cuddles Polar Bear. Polar Bear gazes into the stars.

Having drawn Polar Bear in the context of the home, Marije Tolman and Roland Tolman now send her on a journey. It is difficult not to think of all the nature documentaries in which polar bears swim, swim, swim, until their fatigue drowns them. Indeed, among her companions on this adventure are a family of dodos! But the warm and endlessly cheerful palette of the book belies this more sinister reading. The child-like imitation of Hokusai's Kanawaga Wave, along with the musical coda at the close of the tale, suggest that wonder, art and nature are the ocean in which all the characters swim, and the island on which friendships can be built.

¹ I say "she", because my polar bear Ruban has always been female!

***The Polar Bear* (2012)**

By Mi-Jung Lee (Korea: I-Seum)



Review by Elisabeth Arnett

It is difficult to glean a narrative of comfort and hope from this text. Beautifully painted in watercolours, *Polar Bear* tells the story of the escape (imaginary or real, we do not know) of one of the polar bears from an inner city zoo. Following a child's balloon, he wanders around a fairground, into the subways, across the streets, through a dump, through residential areas, until he finally sees the balloon on a publicity billboard, and crosses *into* the screen to follow.

The narrative is marked by ambiguity and irresolution: is the door of the polar bear enclosure really left open? The door is painted onto a white page with no adjacent walls or context: more of a symbol than a situation. Wandering through the city, the bear is unnoticed and invisible, only drawing attention to himself when he attempts to cross a busy road. Finally, after he crosses the screen of the billboard, there is a shift from realism to marked symbolism. Standing on a sea (or is it blue paving stones?), he gazes up a stone staircase that disappears into the clouds, and leads to a train stop in the sky. The next page is more confusing: a very aged locomotive chugs through a jarring landscape of white, sepia and beige clouds. They are distinctly different to the wispy unassuming clouds of the city.

The narrative ends with a contented polar bear (a marked difference to the dejected and depressed polar bear of the first page) smelling a red fish (the balloon?) that has floated out to his nose. It has separated itself from the river of fish that swirl through the air, in the same reptilian curves the train did. Other polar bears attend this paradise, static in their postures, swimming rigidly in the paving-stone sea.

So what is this book? A story that veers into parable, addressing itself to a generation of screen-lovers, inhabitants of virtual reality? A tale of the lost innocence of 'the city'? (Throughout the polar bear's wanderings, teddy bears make appearances: in the arms of children on every page until we see one discarded in a dump.) Or is it, like so many

children's books, a celebration of the imagination? The most lonely and artificial conditions can become the platform for adventure and wonder.

On closing the book, the bear behind bars maintains its doleful vigil.

La Surprise (2010)

By Janik Coat (France: éditions MeMo)



Review by Jennifer Horan

A cat shares a special bond with its female owner, and this relationship endures many changes in circumstances. But when the owner leaves one night and later returns with a new baby, the cat is nowhere to be found. Life continues for the owner and her baby, though the cat's absence is felt. Until one day when the cat returns...with a surprise of its own.

The cover (image of a cat) does not give much away, so anything is possible! There is a twist in the tale towards the end of the story, when the true surprise is revealed, and this adds to the enjoyment of the reading experience. The title "La Surprise" is similar to the English word, however there is no need for any knowledge of the French language in order to understand this book.

As a cat lover, the storyline of this book appeals to me. There is a clear narrative that runs through the book without the need for words. The bold illustrations are pleasing to look at, and there is good use of colour and page design. The happy ending is touching and uplifting, and made me smile.

The text has a minimalist style of illustration – there are very few images on each page, but bold images and colours fill the page. This book could be linked to *Ginger* by Charlotte Voake (in which a cat deals with a new kitten – could be helpful for children who have new siblings). Other good books to link to include: *The New Small Person* by Lauren Child; *There*

Are Cats In This Book by Viviane Schwarz (a lift the flap book); the *Mog* series by Judith Kerr (has a similar illustrative style).

