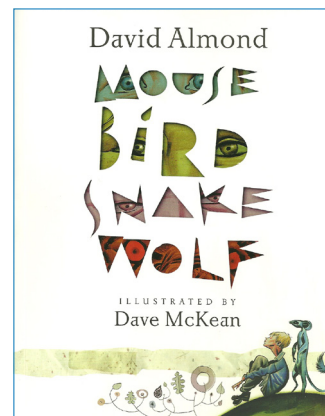


Title: **Mouse Bird Snake Wolf**

Author: **David Almond**

Illustrator: **Dave McKean**

Publisher: **Walker Books**



First look

- * This book may be too long to read aloud to the group from beginning to end in one session. Try to ensure that each shadower is given a chance to read it to themselves before working with the book.
- * Look closely at a range of pictures and ask the group to point out to each other anything that strikes them as interesting about the artwork.
- * Chat in pairs or as a group about whether they enjoyed *Mouse Bird Snake Wolf*. What did they like or dislike and why?

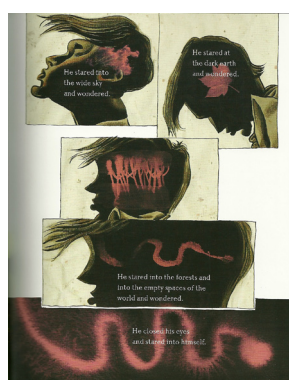
Look again

The work of Dave McKean is internationally admired. His pictures are not always 'easy on the eye' but thinking and talking about them will help make his vibrant images more accessible. Don't worry if his style doesn't appeal to you. You don't have to like it to recognise the power of his work.

When the group have discussed first responses, return to the book, look, think and talk more about the artwork. McKean's images are as unpredictable and disconcerting as the content of Almond's story. Set in a world 'rather like this one' with people 'rather like us', there things which look familiar (flowers, animals etc.) but which turn out to be startlingly different. It is an unfinished world with gaps waiting to be filled by the gods.

- Look at the title on the front cover and the first few pages of the book. What do you notice about the presentation of the animal names?
- Turn to a picture of the gods. Look at the differences in colour and movement between the children and the gods. Which group is more animated and shows more interest in this strange half completed world?
- Possibly, the most ingenious illustrations are of the children imagining and creating new creatures.

McKean portrays thoughts as they form in the children's minds and change from abstract ideas to living beings - a mouse, a bird, a snake and a wolf. For example, when Ben thinks of a mouse he first uses words to express his thought. Then his mind shapes an image, sends it to his hands which make a physical object of his thought. These pages must be as close as anyone can get to drawing creativity.



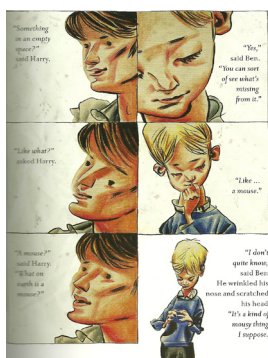
Talk about any visual aspect of the book that interests you, i.e. end papers, font choices, title page and layout. Do these 'extras' to the story contribute to the overall impact of the book.

Interpreting the texts

It is always beneficial, when studying a book, to use tasks which require imaginative response to encourage students to engage fully with the text. The following suggestions may help the group of young readers to become engrossed in the book.

Explaining the world

The story in *Mouse Bird Snake Wolf* concerns the making of a world by a set of powerful, but idle, gods; it is a creation myth. Use the Internet to look up creation myths from around the world. Do they all have explanations of how creatures or humans were made?



Character analysis

Look how subtly the drawings of the children change throughout the book. Compare Ben and Harry's faces from the picture on the right to how they look when the wolf comes to life. Have their characters changed?

Who looks most like the wolf? What do you think about the reaction of the gods to all the children's activities?

Discussion

We can read this story at a literal level without seeking further meanings. Or we can see both written and visual texts having subtext – that is, deeper meanings beyond the literal. The whole book could be seen as a metaphor about human nature and our role in the fate of the planet.

Discuss in pairs what happened to the minds of Sue and Harry as they created and breathed life into the wolf. Did working together make a difference to the creative act? Consider each picture up to the point when they are consumed. How did Ben react? Does his character change as he tries to turn the wolf back into clay, wool, sticks and stones? Read the page when Ben rescues Sue and Harry:

And lying in the middle, fast asleep, were Harry and Sue.

What do you think it means? Share your conclusions with the whole group.

Drama

The gods are indolent. The world is unfinished. Children take control. Things go badly wrong. This tale could make the basis of a powerful piece of dramatic improvisation. Either work as a team or in threes to create the four episodes when the animals are created. Make the interpretation of the text as vivid as possible using any drama techniques you know. If there is time, you could add:

- music or sound effects
- words taken from the story
- mime and movement.

Art

Each child in the story invents something new. They start by describing it with words and then go on to invent how it will look before they make a model. What would you invent to add to the new world? Draw a comic strip about making a newly invented creature.