The Promise by Nicola Davies and Laura Carlin, Walker Books

A girl who is hardened by the harsh urban environment that surrounds her is transformed into a guerrilla gardener by the unexpected booty resulting from a mugging. The burgeoning wildlife opens up people’s hearts and minds and the girl moves on to multiply the magic.

In spare poetic prose, Nicola Davies has fashioned a variation on the myth of the Green Man for a modern age. This is Laura Carlin’s first picture book, although she has previously created superb illustrations for Ted Hughes’ The Iron Man and Sonya Hartnett’s The Silver Donkey. Here she has drawn absorbing grey and brown cityscapes which gradually become permeated with brightly coloured birds and flowers as the girl plants ‘among rubble, ruins and rusty railings, by train tracks, tramlines and traffic lights’.

Overall learning aims of this teaching sequence:

- To read and discuss a book that is set in a harsh, urban landscape, which allows us to explore people’s feelings and how these can be affected by their environment, how their characters can change in responses to changes in the environment, and how a seemingly small event can have a huge effect;
- Appreciate how a character changes through the course of a story;
- Discuss writing similar to that which they are planning to write in order to understand and learn from its structure, vocabulary and grammar;
- Progressively build a varied and rich vocabulary and an increasing range of sentence structures;
- Assess the effectiveness of their own and others’ writing and suggest improvements.

This teaching sequence is designed for a Year 3 or Year 4 class.

Overview of this teaching sequence.

This teaching sequence is approximately 2 - 3 weeks long if spread over 10 – 15 sessions.

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Resources

Prior to the start of the teaching sequence, prepare a class reading journal to collect together examples of incidental writing and notes taken during discussion sessions. A display space or working wall could also be prepared – the contents of which can be added to the reading journal as the sequence progresses.

In session 7, it would be useful to provide the prop of a bag of acorns to bring the events to life. These could be collected prior to the session, or artificial ones can be purchased online. Try http://www.props4shows.co.uk/

A range of pastels, chalks and other drawing media will be needed for session 11.

Teaching Sessions

Session 1: Role on the wall

- 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 each of the stopping points allows you to track changes in the character’s emotional journey.
- Use the image of the girl looking up at the buildings from the first page of the text and discuss in small groups what this image tells us about this character.
- Ask questions to draw out the thinking and response – who is she? What is she doing there? Who is she with? Might she be alone? Where is she going?
- Record responses and ideas onto the role on the wall to begin to build up an understanding of the character.
Session 2: Responding to illustration

- Use the image of the city from the page ‘Nothing grew. Everything was broken. No one ever smiled,’ Build vocabulary around the image by recording what you can see.
- Consider what you might hear if you were there and how it might feel, and ask the children to add their ideas to the vocabulary around the image. Encourage them to use words, phrases and sentences, and extend this to consider similes and metaphors (or personification).
- Choose a word, words, a phrase, sentence, simile or metaphor to describe the city on a strip of paper.
- In groups, share individual strips of paper and put them in an agreed order that encapsulates the group’s description of the city in a free verse poem. Have each group reread their poem to ensure it makes sense.
- Share these. Consider using the line ‘The city’ to join the separate verses the groups have created. Is it cohesive?
- What changes to the linking line can be made to enhance the cohesiveness of the piece? Consider alternatives that might allow the verses to be linked to form a narrative poem.

You might like to allow time for the groups to add a soundscape to their verse of the poem – using voice or percussive instruments – and rehearse and perform these poems in an assembly or for another class.

Session 3: Role play

- Role play allows pupils to take a walk in the shoes of a character and consider what they might be feeling at various points in the text.
- Use the image of the crowd as a stimulus for the role play, which accompanies the text ... ‘The people had grown as mean and hard and ugly as their city, and I was mean and hard and ugly too.’
- Stand the pupils in a small space so they are forced to be crowded together. Freeze in this position.
- Ask the pupils to consider how the people in the city might be feeling. Draw out pupil understanding around the people feeling that they need to keep to themselves or protect their personal space while it is being encroached upon by others. How are you feeling?
- Collect the vocabulary and ideas suggested and display on the working wall for later use.
- Display the image on an IWB and spend some time examining the body language of the characters and their facial expressions. What else do you notice in the image?
- The children should notice the girl pickpocketing the woman in the coat. Spend some time comparing her to the other characters – no shoes, no coat.
- Using a new colour, add suggestions to the role on the wall display and consider the reasons why she might be forced to do this.

You might like to write a diary entry from the girl’s point of view at this point, drawing on the vocabulary and ideas shared so far. Explain her reasons through the writing.