In the classroom or a similar setting, you could ask pupils to write down some words or phrases (feelings/thoughts of characters, dialogue, actions, adjectives etc) on post-it notes. They should then take turns to stick any appropriate words to the pages of the book to help tell the story. Using vocabulary from any language taught or used in a school, pupils could work in groups to retell the story in another language. Fluency is not required here, one word per page will work just as well.

Another idea is to print small images of each page and stick them to skittles hidden around the classroom. Pupils must find the skittles and place them in the order that the images appear in the story. Once all skittles are in the correct order, pupils may bowl to knock them down.

***Foxly's Feast* (2010)**

By Owen Davey (Surrey England: Templar publishing)



Review by Soumi Dey

A fox goes around a wood, meeting different animals. It seems as if he has food and shopping on his mind. Being a 'silent' book, all the reader sees is a fork and spoon in a speech bubble coming out of the fox - meaning the fox might be hungry and he's looking for a meal. The artwork depicts different expressions of the fox, making him look eager and happy to meet the other animals. But the expressions can also be read as greedy and sly. All the animals he encounters, like chickens, rabbits etc., are those that a fox is known to hunt. Taking cues from the title, the reader is led to think that the fox might feast on the animals. The story's benign setting counterpointed with the fox's seemingly evil intent keeps us turning the pages till the final big surprise is revealed.

Upon first reading, it seems that the fox is really hungry and he is plotting how to hunt the animals he meets around the wood/farmyard. Yet there is a surprise. The final spread reveals all the animals eating together in a convivial gathering. The fox was, in truth, inviting all the animals to his feast and also collecting different foods like fruit and vegetables to serve at the feast. Contrary to our expectations, the fox was vegetarian just as all the other invited friends.

This book has no words/written text in the narrative, so no language is needed to understand the story. There are lots of things to look out for, including the owl, which is present on every page. The owl seems to be a good friend of Fox and is complicit in his plans for the feast.

Also, look for the bag the fox is carrying which grows in size with every page turn. This provides clue to the food that the fox has collected with the intention to serve at the feast. Try to gauge the fox's changing expressions.

I enjoyed the book for its humour and excellent artwork. The colour palette is pleasing with its earthy tones of oranges and greens. I also admired the skill with the expressions and body language of the fox, which seemed to provide a number of clues, albeit misleading at times.

Other books this reminds me of include *Rosie's Walk* by Pat Hutchins (when a fox attempts to eat a chicken and is foiled at every stage) and *Rabbits* by Emily Gravett (where the author claims that the wolf is vegetarian and didn't eat the rabbit because wolf is friends with the rabbit).

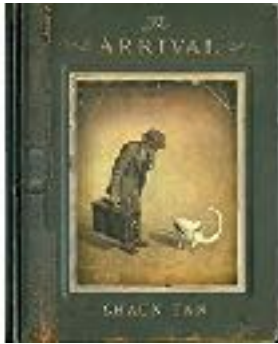
This book can potentially be used with children of different ages. Children can respond through pictures and craft work. Older children can work in groups and can work together for a classroom project.

Some suggestions include:

1. Provide speech bubbles so children can draw what every character is thinking, not just the fox. Use words or dialogue in the speech bubbles to add to the narrative.
2. Look at the different expressions of the fox and other characters and discuss the possible feelings. Name those emotions.
3. Talk about food and how it helps in creating friendships. Favourite foods and when they are usually eaten.
4. Discuss what makes a good feast. Make a list of the things to do when organising a feast/party.
5. Draw alternative ending(s) to the story.

The Arrival (2006)

By Shaun Tan (Australia: Lothian Children's Books)



Review by Ellie Williams

The Arrival is a migrant story told as a series of wordless, pencil drawn images and set in a uniquely timeless framework. A man, leaving behind his wife and child, embarks on a journey to a distant land in search of a more stable future for his family. Upon arrival, the man is examined, cataloged, and labelled. Then, burdened with the knowledge he must find food, shelter and a job that will provide for his family, he encounters a series of supportive strangers who help him navigate around the obscurities and unfamiliarities of this new city and its customs - including alien-like creatures, a foreign language of symbols and bizarre floating objects. Each person he meets also bear their own tales of loss, belonging, violence and hope.

