

Teaching Ideas for the CILIP Carnegie Medal Shortlist 2019

Title: *The Land of Neverendings*

Author: Kate Saunders

Publisher: Faber & Faber, 2017

The Land of Neverendings is a powerful story that uses fantasy and humour to address complex and sensitive issues in a form that engages and entertains its readers. Mourning her much-loved and recently deceased sister, Emily finds the worlds of reality and make-believe blurring as toys start to come alive in the imaginary world she had created in stories for her sister featuring her favourite bear Bluey. Initially this imaginary world — Smockeroon for Emily, the Land of Neverendings for her neighbour Ruth, whose son also died as a child, and is sharing the same dreams — offers comfort and escapism, but a door has opened between Smockeroon and the Hard World, through which a black toad of despair has entered, and an adventure begins to search for the Sturvey, the authority who can re-establish order in Smockeroon. Emily discovers that coming to terms with loss and grief lies not in escaping to a fantasy world but in engaging with the real world, in letting time pass, and in cherishing memories, friendship, and, the power of imagination and storytelling.

This is a sequence of sessions aimed at Upper KS2.

Before You Start

The Land of Neverendings addresses complex and serious themes with intelligence, imagination and humour, and stopping points have been chosen to draw these out in discussion with children as the text is shared. It is essential for teachers to read the whole of the text before sharing it with the children. Teachers will also want to be aware of any children who have experienced bereavement and show appropriate sensitivity as the book addresses this issue, possibly guiding them to the charity Winston's Wish (<https://www.winstonswish.org/>) that Kate Saunders herself advocates in the Afterword (p.321). The story is also rich in intertextual references, so teachers might like to ensure that readers have access to books the author directly or indirectly invokes, by displaying all the texts that have been alluded to or directly referenced and encourage readers to explore these 'classic texts' and then to carry on discussions about them and the links with this text after they have finished reading. Opportunities for exploring the themes of the story through art have also been suggested, for which it would be helpful to have a variety of art materials and opportunities to record and display the class's journey through the text on a Working Wall or in a Reading Journal.

Session 1 (Chapters 1–4, pp.1–62)

Read the opening four paragraph sentences: *'When Holly died, Bluey suddenly fell silent and all the lights went out in Smockeroon.'* to *"My sister is dead."* How has the author chosen to begin this story? Where does she place you as the reader? Reread these sentences and consider: How did this start to the story affect you? Did you want to read on? Why? Why not? What do you think is the effect of the author grabbing you so compellingly and thrusting you into the middle of the story and the main character's situation?

Allow the children to read and re-read this opening, and the rest of Chapter 1 'The Book of Bluey' in which we find out much more about Emily and she has her first curious dream about Smockeroon. *What are your initial impressions of the characters/setting/storyline? What do you like or dislike about them? What*

questions do you have about them? Can you make any connections with them, either personally or with characters, settings and events in other texts you have read?

Provide frequent opportunities to return to these questions as you read on through the book, inviting children to share their personal responses to the key events and character developments as they occur. As part of their ongoing conversation, they may like to gather these grids on a Working Wall or Reading Journal, where they could also note any especially effective writing they encounter.

At this stage it would also be useful to create a Role on the Wall for Emily. Role on the Wall is a technique that uses a displayed outline of the character to record feelings (inside the outline) and outward appearances (outside the outline) at various stopping points across the story. Using a different colour at key stopping points allows you to track pivotal episodes 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 be begun after reading the first full chapter ('The Book of Bluey', pp.1–14), but should be returned to repeatedly as the reader gains new insights into Emily; you could also create Roles on the Wall for other characters as they are introduced e.g., Ruth, Maze or Martha. Using a different colour at key stopping points allows you to track the character's emotional journey. The Role on the Wall could also be used to support discussion of similarities and differences between characters, as well as to explore their respective relationships with the inhabitants of Smockeroon.

