

The Promise

By Nicola Davies and Laura Carlin

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Reading and discussion prompts

	<p>The cover holds clues as to the themes and nature of the narrative so children will benefit from having time to look closely and comment on what is there in the illustration (<i>Can they identify the huddle of people in the background and what they are doing?</i>). <i>How does the style of illustration - its texture and its composition - make them feel? Would they like to live here? What do they make of the image of the main character? What do they make of the position she is in? What impression does her position give in conjunction with her facial expression?</i></p>
Endpapers	<p>Consider whether to show just the opening endpaper and use this as a tool to speculate on the focus of the book, or whether to show both endpapers and ask children to speculate on what lies between them. <i>What kind of story will move us from the opening cold grey stretch of pavement to the vibrant colours of the closing endpaper?</i></p>
Endpaper, dedication and title page	<p>You might want to treat the first endpaper, the dedication pages, and the publisher details/title spread as a kind of mini-movie preamble that moves us into the location of the story. <i>As detail gets loaded in, how do the children's predictions change?</i> Encourage children to elaborate on, and challenge one another's ideas. Generate a sense of mystery and build a hunger to have questions answered.</p>

<p>'When I was young...'</p> <p>Spread 1</p>	<p>On the first spread with text, you'll want to spend time on both words and pictures. Starting with the picture and building on the "preamble" talk, consider how little of the main character we are given. She's barely there - both in terms of position, extent of what is revealed of her, and even the flatness of her colouring. <i>Why might that be?</i> Now consider how she is framed by the buildings. <i>How do they make the children feel? How would they feel if they were the character? Have they ever felt like that?</i> The children might explore the feeling of being hemmed in or dominated by the surroundings. They might notice the relative lack of free space (the small geometric blocks of white space at the top of the picture) and how this almost robs the picture of air. Even the facelessness of the buildings themselves. Windows are simply rectangular lines drawn on to the block of colour: nothing to see here, neither in nor out. <i>What does that do to us as readers?</i></p>
<p>'When I was young...'</p> <p>Spread 1</p>	<p>Now for the words:</p> <p><i>'When I was young I lived in a city that was mean and hard and ugly...'</i></p> <p>This is a page worth lingering on. It's great to read aloud and put into practice all of those suggestions set out in the main body of the blog that will allow children the pleasure of trying out variations in the way in which they will use their voices to bring the book to life. The first two sentences add further weight to the argument that three is the magic number. One uses a simple trio of adjectives to punch out the gritty nature of the setting - each intervening 'and' adding to the blows - if that's how you choose to read it. <i>What happens if you soften each "and"?</i> <i>Does this highlight the words mean/hard/ugly, or does it soften the overall impact of the sentence?</i> The next sentence expands to offer three phrases, more conventionally arranged as a list with a comma. There may be some value in comparing the two and supporting children in weighing up the prosodic differences between the less wordy first sentence, and the flow of the second. The final sentence has its own trio in the form of a noun phrase, a verb phrase (yes this is a thing) and a closing simile, all working together to complete this initial impression. In terms of sentence structure we have three sentences/ three structures, each with three notable elements. Mathematical patterns in literacy – worth highlighting for the more systematic/pattern- oriented children in your class that love to spot these sorts of features in writing.</p>

<p>'Nothing grew...'</p> <p>Spread 2</p>	<p>Turn the page and we have three more wordy nuggets. Three simple sentences with two, then three, then four words - I'll leave the patterning alone now - it's not especially helpful but it does speak of the rhythms of the book. Children may want to take note of the move from the opening 'Nothing...' of the first sentence, to the contrasting but complementary 'Everything...' of the second. The final sentence on this spread moves back to a negative 'No one...'. Children will likely enjoy rewriting these sentences using the same openers to perhaps express the same sentiments with their own phrasing, or to apply them to other settings/situations:</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="590 414 1837 711"> <tr> <td>Nothing</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Everything</td> </tr> <tr> <td>No one</td> </tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center;">T A T - - - - - - - -</p>	Nothing	Everything	No one
Nothing				
Everything				
No one				
<p>'Nothing grew...'</p> <p>Spread 2</p>	<p>Take time to consider the cityscape presented here. This is an ideal opportunity for children to hear, find, share, and generate their own descriptive language. Remind them of the five senses but rein in the exploration: rank the senses for the context. <i>Which are likely to be the most notable at this distance?</i> (Sight and Sound) We'll save the others for the spreads that take us deeper into the city. Gather banks of words and phrases to support later writing.</p>			
<p>'The people...'</p> <p>Spread 3</p>	<p>The next spread echoes the opening text ('...mean and hard and ugly...'). It might be interesting here to ask what children think of this use of repetition of these words in particular. Responses may vary but sometimes children are inclined to see the repeated use of "and" as a weakness in writing. Unpicking what sits behind this in terms of how children view written language use as they move up the school can be very interesting. If children are proving to be unduly harsh critics, that's fine of course, but is it based on slightly dubious notions that "and" is a KS1 word (it happens!) rather than considering how it works in context? It may be worth talking to them along these lines: <i>Okay, so you're not keen on the author's choice here. But help me out. Why do you think Nicola Davies did choose to do this?</i> There's no firm answer, so be prepared to encourage children to frame their opinions using tentative language (for Year 5 upwards, those 'adverbs of possibility' will come in quite handy).</p>			