What immediately struck me about the book was the distinctive elements of mystery that make for a surreal and mesmerising read. The cover is an illustration of the young man with his suitcase curiously observing what appears to be a friendly, but completely unfamiliar, creature to both the protagonist and the reader. As follows, through this use of absurdist detail, we see the story unfold through the lens of a newcomer and the obstacles experienced when trying 'belong' in a new place with an unknown future, having left behind your loved ones. The book draws attention to what it means to 'belong' and the value in welcoming outsiders, sharing stories with one another and recognising that each and every person has a past - thus paying tribute to all those who have embarked on similar journeys throughout history.

In one scene, the man attempts to communicate with a local city dweller by drawing pictures as he cannot speak the native tongue. This emphasises the power and importance of visual imagery and its ability to tell a cross cultural story. One device I found particularly striking is the subtle changes in colour throughout the book that help distinguish time frames, illustrate mood changes and depict different settings. Ranging from a colour palette of black and

white to sepia, and everything in between, as though a worn-out photo album of the past, moments and memories of beauty are captured with an orange tint, whereas tales of past violence have a darker hue. This technique again gives the story an artistic timelessness, unfamiliar to all and yet applicable to any family in migrant history. Whilst depicting a strong sense of displacement and isolation, the reader also shares the character's ultimate joys.

I think that comparisons can be drawn between Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* and *Becoming Unbecoming* by Una, another surrealist graphic novel. Una deftly uses visual metaphor to make a powerful stance - a call for the importance of listening to the voices of oppressed women. The illustrations in both these books are beautiful and haunting, standing for those who have suffered similar hardships but who cannot necessarily voice their oppression.

As a teaching device, *The Arrival* could be used to discuss issues of representation - race, class and gender. Children could draw connections between their own lives and understanding of the world with the immigrant's story by attaching words to the images and analysing the effect this has to the book overall. If working with refugee children, they could be asked to draw comparisons between their own experiences and the protagonist's in the book, whether the images portray any similar emotions and events they have endured and how Tan has managed to capture this through his art. They could draw up a storyboard of their own journey, using any chosen art form, after discussing the challenges of telling a story with no words. They could compare finished pieces with one another, noting similarities and differences in style and technique and reviewing whether they think their 'silent' story could be communicated across cultures and languages.

A 'silent' book is powerful in the diverse ways it can be used as an educational and a delightful teaching resource. Pictures can bring people together in understanding where sometimes words cannot, using art as a means of communicating and sharing experiences and emotions that are universal.

Zachem? / Why? (1995)

By Popov, Nikolai (Salzberg: Ripol Classic Publishing House)



Review by Meng-Ying Liu

A frog, a mouse, a flower, and an umbrella cause the start a big fight between frogs and mice. The story seems to begin in the middle of nowhere, with green, green grass and bunches of white flowers. The story actually starts on the front cover, with the frog sitting on a log, enjoying a beautiful flower. As we open the book and flip to the title page, the frog plucks up the flower and holds it in his hands with delight. Suddenly, something seems to be coming out from below... it is a mouse with an umbrella. Obviously, the mouse wants the flower too, so he tries to take it from the frog. The situation becomes more serious as the other frogs join the fight, and the mouse also calls his friends for help. In the end, the entire field is destroyed, with only the mouse and the frog left, alone on the bare land with no flowers at all.

At first, I thought this book is about the adventure of the frog and his love for the flower—I never expected a 'war' to be coming up. I liked how the whole scenery differed from the start to the end. The contrasting colours of the first picture and the last picture also parallels with the colours on the mouse and the frog. The reason I like this book so much is its connection to the war. If you read the story from the middle onwards, you would probably expect the cause of the war to be extremely serious, since it concerns two different races (frog and mice), and the impact is catastrophic (everything is destroyed). Ironically, all this disaster comes from merely a flower. So if you examine the first few pages again, you would realise that there are flowers everywhere. So why bother fighting on that specific flower? And this question echoes with the title which I failed to understand at first—it means 'Why?' in Russian. Why there is a war? Why we bother to start a war? Why we need a war? And why it all happens because of something that insignificant?