Information from the Role on the Wall could also be used to help populate a network of relationships — similar to a family tree, but including friends and toys as well as family — that shows Emily's family and friends (and in due course their toys) and how they are inter-related in the Hard World and in Smockeroon.

Given that the action of the story is so bound up in the geographies of Barkstone/Bottleton and Smockeroon, children may like to create their own maps to clarify the setting of the narrative both 'hardside' and in Smockeroon. There is a long and rich tradition of books whose authors include maps in their endpapers (Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*, J R R Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*, A A Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, as well as more recently Piers Torday's *The Last Wild*, Kiran Millwood-Hargrave's *The Girl of Ink and Stars*, and last year's Carnegie-shortlisted *Wed Wabbit* from Lissa Evans), and these can help readers to fix the action in their understanding. *Why do you think the author or publisher decided against including a map? Do you think a map would have added to your enjoyment or understanding of the story?*

Discuss with the children stories in which protagonists find themselves in imaginary worlds that have become real. *Are you familiar with this device from other texts you have read? What is the effect of setting the story in a fantastical setting, where different rules apply? Do you find Smockeroon believable? How well does the author bring it to life for you? How is it different from the real world in which Emily and Ruth begin the story?* As they read on through Chapters 2, 3 and 4 ('The Wrong Door', 'Choir Practice', 'Black Toad') they may mention Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Piers Torday's *There May Be a Castle*, Chris van Allsburg's *Jumanji*, Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, Lauren Child's *Beware of the Storybook Wolves*.

Encourage the children to respond with their initial impressions of the characters, the story and its two settings (critically, the story is set in two worlds). Aidan Chambers' basic Book Talk questions (*Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk*; Thimble Press, 2011) provide a useful scaffold for these initial conversations: *Tell*

me... anything you liked about this book... anything that you particularly disliked... anything that puzzled you... any patterns or connections that you noticed...

Session 2 (Chapters 5–10, pp.63–130)

This section of the book invites serious discussion of intertextuality. Invite the children to compare and contrast *The Land of Neverendings* with the stories mentioned in the previous section. *How do you think this story is similar to classical stories of make-believe worlds becoming real, and how is it different? How does the author portray the interaction between the imagined world and the real? What do you think is the significance of the intrusion of the black toad at the end of Chapter 4 'Black Toad'?* Support the children in establishing that the toad represents sadness intruding in a domain that is meant to be free from worldly pain.

Children may or may not be familiar with the books Kate Saunders implicitly and explicitly references, so you may need to make explicit the tradition on which she is drawing. *What do you think is the significance of the play Ms Robinson — who has herself known the loss of a sibling — is staging? Do you think there are any parallels between Emily's experience and that of Alice in Lewis Carroll's story?* Her take on the classic theme of toys coming to life is refreshing and contemporary, with the residents of Smockeroon amusingly sassy and self-involved. Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*, E T A Hoffmann's *Nutcracker*, Margery Williams' *Velveteen Rabbit*, Russell Hoban's *Mouse and his Child*, Peter Firmin and Oliver Postgate's *Bagpuss* (also with an Emily...), Lynne Reid Banks' *Indian in the Cupboard*, Kate DiCamillo's *Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* up to Pixar's *Toy Story* and Warner Bros' *Lego Movie* films are just some of the better known explorations of the idea. Introduce these or other titles and encourage the children to consider: *How do the toys in this book compare to the ones you have encountered in other books, programmes or films? What kind of personalities do you feel they have? Do you find them believable characters? Is it helpful or revealing to be able to draw comparisons between the toys that different authors or filmmakers have brought to life?*

Support children's visualisation of the text by returning to the moment on pp.124–130 when Ruth appears inside The Sycamores. Read the text from "Now a brand-new series..." to "...her house is on fire." As you read, ask them to close their eyes and picture the scene unfolding as if it were a film in their mind. Read the descriptive passages about the kitchen 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?*

