

The Marvels by Brian Selznick: A Sequence of activities for Upper Key Stage 2 or Key Stage 3

Before beginning this sequence:

It would be incredibly useful to have a visualiser or some kind of camera projection device to be able to share the images from the text with the pupils on a large scale, to allow for close reading of the images. This text deals with the bereavement of close family members, so you will need to read the text before sharing with your class in case this brings up significant memories with children that they may not be ready to reflect on through a text such as this.

Session 1:

Share the spread showing the numeral 1766 on the opening double page spread, followed by the boat sailing on the sea. What clues does each image give us and what might be the significance of starting the story here? Focus children's attention on the style of the boat, how the sea and sky are depicted, the choice to cast the moon's light directly on the boat, almost like a spotlight in a theatre. A helpful guide to close reading of images can be found at:

<https://www.clpe.org.uk/powerofpictures/teaching-approaches/choosing-and-using-picture-books>

Gather children's responses, questions and predictions about the story around a copy of the illustration, either individually or in pairs or groups. Turn the page and look at the next illustration. How is this different to the first one? Brian Selznick's use of image is very cinematic, the pupils may link this to film terminology, e.g. wide shots and close-ups. Why do you think he has chosen to zoom in on the name of the ship? What feeling does the choice of text colour for the lettering create?

What is the meaning of the word Kraken? If the pupils are unaware of this, you might draw their attention to one of the original illustrations from Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, which is later referenced in the book (a good illustration can be found at:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kraken#/media/File:20000_squid_holding_sailor.jpg). What does this add to their perceptions of the story that might be told?

Read the first section of the book, up until the illustration of the angel flying with his sword aloft against the backdrop of the ship's sail. Give the pupils time to discuss what story they think is being played out. What is different about a story being told in pictures? How do you feel about reading in this way? What type of story is this? They may draw on clues in the images to predict that it is a historical story, a fantasy story, an adventure, a journey. Provide a forum for discussion around reader response by introducing the four basic questions, from Aidan Chambers *Tell Me* approach from *Tell Me: Children, Reading & Talk with The Reading Environment* (Thimble Press 2011). These questions give children accessible starting points for discussion:

- Tell me ... was there anything you liked about the start of this book?
- Was there anything that you particularly disliked...?
- Was there anything that puzzled you?
- Were there any patterns...any connections that you noticed...?

Provide time for the children to share, compare and contrast their viewpoints.

Session 2:

Reveal the next double-page spread of the text. How does this change our perceptions of the story from the previous session? Turn the page and look at the next image, depicting the audience. What does the perspective of this image bring to our understanding? Look at the gaze and body language of the audience. What do you think they are reacting to? Turn the page and reveal this. Look at how this character is depicted over the next two pages. What does the way he has been portrayed in the illustrations make us think and feel about him? Have the pupils justify their responses in relation to

the artistic techniques used, e.g. facial expression and body language, use of props, use of light and shade, ratio and perspective, scale, framing as seen in the document referenced in the previous session. Read the next section of the book, from where the thunder strikes, up until the boat is lost to the turbulent waves. Compare and contrast the two characters by competing a role on the wall for each of them. 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. 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. What do we know, or what do we think we can tell about the two main characters in the story so far? How much of this relates to the part they were playing in the play and how much can we tell from when the storm strikes?

Session 3:

Turn the page to reveal the next page showing the sun rising over the sea. What do you think this image tells us about where the story might be heading? Look at the next double page spread; does this match what you thought? Do you think this is a hopeless or a hopeful image? What gives you that idea? You may wish to scribe or have the children scribe their responses around copies of the two illustrations on a working wall or in a Shared Journal as a record of the discussions. Read on, until the dog pulls off the wig. Look at how the illustrator has chosen to develop this over the course of five spreads. What impact does this make on us as readers? How do the different ways he has used scale and perspective draw us into this moment? Reflect back on the role on the wall from the previous session. Would you now think differently about this character? Why or why not? This may instigate some wider conversation around gender stereotyping and whether our perceptions should change on finding out this information. Turn the page and explore the next two spreads; how does the depiction of the setting engage us emotionally with the story? What do we think is in store for the characters next? What leads us to think this? Read the next section of the text, up until when the boy is hailing the boat whilst the island burns in fire behind him. Reflect on the smaller boy's position after reading. What have we learnt about him? How have the illustrations supported the storytelling, our depth of feeling and empathy for this character? Come back to the roles on the wall, and in a different colour note any perceptions that have developed over the course of this reading. In role as the boy, write a letter to slip into a bottle to tell his story up until this point and request help. How will you use vocabulary, sentence structure and punctuation to engage your reader with the same amount of empathy as Brian Selznick is able to convey through illustration? You may wish to model some effective sentences through shared writing to help convey this to the children.

Session 4:

Turn the page and explore the text in the newspaper article. What effective use of vocabulary and sentence structure has been used here in order to engage the reader's empathy towards Billy? You may want to provide the children with a copy of this illustration, along with highlighters and give time for them to text mark and respond to the writing in response partners. This will support them in being reflective about their own writing. You may wish, at this point, to come back to the writing from yesterday and get the children to respond to a partner's work, before giving the opportunity to redraft after thinking more deeply about vocabulary, sentence structure and punctuation in the context of the article. Turn the page to see how people react to Billy after reading the article. How do you think it feels to be him at this point in the story? What do you think the people's reactions make him feel? You could engage the children in a freeze frame depiction of this illustration and, through thought tracking, get them to vocalise the thoughts of Billy and the public around him. Turn

