

Teaching Ideas for the CILIP Carnegie Medal Shortlist 2019

Title: *The House with Chicken Legs*

Author: Sophie Anderson

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This is a sequence of sessions aimed at Upper KS2.

Marinka lives with her grandmother, a Yaga whose vocation is to guide the dead through The Gate from where they float off to the stars. Baba believes that her granddaughter will inherit her role as Guardian but Marinka longs to make friends with the living and is frustrated because, as soon as she gets to know someone, their house rises up on chicken legs and moves to another location. When Baba goes through The Gate herself what will Marinka do?

Before You Start

The House with Chicken Legs addresses complex and serious themes amidst its adventurous page-turning narrative, 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. As Baba Yaga's role in this book is to guide the dead, inevitably many of the characters are forced to reflect on their own mortality as well as dealing with grief and bereavement. Teachers will want to be aware of any children who have experienced bereavement, and show appropriate sensitivity as the book is read.

Session 1 (Prologue, Chapters 1–4: page 1 - 60)

Share the front cover of the book and allow children to discuss what they notice, their expectations, their predictions and any questions inspired by the title and by the cover illustration (which is the work of Melissa Castrillón). The skulls on the fence, the character's red dress, the corvid, the forest/woodland setting and the fantastical nature of the house may encourage the class to make connections with traditional tales, legends and mythology from various cultures and countries. Some children may have come across the idea of a moving chicken-legged house from the Baba Yaga stories or from its use in other narratives (such as the Miyazaki animated film *Howl's Moving Castle*).

After reading the prologue, allow time for the children to respond with their initial impressions of the characters, the story and the world in which it is set. *What did it make them think about? How did it make them feel?* You might use Aidan Chambers' basic booktalk questions (*Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk*, Aidan Chambers, Thimble Press, 2011) to scaffold their initial conversations: *Tell me...was there anything you liked about this book? Was there anything that you particularly disliked...? Was there anything that puzzled you? Were there any patterns...any connections that you noticed...?*

As the book continues to be read, the children will benefit from regular opportunities to return to these questions and share their personal responses to the key events and character developments as they occur. As part of their ongoing conversation, they may also note, discuss and clarify any unfamiliar language that appears, investigating its origins as well as its meaning. As well as any classroom resources that might support them in their investigations, they can also make use of 'Marinka's Glossary' which Sophie Anderson includes at the back of the book (p340-341). Either as a class or individually, children may wish to keep their

own glossary of words from the text, including any etymological or morphological findings from their investigations.

Within the first two chapters, the reader will develop a growing understanding of the role of the Yaga, the house and 'the gate' in guiding the dead. Use the children's questions as a starting point to explore the origins of the Baba Yaga mythos specifically, as well as the wider myths and legends surrounding characters whose role it is to guide the dead. These are referred to collectively as psychopomps and include such figures as Anubis, Charon and the Grim Reaper. Many cultures have their own versions of the psychopomp figure. *Are there any common characteristics or patterns in how these figures are depicted in stories and in other art forms?*

To summarise the events in the novel as well as their responses to it so far, it would be useful to create a Role on the Wall for both Marinka and for Baba. These will be useful to make notes on or record ideas (either individually or as a larger group) as you move through the text. To create a Role on the Wall, draw an outline to represent the character on a large sheet of paper. Around the outside of the outline, record the character's external characteristics – these might include actions taken by the character, things that the character says and words or phrases to describe their appearance. Inside the outline, the class can write words or phrases to describe the character's internal characteristics – how they feel, what they might be thinking and words we might use to describe their personality.

The role on the wall posters could be begun after reading the first full chapter ('Guiding The Dead' page 11-24), but should be returned to repeatedly as the reader gains new insights into both of these characters. 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 point out similarities and differences between characters, as well as to explore their respective relationships with the house itself and with Jack.

Support children's visualisation of the text by returning to the moment on page 17 when the gate appears. Read the text from "*The Gate appears in the corner of the room...*" to "*...water smashes against the glassy mountains.*" As you read, ask them to close their eyes and picture the scene unfolding as if it were a movie in their mind. Read the short passage aloud two or three times and then ask them to describe to a partner what they pictured in their mind's eye. *Were there any particular words or phrases which the author used which were particularly evocative in helping to form the visualisation?*

After reading the next couple of chapters which introduce the character of Benjamin ('Benjamin' p25-38; 'A Too Heavy Blanket' p39-47), consider the impact – positive or negative – this relationship could have on Marinka's world. Give the class the opportunity to predict the impact that Benjamin's appearance in the narrative might have on Marinka's character and journey. *When Benjamin invites her to go for a walk, do they think that she should join him? Why/why not? What are the potential consequences? Why do they think Baba has warned her from going beyond the fence or speaking to 'the living'? What might the imagery of the 'too-heavy blanket' (page 43) tell us about how Marinka is feeling and her relationship with Baba and the house?*