The character of Ruth is very useful for Kate Saunders, as it allows a different adult perspective on loss and on the intrusion of Smockeroon/the Land of Neverendings. Ruth is also in a better position to carry out the research on John Staples in Chapter 7, and to prepare then take the potion in Chapter 9. Discuss Ruth and Emily's relationship and consider: *How do you think Emily's friendship with Ruth develops? What do you think they have in common? What does it bring to the story for Emily to have an older friend as her accomplice and confidante? Do you find this friendship believable? Do you have adult friends as well as your own age? How does the author make it credible?*

Session 3 (Chapters 11–16, pp.131–190)

While reading this section encourage the children to summarise events and analyse the way in which the narrative develops, as events in Smockeroon begin to have an impact in the real world. *What do you think the fire in Ruth's shop tells us about the influence of Smockeroon on the 'hard world'? What do you think is the significance of Pippa, a character from Smockeroon, coming into Martha's life (Chapter 12 'An Old Friend in a Strange Place'); of the Staples' toys entering Ruth's shop through the cat flap in Chapter 13 'The New Lodgers'; or of Maisie/Maze starting to receive abusive messages from Prison Wendy/Prizzy in Chapter 14 'It Begins'? What do these incidents tell us about the influence and reach of the imaginary world?*

The magical elements of the narrative cushion the heftier themes allowing Emily and Ruth to discuss no longer wanting to live for example, on p.137 '... for the first few seconds I was very sad to find myself back in real life.' Discuss the feelings Emily and Ruth share that life is not worth living once Danny and Holly have died, and the pain that loss has brought them. *Do you think Emily genuinely wants to die, or simply that she finds it hard to find pleasure in living? What is the effect of being able to have these discussion with Ruth? Who might she have had these discussions with instead? Why do you think her parents are unable to talk with her about Holly? What do you know about their reaction to her death? Who else can Emily talk to about losing a sibling? Why do you think this is important?*

The change in Emily's relationship with Maze is also worth discussing as it changes over the course of the book, and may well resonate with readers. *How do you think Emily feels to see Maze making friends with someone else? Why do you think Maze wants to be friends with Summer and not be friends with Emily? What is the effect of Emily's and Maze's parents seeming not to be aware that the girls are no longer close? How do you think this makes Emily feel? How do you know? Are you able to make any personal connection to these friendship issues, so that you can empathise more deeply with the characters?*

After reading Chapter 15 'The Serpent in the Garden' discuss Emily's decision to attempt to visit Smockeroon in spite of the risks she knows this represents. *Why do you think Emily decides to take the rest of the potion and try to use the spell, after she knows how dangerous this can be? Do you think this was the right thing to do? Would you have done it? Why? Why not?*

The next day Emily's mum finds one of Holly's T-shirts and she and her daughter reverse roles, Emily comforting her mother for Holly's death. *What do you think this scene shows about Emily's parents' reaction to losing their daughter? How does this scene affect you? What do you think Emily's mum means when she calls her 'our brilliant mistake' and why do you think Emily likes to hear this?*

Read on and discuss the changes that are taking place not just in Emily's but everyone's lives. *What does Chapter 16 'Pippa's Holiday' show you about the influence of Smockeroon on the 'Hard World'? Do you find this believable? How does the author achieve this? Can you imagine your own childhood toys appearing in your life now? What do you think this would be like?*

Session 4 (Chapters 17–21, pp.191–250)

Following Pippa's 'holiday' (Chapter 16) Emily is able to take Martha into her confidence, and has an accomplice to attempt the spell a second time (Chapter 17 'The Spellbinders'). As well as continuing to update the Role on the Wall for Emily and any other characters you may have done this for, you may consider creating a Graph of Emotion, which can deepen children's understanding and engagement with the larger

shape of the story, and enable them to summarise events succinctly and identify patterns within the narrative.