Session 4: Readers Theatre

- Spend time with the pupils turning the section of text from ‘When I was young...’ to ‘... and I was mean and hard and ugly too.’
- Demonstrate the process using the first sentence and the beginning of the second, up to ‘dry as dust’.
- Highlight the words mean, hard, ugly and dry as dust, and discuss how these words might be lifted off the page and read using tone of voice, actions etc. Read them with actions and expression together.
- Provide the text on an A4 sheet for the children to annotate and work on in their groups – they can read in unison/individually/in turn. They can whisper, raise voices, or echo certain words. Keep the script true to the original text.
- Rehearse and perform their readings for the other groups. You might use this as an opportunity to critique their readings and consider how they can be improved for further performance opportunities such as in an assembly, or next time Readers Theatre is used.
Session 5: Respond to illustration and freeze-frame

- Show the image of the shadows which accompanies the text, ‘And then, one night...’ and ask the children to predict what is happening in the scene. Make a list of possibilities on the IWB or a flip chart.
- Freeze-frame the scene in pairs, each child taking one of the shadow roles.
- Listen to the accompanying text read aloud up to ‘...with the strength of heroes.’
- Where could role play lead to?
- Write from one shadow’s point of view, recording the inferences, deductions and predictions first as thought bubbles, and then developing this into a description of the scene from each person’s viewpoint.
- Compare and contrast the writing and consider how the same scene can be portrayed in different ways determined by the point of view of the narrator. How might a third person describe the scene?

Session 6: Writing in role

- The children could write a report, in role as a newspaper, TV or radio news reporter. Decide as a class on an appropriate audience for the writing. You might differentiate the task here, extending the most able to write for a broadsheet or nightly news programme, while supporting others to write for a children’s news programme or paper.
- Include interviews with citizens of the city, who might not have directly seen the incident but could comment on the crime within the city and their feelings and personal experiences about this.
- As a whole class, consider the features of the newspaper (which should be well understood in upper Key Stage 2) and build up a list which will be included once their initial reports are edited and redrafted.
- Begin to draft their writing focusing on the content of the report itself, rather than the features and structure (columns, headline, etc).
- Use response partners to read work out loud and comment on how effective the writing is for the purpose and audience.
- Use editing partners to work with alongside the author of the report to attend to punctuation and spelling errors and make language and editing suggestions, refining the writing.

Session 7: Reading aloud and conscience alley

Conscience alley is a useful technique for exploring any kind of dilemma faced by a character, providing an opportunity to analyse a decisive moment in greater detail. The class forms two lines facing each other. One person (the teacher or a participant) takes the role of the protagonist and walks between the lines as each member of the group speaks their advice. It can be organised so that those on one side give opposing advice to those on the other. When the protagonist reaches the end of the alley, they make their decision.

In this session, it would be useful to provide the prop of a bag of acorns. You could collect these prior to the session, or artificial ones can be purchased online.

- Read aloud from ‘To and fro’... to ...‘thinking of the food and money in the bag’.
- In the role of the girl, think about what might be in the bag. Ask questions to explore their thoughts - what do you hope to find? Why?
- Show the bag that was taken and ask the child to peer inside (not letting on what is inside the bag) and pass the bag on to the next child.
- Think about what advice they would give the girl – should she keep the promise she has made?
- Form a conscience alley – where the children who think she should keep her promise form one side of the alley, while those that think she shouldn’t keep the promise form the other side. Ask a child to walk the conscience alley slowly while the children quietly explain their reasons for the side they have taken.
- Ask the child to voice which pieces of advice stood out for them when they get to the end of the walk down the alley.
Session 8: Writing in role
You might add more details to the role on the wall at this point (using a new colour or two) as we have predicted and inferred some new information about her. What are the reasons for her actions/potential actions?

- Write a note of advice to the girl. State the reasons for the advice and suggested course of action.
- Roll these notes into balls and throw them to someone else in the room (ensure everyone has a note prior to the next step in the lesson).
- Respond to the advice in role as the girl, stating your agreement/disagreement with the advice and your planned course of action.
- Roll these notes into balls again and throw to someone else in the room. Read the note – share some of them and display them on the working wall.

Session 9: Read aloud and book talk
- Read aloud from ‘I stared at them, so green’... to ...’I began to keep my promise’.
- Using Aidan Chambers’ ‘Tell me’ approach, as outlined in his book, Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk – which offers suggestions for the kinds of questions that teachers and children might use in discussion around a book – get the talk going by working through the basic questions:
  - Tell me ... is there anything you liked about the text?
  - Was there anything you disliked?
  - Were there things that puzzled you or that you have questions about?
  - Were there any patterns or connections that you noticed?
- Collect responses using post-it notes on a flip chart or board divided into 4 quadrants.
- You could explore some of the ‘special’ questions, which will help to draw the children’s focus to particular themes and ideas.