During the reading of the next chapter ('Beyond the Fence' p48-60), you might pause on page 57 to consider the concept of destiny which is raised in the book several times. On page 54, Marinka asks Benjamin if he believes in destiny. Clarify the meaning of this word with the children. *What does it mean to be 'destined'*

*to do something or be something? To what extent does the class believe in the idea of destiny? You might use a decision line to explore different points of view amongst the children. Mark out a real (or imaginary) line across the teaching space where children can position themselves based on their personal response: one end of the line being a firm belief in destiny, the opposite end being a firm disbelief and every possible scale between these two points of view. Are there any other characters they know of in mythology, legend or popular culture who have been seen by themselves or by others as being destined for a particular purpose and sometimes referred to as 'the chosen one' (e.g. Luke Skywalker in the Star Wars saga, Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*, Harry Potter, etc.)?*

Destiny is a prevalent theme throughout the book. At the end of this first section of the story, note down any other themes that children might have noticed. Noting and discussing potential themes will support children's knowledge of story structures and concepts. These may include Marinka's desire to escape her destiny and therefore the idea of free will, or of following your dreams; the concept of self-identity: how we see ourselves and the place of family and community within that is a recurring motif; and of course, the theme of the cycle of life and death, including ideas around the afterlife and therefore different belief systems. Jot down any of the children's thoughts around the themes of the book, many of which may be interlinked. Examples of these themes as they occur could be noted on a working wall or in a reading journal throughout the exploration of the text.

To further support children's understanding and engagement with the larger shape of the story, as well as patterns within that structure, as well as the Role on the Wall posters, you could start and then maintain a Graph of Emotion. Sequence the key events from this part of the novel along the bottom axis of a large scale class graph. Start by working with the children to establish what the key events in the story are for Marinka and summarise these. Once these key moments are established, move to the scale of emotion which is written alongside the vertical axis. Draw on the children's repertoire of vocabulary to describe Marinka's range of emotions throughout the story so far. Use these to plot Marinka's emotional response to each of the events in the first part of the novel. As you continue to share the rest of the story, add to Marinka's emotional journey or arc.

Session 2 (Chapters 5–10, p61-120)

Display and discuss the quote "*Some things just are and we can't change them.*" (page 64) referring back to earlier discussions around the positive and negative views about destiny, including how Marinka and Baba might feel about it.

Children can respond to the conversation between Baba and Marinka in the book (p62-68) as another opportunity to add to their understanding of the characters and the relationship between them. *What does Marinka want? What is she willing to say and what does she want to keep secret? What is most important to Baba? How does she feel about Marinka and how does this impact on how she might react to Marinka's hopes and dreams? Are there any obstacles to them being able to communicate clearly to one another? Is either of them able or willing to compromise their viewpoint? Children might consider what they still don't know about one or both of these characters and note their own questions that they might want to ask the characters (and then consider the response that they might expect that character to give). You may consider*

using role play or teacher in role to explore potential responses to these questions, and then to add to children's Role on the Wall for both Marinka and Baba.

Over the next two chapters ('Nina' and 'Learning to Swim' p71-91), consider Marinka's growing friendship with Nina. During one of their earliest conversations, Marinka says to the reader/herself "*Nothing is forever. Everything moves on*" (page 78). *Why is Marinka stopping Nina from moving on? What might be the consequence of Nina not going through the gate? Should Nina be moving on or should she be able to stay with Marinka?* Children might link this to the characters' visit to the nest of the ant lion and their conversation about it (page 80-81). *Are there times when it is right to disrupt the natural cycle of life and death? Why/why not?*

Revisit the section of text on page 84-86 where Baba helps Marinka to practise the 'Death Journey Words'. Where necessary, support the children in clarifying the meaning of certain words or phrases. *Why has Baba – and the author – chosen these particular words to describe the journey? What do they tell us about the Yaga's role and the journey that the dead are taking?* When Marinka says that the stars are "*waiting for you*", Baba corrects her – "*calling for you.*" *What is the difference between these word choices? What might their impact be on the reader/listener?*

In Chapter 8 ('Serina'), Marinka directly lies to Nina. *How do the children feel about this? Why do they think she is avoiding telling Nina the truth? Should she tell Nina the truth? Is Marinka's behaviour selfless or selfish?* Marinka debates these questions with herself. Children might work in small groups to return to the first few pages of the chapter, rereading and text marking to highlight any words or phrases that demonstrate Marinka struggling with her decisions about Nina.

Throughout this section of the book, support the children in building empathy with Marinka and understanding why she does the things that she does, why she makes these particular decisions. They might personally reflect on moments when they have chosen to hide the truth because they thought it would benefit somebody else; you might debate wider questions such as whether there are circumstances in which lying is the right choice; you could provide opportunities to briefly write in role as the character.