Sequence the key events from the story 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 Emily and summarise these: you may identify landmark events of which everyone is aware, like the Autumn fair, Bonfire Night, the birthday party and sleepover, the visit to the pie factory and the production of *Alice in Wonderland*, as well as events in the story that have particular significance for Emily, such as the first dream when she meets Hugo and Smiffy, the fire at Ruth's shop, Prizzy's notes to Maze, Pippa's appearance at school, and so on. 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 Emily's range of emotions throughout the story so far. Use these to plot Emily's emotional response to each of the events in the novel.

You could compare Emily's arc to Ruth's and also identify what the key episodes are that mark the turning points in her emotional journey, e.g., abandonment by Maze, friendship with Martha, Ms Robinson's kindness, the fire at Ruth's shop...

Discuss the Fireworks Display (Chapter 18 'Fireworks'), where Maze's hostility ends and she joins forces with Emily and Martha. *Why do you think Maze decides to become friends with Emily again? Do you think the toys' personalities reflect their owners at all? How? What do you think of Prizzy/Prison Wendy?* Chapters 19 'Demands' and 20 'Gold Boots' especially reward close reading for insights into the girls' friendship. *What do you think her personality and behaviour tell you about Maze, who created her at a time when Emily and she were first friends?*

This section is also notable for Smockeroon increasingly breaking into the 'hard world', as the school trip and the Penguin Society Outing both visit Norton's pie factory on the same day (Chapter 21 'The Penguin Society Outing'). Discuss with the children how Kate Saunders uses humour to manage the transition between the two worlds. *Do you find any parts of the story especially funny? Which parts? Why do you think the author uses humour when tackling a serious subject like grief, and loss, and what is the effect?*

Session 5 (Chapters 22–28, pp.251–317)

Continue to update the Role/s on the Wall you have created for Emily (and any other characters) and to chart her emotional journey on the Graph of Emotion. As the story nears its climax and resolution the imaginary and real worlds come closer. As when Ruth lost consciousness when her shop caught fire, so Emily starts Chapter 22 'A Meeting in Wonderland' coming round and visiting the doctor. The two worlds seem to be on a collision course, and fiction and reality are increasingly overlapping. Does Emily's appearance in Smockeroon whilst she is in the middle of the rehearsal for Ms Robinson's production of *Alice in Wonderland* remind you of anything you have read or seen in other stories or films? Teacher readers may note that Emily as Alice tumbling down the rabbit-hole is a passing homage to Lewis Carroll.

The Sturvey and his location at the Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green (Chapter 23 'The Message') bring Smockeroon and the 'hard world' together in one place, a real institution, part of South Kensington's Victoria and Albert Museum, that children may like to research and/or visit (<https://www.vam.ac.uk/moc/>) to see the setting for themselves, because it is inherently fascinating, and may stimulate their discussion about the role of toys in our lives as children and adults.

Discuss the way in which Emily is able to vanquish the black toad, and the means she uses to do so (Chapter 24 'Showdown'). *Does the confrontation between Emily and the black toad remind you of any other stories you may have read or films you may have seen? What do you think is significant about the force she uses to ensure victory?* Teacher readers may be reminded of J M Barrie's Peter Pan ("Every time a child says, 'I don't believe in fairies,' there is a fairy somewhere that falls down dead." Peter replies.). *Why do you think imagination is such an important gift that it keeps the Sturvey alive? What do you think Kate Saunders is telling us about storytelling by using Emily's Bluey Book to destroy the black toad?*

The end of the narrative centres on the final performance of *Alice in Wonderland*, during which Emily again escapes to Smockeroon (Chapter 26 'Invitation to a Posh Ball'). *Why do you think the author chooses to resolve this story within a play within her story? What do we learn from her meeting with the Sturvey and their discussion about storytelling and imagination (Chapter 25 'A Very Important Job')? Do you agree with what he says to Emily?*

In the final chapter (Chapter 28 'All Shall Have Prizes') Emily emerges from Smockeroon and talks with Ruth. *What changes do you see in Emily and Ruth as a result of Emily's final visit to Smockeroon? What transition do you think they have undergone during the course of the story? Why do you think the author has chosen 'All Shall Have Prizes' for the chapter title? Does it link to anything you know from other stories, particularly those already referenced?*