Session 10: Read aloud and re-read
- Read the next four double pages, up to ‘...slowly, slowly shoots of green began to show...’
- Explore each of the pages in turn and consider the use of alliteration and the play of text and image which add to the meaning in this section of the story. The circular pattern in the roundabout page resembles a seed – do we agree? What symbolism can we deduce from the railway line page? (rows of acorns being planted, etc.).
- Explore the use of punctuation and the effect it has on the sentences.
- How does the use of repetition reinforce the action of the girl as she plants the acorns?
- Write some of your own alliterative lines describing other potential planting locations in the city (or using your local area as a stimulus). If you use your local area you could follow up the activity with some planting and then write about the experiences, or write non-fiction pieces on the life cycles of a variety of plants – considering how the seeds germinate, how plants grow to adult plants and produce seeds, then how they disperse these seeds to continue to continue the cycle.

Session 11: Visualisation
- Consider how the city will look once the ‘shoots of green begin to show.’
- Provide an image of the city for the pupils to change using a range of pastels, crayons, chalks or felt tip pens.
- Pupils draw over the city image, changing it to show what the city will look like once the plants bloom fully.
- Play some music to demarcate the time allowed – ‘Tree’ by Stevie Wonder (5.47) from The Secret Life of Plants album, is a suitable amount of time, keeping this activity short and focussed.
- Using post-its, build up some vocabulary be reflecting on the words that the activity brought to mind.
- Display the edited city images in a gallery (along with the vocabulary), and a caption for each image on a strip of paper.
- Spend some time walking the gallery, discussing the ways in which the city has been changed by the planting.

You might like to return to the vocabulary work that came out of session 2. Compare and contrast these images with the previous ones and extend the vocabulary lists to reflect this comparison. Use the vocabulary to extend the captions into a
longer description of the transformed city. Think about whether you are writing this in the 1st person as the girl or a citizen or in the 3rd person as an outsider looking in.

Session 12: Graph of emotions

- A graph of emotions can be used to show the emotional journey of characters, by comparing their emotional state over the time continuum of the story.
- Consider the emotional journey the girl or the citizens in the city have gone on since the start of the story.
- Think about the emotional range of the character you want to graph and select words to demarcate the y axis of your graph. Spend some time thinking about the most suitable words to use – is it sad? Or could you describe the emotions experienced better by using words such as miserable, despairing or desolate?

- Use a thermometer image to build up a scale of suitable words, perhaps in small groups, and share these as a whole class, selecting appropriate vocabulary for your graph.
- Use the main events of the story as the x axis and then graph the emotional state of the character at each of these main events to form your graph. Display these graphs and tell the story of the character’s emotional journey.

Session 13: Story mapping

- Re-read the book and think about the main events.
- Pupils can sequence the events of the story using story mapping, drawing and annotating their maps to show the events and drawing on their knowledge of the characters and how they have changed through the story.
- Share your story map with a partner, retelling the story in your own words. Take turns, adding missed bits of information, etc and editing your story maps accordingly as you work.

You could explore ICT opportunities by considering how you might show events in the story in order to promote the book as a book trailer. Look at other book trailer examples on the internet ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNVp_Y1rLY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNVp_Y1rLY) is a good example) and consider what to include, and more importantly what to leave out, so that you don’t give away too much of the story.

Session 14: Narrative writing

- Read from ‘Green spread through the city...’ to the end.
- Draft, edit and publish a description of the city ‘in full bloom’ which explores how the people within the city (or the character of the girl) has changed also.
- Alternatively, write a next chapter for the story – about the girl who steals the bag from her. What life has she previously led? Does she continue to keep ‘The Promise’? How?
- You might explore what has happened to the old lady from the beginning of the story – did she watch, from a distance, the changes as they occurred? How did she feel knowing that she has started this? What would she say to the girl if their paths ever crossed?
- Write a letter from the girl to the old lady thanking her for the changes in her life – what else might she want to say?

Session 15: Book making

- Publishing writing for an audience makes the writing more purposeful and raising the bar in terms of expectations and presentation. Children begin to see themselves as ‘real authors’ and take this responsibility seriously. Simple concertina books, folded from A3 paper or card, folded ‘origami’ books or books employing a range of paper
technology pop-up and sliding elements can all be used to add impact to the writing.

- Orientate a piece of A3 or A4 paper in landscape and fold each of the outside edges to the centre to create cupboard doors.
- Cut building shapes along the top of the page – they do not have to match as they will resemble a cityscape when folded shut.
- You could make a second cityscape book, hiding a green ‘in bloom’ scene inside it. Stick the two books together, back to back, and use it to display two contrasting pieces of writing.
- Publish and display your writing, displaying the made books in your class reading corner or main school foyer for others to enjoy.

For more information on book making techniques visit Paul Johnson’s web site (http://www.bookart.co.uk/) where you can find a range of useful references suitable for primary aged children.