Return to the moment at which Baba warns Marinka not to step over the gate's threshold (page 101). *Why might this be? What would happen if she did? What more do we understand about Baba's role in guiding the dead?* Note down any questions that the children may have in response to this moment – *what do they want to know or to find out?* Work together to explore potential answers, predictions and possibilities.

At the end of chapter 10 (The Beach, page 108-120), allow children time to respond to the revelation that Marinka is also fading and what they think this could mean. Encourage the children to link any theories or predictions to other events or puzzles in the story so far.

Session 3 (Chapters 11–16, p121-197)

In Chapter 11 (Truth and Lies, p121-136), we begin to learn the truth about Marinka's background and how she came to live with Baba. Allow children to share their initial responses and then discuss why they think Baba has kept this a secret for so long. *Is this different to Marinka hiding the truth from Nina? Why/why not? Why do you think Baba chose not to tell Marinka? Do you think she is telling Marinka the whole truth now? If you were Marinka, what more might you want to know/what questions would you ask?*

During this section of the book, Marinka has to redefine how she imagines herself and what her identity is. *To what extent does she still have an identity which is linked to the Yaga house and its inherent responsibilities?* While Marinka knows that she is not a Yaga by birth, she becomes increasingly aware of the consequences of not guiding the dead through the gate. Her long relationship with the house also influences her desires and her actions. Continue to add to the Role on the Wall posters and at key moments provide opportunities to write in role as Marinka to support ongoing reflection and understanding of her character's journey.

After reading the story within a story - 'The Baby Who Would Not Be Guided' (p163-165) – pause to consider the significance of this Yaga Tale to Marinka and to the reader. *Why might the old Yaga have given it to Marinka to read? Why has Sophie Anderson included it in the book? What role does it play in terms of developing our understanding of the key characters and the world in which they exist?* You might also distribute copies of the story to allow children to look more closely at the language the author uses to tell this story – *what type of story is it? In what way does it feel different to the regular narrative voice? What grammatical choices are being made and what impact might they have on the reader?*

Use the notations on our Role on the Wall for Marinka to compare her characteristics with those of Salma. *In what ways is Salma similar to or different from Marinka? Do our opinions and reflections around Salma change as we (and Marinka) get to know her?*

At the end of this section, reflect on Marinka's position, options, needs, etc... *How does she feel? What does she want? What would you say to her if you could?*

Session 4 (Chapters 17–22, p198-269)

At the start of this section, support the children in developing personal connections and empathy with Marinka. As Chapter 17 ('The Riad') begins, discuss how Marinka is feeling and how this is reflected in her language choices, e.g. *"I tell myself the house will be fine..."* and the impact of the anthropomorphisation of the house (*"sadness in the skylights", "disappointment in the rafters"*). *How are Marinka's feelings of guilt exhibited to the reader? Where do these feelings come from? Have they ever felt guilty about something that they said or did or felt?* It needn't be necessary for children to share these personal experiences if they don't wish to, but provide time for reflection. *If they have felt that way, what made them feel better? Could similar behaviours or actions be applied to Marinka's situation?*

At the end of this chapter, discuss the relationship between Marinka, Salma and Lamya. *How do they behave when they're together? Are their characteristics similar? Why are they friends? Is this how you would define/recognise friendship? Why/why not? How do they impact on Marinka's view of the living? Do you agree with her? Why/why not?* Children might use their Role on the Wall or Graph of Emotion notes to compare Marinka's relationships in these chapters with her previous relationships with Benjamin, Nina and Baba. *How might her relationship with these characters influence her journey, her decisions and choices moving forward?* The class might note down their personal predictions for these characters.

At this point in the novel, the house has travelled to a number of different places. Although there are clues as to the general location given through descriptions of climate, environment, flora and fauna, food, dress and language, the specific cities or countries are not named. *Why do you think the settings and locations*

are not specified? Would you prefer to know? Did it matter where it was set? Could it just as well been set anywhere? Or could it have been better set somewhere else? Did you think about the place as you were reading?