A pas de pallaso (2000)

By Teresa Duran and Francesc Rovira (France: La Galera)



Review by Maureen Farrell

This is the story of a clown who follows an interesting butterfly inside the circus tent where he finds a beautiful ballerina dancing. He is immediately entranced by her and desperate to dance like she does. The ensuing efforts are hilarious and beautifully drawn. He persists – shown in a series of black and white silhouette illustrations - until they suddenly realise that the reason he's having problems is his shoes. The clever clown has an idea how to solve his problem and his solution seem to prove successful.... Up to a point! The ensuing adventures are hilarious, exciting, heart-stopping and laugh-out-loud funny. However there is a happy ending for the clown and the ballerina.

From the front cover a reader might expect a circus story about a clown but though the illustration does give away a major point of the story it is not immediately obvious and doesn't spoil the surprise. I don't speak Spanish so I'm not sure how much the blurb at the back of the book gives away.

The humour of the book was what surprised me and the beautiful and quirky illustrations. It does not matter one bit what language the book is published in.

I loved the humour and the absolutely endearing and at times child-like quality of the clown. (This is definitely not a scary clown!) I liked it because he saw something he wanted to do himself and was willing to try it and to make a fool of himself and to persevere when he wasn't immediately successful. I loved his resourcefulness and problem-solving abilities and I loved his willingness to embrace adventure and take risks.

The butterfly is an interesting character in the story as a means of capturing both the clown's and the readers' interest and as a plot device to entice us into the story and the clown into the tent. (It would be fun working with children to track the butterfly and consider its

importance in the story.) The depiction of movement in the illustrations is another element worth commenting on. How is that achieved in a static and silent picturebook? There's a great deal to be learned looking at the body language of the characters and the expressions on faces – though at all times the clown is in full make-up, and that too is worth talking about. There are themes to be explored about flying, and ropes and apparatus and health and safety and happy endings.

I immediately thought of another wordless picturebook *Clown* by Quentin Blake and there are obvious links. There's a good piece about that book and wordless picturebooks on the Scottish Book Trust website at this link <http://www.scottishbooktrust.com/blog/bookbug/2016/06/clowning-around-with-wordless-picture-books>

Also *Katie Morag and the Dancing Class* by Mairi Hedderwick, though this is not a wordless picturebook

Things to do in the classroom:

Link to Health and wellbeing, PE, drama and dance in particular; learn a Scottish dance, watch a video of a ballet dancer; watch a trapeze artist in the circus

Choose pieces of music to use with different pages and create a soundscape to go with the book

Have a face-painting lesson

En El Silencio Del Bosque (2010)

By Cristina Pérez Navarro (Barcelona, Spain: A buen paso)



Review by Kili Connors

This wordless picturebook follows a little girl, reminiscent of Little Red Riding Hood in her red dress, whose ball rolls into the forest as she enters to retrieve it. Each illustrated page coincides with a mirroring page of a single colour. The colours match the feeling of the ensuing page but slowly transform from negative to positive connotations as the story progresses and the little girl becomes more comfortable in the forest. The protagonist is scared and alone of the silent forest at first so the page of blue emotes a sense of sadness; whereas once she befriends a sweet bear and little bird as playtime pals, the next appearance of blue shows the bear saving the runaway ball in a rushing river. The three go on an adventure and have a sweet farewell as the girl returns to her home, with the bear and bird reading this very book to remember their new friend.