the page again and look at how our focus is brought to Billy's dog. What do you think this picture might be steering the story to? Look at the way the dog is rushing almost into the next page and towards a much lighter tone. What might this signify? Read on to Billy's arrival at the Theatre and look at the double page spread depicting his face, almost as if it is surrounded by light. What do you think he is thinking or feeling here? How can you tell? You may wish to get the children to scribe their thoughts into speech or thought bubbles and place these around a copy of the illustration on the working wall. Continue reading, following Billy's explorations of the theatre and people's reactions to him. Look closely at the scene where he is sat on the stool, surrounded by everyone. What is happening here? What can you tell from the reactions of the crowd? What has the illustrator done that helps to engage you in this moment? How does it make you feel about Billy now? Add these thoughts to the role on the wall in a different colour. Turn the page and compare this illustration with the close up of Billy's face earlier. What do you think will happen next? Read on to the tenth anniversary party invitation. What clues does the artist's response and the passage of time depicted over the course of these illustrations tell us about Billy's relationship with the theatre? Write a piece in role as Billy, reflecting on the ten years he has been at the theatre and how he feels about being there.

Session 5:

Turn to the next spread, where Billy is outside the stage door. What do you think is important in this image? Follow to where the candlelight and Billy's gaze leads; what do you think this is showing us? Now turn to the next spread and discuss Billy's feelings and reactions in relation to how this scene has been depicted by the illustrator. Read on to where Billy goes outside to find the basket by Tar's grave. What do you think might be in there? How do you think this event might lead the story on? Collect children's responses on post it notes around a copy of the illustration on the working wall. Now turn the page and look at Billy's reaction on opening the basket. Would you change your prediction now? Give children the chance to swap their post it prediction if they feel they'd like to. Turn the page to reveal the baby and letter inside. What do you think will happen next? Read the contents of the letter in the basket. Prepare a note of advice, advising Billy of what he could and should do next. How will you use what you know about his own story, and what you know about using language for effect to explore his options and persuade him of your opinion. Explore the next section of the text, up until Alexander's birth certificate and the image of Alexander on the cushion. Give the children time to discuss this section of the text, in pairs or groups, justifying responses using what they have gleaned from the illustrations. Take another opportunity to write in role as Billy, reflecting on this stage of his life compared to the initial section of the text, before he arrived at the theatre.

Session 6:

Turn the page and look at how Brian Selznick has used letters and newspaper clippings in this spread to move time on significantly and still keep the story going. In pairs, give the children of this illustration and ask them to take notes and summarise what they think is important in the narrative portrayed here. Now look at the next spread. Using this information, and what was gleaned from the previous spread, what conclusions can the pupil's draw about the character of Alexander? We also find out in these pages about the death of Billy. How do you think he would have reacted to the course Alexander's life has taken? Turn the page and have the pupils read the letter from Kitty. Compare and contrast this moment with the moment Billy found Marcus outside the stage door. Do you think Alexander will react similarly or differently to Billy? Have the children scribe their responses around a copy of the illustration on post it notes. Now turn the page and look at the way Alexander and the baby are depicted in the next illustration. Once again, give the children the

chance to change their predictions if they wish, based on what they have seen here. If they changed their minds, what was it about the illustration that made them do this? Read the next section of the text, exploring baby Oberon's development, up until the newspaper article announcing the birth of Leontes. Give the children the time to discuss traits that the Marvel family have across the generations. What expectations might there be for new baby Leontes as a result of these? Encourage the children to make notes related to their discussions. Continue reading until Oberon picks up Leontes' drawing that has dropped to the stage mid-performance. Take the time to discuss whether the children think Leontes has lived up to his father's expectations of him since he was born and how Leontes might feel about the expectations that have been placed upon him. With the children working in pairs, select one of the pair to act in role as Oberon and the other as Leontes. Reflecting on this section of the text, write a letter in role as their character to the other character, putting across their viewpoint and perspective. When they have written their letter, have them 'deliver' their letter to the other person who reads the letter, thinking as their character would think if they were reading it. Did anything in the letter open a new window into the perspective of the other person? What parts of the text or language made this happen? Why was it effective?

Session 7:

Read on to discover Oberon's reaction, pausing at the close up spread after Leontes has been banished. Ask the pupils if this what they expected to happen? Why or why not? Ask the children to predict what will happen now, drawing on their knowledge of character's journeys throughout the rest of the text and information from the letters and newspaper clippings. Turn the page and read the next section, where Leontes discovers his grandfather, Alexander, hidden away in the props room as was speculated in one of the clippings. Stop to reflect on the close up of Alexander pointing at Leontes. Summarise in pairs or groups, what they think was significant about their interactions and what they predict will happen to Leontes now. Share these across the group as a whole, looking at the similarities and differences in the responses of different groups.

Continue reading up until the close up of Leontes looking up and back. Why do you think he is gazing up in this way? Take some predictions then turn the page to reveal. What do you think is happening here? How do you think Leontes will react? Read to the end of the first graphic section of the text. What can we really tell about the character of Leontes? How do you think his father would view him now? Why do you think the illustrator has chosen to end this part of the story in this way? Do you think this is how this story should end? Discuss or write down any ideas.

In subsequent sessions, you should then go on to explore the written section of the text, revealing the history of the story depicted in illustrations and the real life historical inspirations for the story as a whole, as told in the Afterword.

The children can then go on to explore how Joseph chooses to end the story in pictures after the death of his Uncle Albert. Do they think this was a fitting way to end the story? Why or why not?

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

In depth teaching sequences for over 175 other high quality texts can be found at: www.clpe.org.uk/powerofreading

Further resources to support children's understanding of picturebooks for all ages and research on the importance of using picturebooks across the primary years can be found at:

<https://www.clpe.org.uk/powerofpictures>