During the following chapter ('The Expanding Universe'), refer back to the theme of destiny discussed earlier in the novel. The Old Yaga tells Marinka, "You have a choice" (page 219). *Do they agree that Marinka has a choice? Has her future already been determined or is she free to choose where she goes and what she does and who she is? How does Marinka respond? Why do you think she responds in that way? Later, she tells the Old Yaga that she wants to and is ready to bond with her house and start guiding even though this isn't true. She believes that the lie is worth telling because it will give her the opportunity to save Baba. Is this the right thing to do? Is she starting to make the same mistakes she made with Baba all over again with the Old Yaga?*

After reading Chapter 19, continue to build on children's responses to Marinka's relationship with Salam and Lamya. *Does Marinka blame Salma ("You tried to turn me into something I'm not" p232) or does she blame herself ("I wanted to be something I'm not")? How might all of the new insights Marinka is having into her background, her relationships, and her family be having on her self-identity? What does the admission that "I wanted to be something I'm not" tell you about how Marinka views herself at this moment? Should she be limited to a single view or a single possibility? Should all of our possibilities be limited by how others see us, or even by how we see ourselves?*

Discuss the Old Yaga's advice: "There are more good people than bad people in this world. You just have to be careful, and choose your friends wisely" (p235). *What do you think the Old Yaga wants for Marinka? What makes you think that? Use the Role on the Wall that was created for Baba to compare her to the Old Yaga. Have your opinions changed since she was introduced to the story?*

As a class, investigate the impact of authorial language and sentence structure choices by undertaking a close reading of the start of Chapter 22 ('Darkness', page 262). *What do they notice as the text is read aloud? How does it make them feel? What do they picture in their mind's eye? Now, use a visualiser or a scanner to display the text from the first paragraph so that everyone see it. Reread the text with the children. What do they notice? How do the words, sentences and paragraph work to slow down the action? It might be compared as the literary equivalent of slow motion in television or action cinema. How does she slow down the action and what impact does it have on the reader? Children might make links with other texts – novels, picture books, poetry or comics – where the author or illustrator is able to manipulate our perception of time, slowing things down or speeding things up, to create an effect on the reader.*

Session 5 (Chapters 23–28 and Epilogue, p270-337)

On page 279, Marinka reflects that "I wish she [Baba] was here to help, to talk to. But more than anything I just wish I could sit with her one more time..." Based on their knowledge of the character, her relationship with Baba and the house, discuss with the class what they think Marinka might want to say to Baba if she were able to. *What do they think Marinka might want to say to some of the other people she has left behind during this story - Baba? Old Yaga? Salma? Nina? Benjamin?*

Continue to add to the children's understanding and empathy with Marinka as her quest to rescue Baba reaches its climax. With permission of the house, she eventually journeys through the gate to rescue Baba only to realise that she has gone, she has moved on and become something else, part of the stars. Allow the children to share their responses to this moment and its impact on Marinka. *How do they think she is changing as a character over the course of the story so far? How do we feel about Marinka? What helps us to feel this way?*

After finishing the book, discuss the use of a prologue and epilogue to the story as well as the overall shape and structure of the story. Sophie Anderson uses the device of an epilogue set some months after the main events in the story to reveal the fates of the characters. *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?*

As you reach the end of the story, gather children's overall response and opinions about the book. Look back at any notes that have been made about the themes of the book and the emotional journey that Marinka is on.

Discuss how the children felt about the book compared to their original expectations: *When you first saw this book, even before you read it, what kind of book did you think it was going to be? What made you think this? Now you've read it, is it as you expected? Have you read other books like it? How is this one the same? How is it different?*

*Which character interested you the class the most? Are there any 'minor' characters that the class would have liked to have spent more time with? Sophie Anderson has said that one minor character from *The House with Chicken Legs* will be featured in her new novel. Who do they think it could be? Did any of the characters remind you of people you know or remind you of characters in other books?*

When you were reading the story, did you feel it was happening now or did you feel it was happening in the past and being remembered? Can you tell me anything in the writing that made you feel like that? Sophie Anderson made the decision to write the book in both first person and present tense. What impact do these choices have on the reader? What are the benefits and challenges of writing in the first person? How would the book have been different if it used a different voice or tense? Take a small passage from the start of the book and read it in both the past and present tense. What is the impact? Which do they prefer? Why do you think the author made these choices?

Children may wish to find out more about the author, her influences and some of the inspiration behind *The House with Chicken Legs*. The publisher has included a short interview with Sophie Anderson at the back of the book which could be made available to interested readers.

As is reflected in this short Q&A, the novel is steeped in Slavic folklore which reflects Sophie Anderson's keen interest in and enjoyment of folk tales and legends from that culture. This could be explored further in some of the many published retellings of the Baba Yaga story, of which a wide variety are listed on the SurLaLune Fairy Tales website (<http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/babayaga/index.html>). Sadly, many of these are currently out of print, although school libraries may still stock copies, as may a local library service.

The House with Chicken Legs is Sophie Anderson's first published novel for children. Her second will be published later in 2019 and could be suggested to children who have enjoyed Marinka's story. It is called



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The Girl Who Speaks Bear. More details about this and further information about Sophie Anderson can be found on the author's website: <https://sophieandersonauthor.com/>

This sequence of activities was designed by CLPE for the Carnegie and Greenaway Medals shortlists. To access more free resources from CLPE, visit: www.clpe.org.uk/freeresources

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