Because I speak Spanish I was able to translate the title to 'In the Silence of the Forest,' but a non-native speaker may take the hint from the cover that the story would be about a girl playing in nature. I love this book for its simplicity and sweet friendship between the girl and bear, who she starts off afraid of and, through play and no words, becomes friends and has such relief when the bear survives his encounter with a waterfall to save her ball. Meanwhile, the use of colour to depict different feelings is universal for children around the globe: red for both anger and happiness/love. For this reason, I think this book could be used in the classroom to understand the relationships between colours and feelings and the unfamiliar. For younger students, a trip to a park or some other natural environment to explore some of the images in the book, like the birds and trees, etc. This picturebook is ideal for teaching visual literacy as it shows imaginative situations that students would be still able to recognise the book's *feelings* because of the use of everyday colours. Overall, a very sweet and colourful story of a child in nature children around the world could all enjoy.

The Wave (2008)

By Suzy Lee (San Francisco: Chronicle Books)



Review by Emma Malcomson

This beautiful wordless picture book tells the story of a little girl who spends her day at the beach. The illustrations were created using just two shades of watercolour and their simplicity lends to the evocativeness of the book. The pictures tell the story of a little girl who is playing at the beach but is afraid of the ocean. To begin with she is very timid of the water, standing at the edge and watching the waves lap in and out on the shore and appears to be enraptured. Gradually she edges closer until she is dancing in the waves which break on the sand, realising the water isn't something she needs to be afraid of. The rest of the book shows her playing happily in the water, embracing the small waves which crash into her legs until a larger one comes and completely knocks her off her feet. To begin with she seems sad and afraid again, until she notices that this larger wave washed up seashells onto the sand and she is delighted to gather them up.

Based on the title and the front cover of this book I was expecting the story to be about a journey, possibly overseas. I was surprised by how powerful the illustrations were as a result of their simplicity and the depth of emotion Lee was able to convey through the character of the little girl. The illustrations captivate the reader and the story is clear and easy to follow even without the use of text, meaning the reader would not need to be a native English speaker in order to understand the story that is told.

What I particularly liked about this book is that it will be relatable for so many of its readers, since it is about a little girl's first encounter with the ocean. The fact that the waves are the only part of the book which are in colour symbolise the allure the ocean holds for the little girl

and as it is a wordless picture book the story is told almost completely through the expressions Lee has depicted on the little girl's face.

Within a classroom setting this picture book would be fabulous for younger readers as it would open the concept of visual literacy to them and help them explore how images can hold meaning and information in similar ways to reading text. They can use these images to create the story for themselves, helping to develop their imagination and meaning-making skills.

Bramenjam (2010)

By Natashca Stenvert (Antwerp: The House of Books)



Review by Jennifer Farrar

This is the quirky, funny and utterly engaging tale of a middle-aged couple's pursuit of a pot of bramble jam. Having spotted a patch of brambles during their drive home, the couple return with a bucket and intend to collect some of the juicy fruit. Sadly, their harvest is 'spoiled' (for a reason I won't 'spoil' here either) and they resort to growing their own crop in the apparent safety of their back garden. The plants and berries grow, the fruit is picked and the much-anticipated jam is made, but will they ever get to eat their bramble jam and bread...? Read the book and find out!

One of the reasons this book both engrosses and entertains is the multiple narratives at work on every double-page spread. Readers can choose to follow the story of the family of little monkeys who are evicted from their hedgerow home close to the start of the novel; there is also the romantic tale of an escaped crocodile who falls madly in love with an inflatable version of itself; and there is also the curious plot that unfolds inside the framed picture that hangs on the jam-making couple's living room wall. The main story of the jam-making weaves in and around these events, being shaped by and shaping the outcomes of all the separate narratives.

While the book is funny, it also carries some potentially serious themes, such as the matter of the tiny monkeys losing their home or the value of being a 'good neighbour' (and what this means in our societies).

Some ideas for using this book inside the classroom include:

Putting voices to the picture: pick a character or part of the story. How would you tell it in words? How might someone else in your class tell it? What can we learn about each other from our different retellings?

Act it out: create a play script based on your favourite bit of the book. What bits have been left in? What has been left out? How else might this story be told?

Go out and pick some brambles and investigate how to make some jam. Even better, do what the couple in the book does, and plant the berries from seed. You could practise writing instructions for growing and caring for bramble or for jam-making (or both).