<p>'The people...'</p> <p>Spread 3</p>	<p>Explore the accompanying picture of a crowd of people. Consider how they are presented in terms of arrangement, their facial expressions, their colouring. <i>What is the overall effect?</i> Then look for signs of individuality to add some complexity to first impressions - <i>what marks individual figures out as different? Have they noticed the main character and what she is doing?</i> (Try to resist too much of a PHSE intermission at this point) Select one or two figures and explore what they might be thinking and feeling. This page lends itself to a range of dramatic techniques that will support children's understanding. Where possible, see how easy or not it is to provide these figures with a sense of humanity. Perhaps exploring some thoughts through freeze-framing or thought tracking could be used to support a modelled or shared write of a monologue before children have a go for themselves.</p>
<p>'And then, one night...'</p> <p>Spread 4</p>	<p>The next spread is a pivotal moment in which the promise is made. Discuss the tussle between the elderly lady and the protagonist – unpick the meaning of 'easy victim' and 'strength of heroes'. Children might discuss in pairs and note down what each means and then how together they give a mixed impression of the old lady. Read on till 'I held a forest in my arms and my heart was changed' and explore the children's earlier predictions. <i>What has changed and what do you think she understands of the promise?</i> It is also worth discussing why the struggle is presented in shadow. This leaves plenty of space to expand on how the victim is presented in words. Considering how the incident plays out, perhaps this sense of mystery adds to the way in which the words move us from a shocking event to an unexpected outcome.</p>

<p>From 'I ran off...' to 'But then I opened it...'</p> <p>Spreads 5 & 6</p>	<p>Across the next two spreads, consider how the illustrations begin to shift: a lightness creeps in, first with the impression of the trees as the protagonist begins to realise the nature of the promise she has made. (It just strikes me that 'the nature of the promise' is a nifty play on words but it was entirely unintentional). Alongside the softening of the images, and the early shoots of additional colour, consider how the words on the page beginning with 'But when I opened it...' are arranged. The line breaks seem to slow the pace of the writing as the protagonist contemplates the acorns. The typography of the words 'the promise' ask us to carefully consider how we might read them. This is echoed on the following page, with its closing 'my promise'. Taken together, these two pages would offer further valuable practice of reading aloud and experimenting with prosodic variation. It offers a fruitful contrast to the tone of the earlier sections of the book. Allow children time to listen to one another and offer friendly constructive feedback as they refine their performances. Circulate as they do this - supporting where necessary and taking note of those who may benefit from some targeted fluency work.</p>
<p>'I forgot...'</p> <p>Spread 7</p>	<p>Do not rush past the page that begins with 'I forgot the food and money' and ends with 'my promise'. Note how the central image has shifted across the book's gutter, where previous single page illustrations of the city had tended to sit on the left. <i>What might lie behind this shift?</i> Consider the introduction of brighter colours in the shape of the birds surrounding the sleeping girl. <i>Why does she say that she feels 'rich beyond my wildest dreams'?</i> Now is an ideal time for children to make further predictions, drawing upon what they have read so far and what is presented on this spread. Predictions are sometimes forgotten in the course of the book but they are so helpful for pegging in deeper engagement.</p>
<p>From 'I planted besides...' to 'shoots of green began to show'</p> <p>Spreads 8 - 11</p>	<p>Read the following three spreads detailing the planting of the acorns. I don't really need to point out the alliteration - it's plain to see - but please let's not lose sight of the simple enjoyment of reading them aloud. You might want to linger on the third of the spreads and explore with, or support the children in understanding what might be meant by 'I pushed aside the mean and hard and ugly...' as well as the balancing act achieved with the repeated refrain of 'planted, planted, planted.' Another structure that is a joy to read aloud. The fourth spread of this section has a nice touch in the background - the faceless, blur of people entering and exiting a subway or underground station. Something about this set up on the page, and what follows immediately afterwards almost seems to suggest that the people of the city are emerging at the right side of the spread ready for a new way of being. Because then...</p>

<p>'Trees!'</p> <p>Spread 12</p>	<p>...everything changes. Colours. Space. The dynamic positioning of words and images. Where images have tended to lead your eyes in vertical or horizontal movements, now we have the freedom and softness of curves - both in terms of the individual graphic elements and the overall composition itself. As colour explodes across the city, once again, allow children to savour some of the beautiful written imagery, and consider how they can bring the shift in atmosphere to vivid life through their reading performance. <i>Can they give a sense of the colour and vibrancy of these pages through the way that they read them?</i></p>
<p>From 'Trees...' to 'and another.'</p> <p>Spreads 12 -18</p>	<p>The closing pages do some wonderful things in terms of the balance between muted and brighter colours, as the girl moves on to keep her promise further and wider. Draw children's attention to the use of colour and gently encourage them to consider how there is a growing movement from the left hand side of each spread to the right. <i>How does this add to and enrich this section of the story?</i></p>
<p>'And last night...'</p> <p>Spread 19</p>	<p>Finally, we come full circle and a key scene is repeated. Introduce children to the term 'cyclical' and make links to the word cycle and its meanings, especially in terms of a process that repeats (links to the study of life cycles are most immediately useful here). Ask children to think about what it means to end the book with a repetition of the earlier robbery. <i>Will this story ever end?</i> If some think that it will, encourage them to share their ideas for the sorts of endings that they envisage. Be prepared to allow for these to be extended or challenged. You may find it useful to draw a graphic representation of a cyclical story structure. The diagram below might be used to represent the structure of The Promise.</p> <div data-bbox="871 901 1484 1303"> <pre> graph TD A[events leading up to the robbery/promise] --- B[robbery/ promise] B --- C(()) C --- D[planting/ transforming cycle] D --- C </pre> </div>