Kate Saunders uses the device of an Afterword explaining the origin of the story and the importance of toys in her own life, and sharing the sad loss of her own son Felix. *What is the effect of reading the Afterword, does it make you feel any differently about the story or its protagonists, or about the author herself and her motivation for writing this story? Do you feel that the Afterword adds to or detracts from your enjoyment of the book?*

Kate Saunders specifically alludes to C S Lewis, the author of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, in which an imaginary world so involved as to sustain a seven volume narrative, exists through the back of a cupboard. Given time, children may wish to read all or part of C S Lewis's novels or may have seen the TV or film adaptations. *Do you think there are parallels between the two stories? How do the time and adventures she has in Smockeroon affect Emily, is it a quest?*

As the author shares such a personal inspiration for her story, readers may like to find out more about her and her other writing. As Kate Saunders' writing is so heavily steeped in the richest traditions of classic children's literature, children may consider how the story she has written references the trope of toys coming alive. Especially as intertextuality plays such an important part in the story it is worth noting as a teacher reader that Kate Saunders won the 2015 Costa Children's Book Award for *Five Children on the Western Front*, a continuation of E Nesbit's classic fantasy series begun in 1902 with *Five Children and It*. She was also a contributor to the authorised Winnie-the-Pooh sequel, *The Best Bear in All the World*. And as noted she explicitly references C S Lewis and his brother burying their toys as they approached adulthood (see 'Afterword' p.319) as Blokey, Mokey and Figinda Faraway had been buried.

Once you have had the opportunity to read and reread the story, widen the discussion to an appreciation of the whole story and its issues. Use Aidan Chambers' 'Tell Me' grids to support Book Talk, allowing them to reflect as a whole on their likes, dislikes, questions and the broad range of intertextual connections, as well as providing ample opportunities for connecting with personal experiences.

The story is called The Land of Neverendings, but where do you think the most important action takes place, in Smockeroon or the Hard World?

Review the Roles on the Wall and Graph of Emotion the children have kept. *How do the relationships between the main characters shift during the story?*

The protagonists of this story are predominantly female *Why do you think the author has chosen female characters to carry the narrative? What does this mean for the story and the narrative? Would the story work in the same way with male protagonists? Why or why not? Do you think this was a conscious choice or mere chance? Does it matter?*

Review the Tell Me grids the children have kept as records of their discussions. *Do you like the ending of the book and the fate of protagonists in whom you have invested? What is the book's message? If the writer asked you what could be improved in the book, how would you have made it better? Would you recommend it to another reader? What would you tell them about it or what wouldn't you tell them because it might spoil the book for them? Or might mislead them about what it is like?*

And do you think it should win the CILIP Carnegie Medal? Why? Why not? To facilitate this discussion you could introduce pupils to the judging criteria. Encourage the pupils to explore the elements of the narrative against the same criteria used by the judges of this award:

Style

- Is the style or styles appropriate to the subject and theme and conducive to the establishment of voice?
- Do dialogue and narrative work effectively together?
- How effective is the use of literary techniques and conventions?
- How effective is the use of language in conveying setting, atmosphere, characters, action etc.?
- How appropriate is that to the theme?
- Where rhyme or rhythm are used, is their use accomplished and imaginative?
- Where factual information is presented, is this accurate and clear?

The plot

- Is it well-constructed?
- Do events happen, not necessarily logically, but acceptably within the limits set by the theme?
- Is the final resolution of the plot credible in relation to the rest of the book?

Characterisation

- Are the characters believable and convincing?
- Are they well-rounded, and do they develop during the course of the book?
- Do they interact with each other convincingly?
- Are the characters' behaviour and patterns of speech consistent with their known background and environment?
- Do they act consistently in character throughout the book?
- How effectively are the characters revealed through narration, dialogue, action, inner dialogue and through the thoughts, reactions and responses of others?

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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