

TALKING POINTS

CILIP Carnegie Medal Shortlist 2012



The CILIP Carnegie
& Kate Greenaway
Children's Book
Awards



The Midnight Zoo by Sonya Hartnett

INVESTIGATE:

ANY TIME, ANY PLACE?

- What clues can you find to tell you when and where The Midnight Zoo is set?
- Could it be set elsewhere, at another time? Suggest some alternatives.
- The immediate world of the story is an abandoned zoo near a village

where nobody is left alive. How does the writer tell us about what was going on in the outside world at the time?

DISCOVER:

IMAGES

Study the illustrations by Jonathan McNaughtt:

- How often is the image of the bars on the animals' cages reflected in his work?
- He often uses hard angles and straight lines, when are the exceptions to this?

WORDS

The invaders' language, which the children do not understand, is described as "like flying chips of wood". Ideas about language and communication are important in this book.

- In Chapter 4 ("The Voices"), the animals speak to the children for the first time. What can we tell about each animal from the way they speak?
- The first two animals to speak are not identified, but can you work out who they are from what you learn later in the story?
- One animal does not speak until much later, in Chapter 12 ("The Test"). How does this influence how he affects the other animals and the children?

STORY STRUCTURE

This quite short novel contains:

- The story of the night the children spend in the abandoned zoo.
- The story of the children, what has happened to them in the past and what they want for the future.
- The story of the zoo and how it came to be there.
- The story of how each animal came to the zoo and the life it wants to return to.
- The story of the local villagers.
- The bigger story created by humans that the animals are drawn into.

Draw a chart or graph that shows how each chapter relates to each of these stories.



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DESCRIPTIVE POWERS

The journey from day into night and back to day provides the framing story that contains the other stories.

- Find all the ways that Sonya Hartnett describes night and day.

TALKING POINTS

WORDS OF WISDOM

The creatures in the zoo are much wiser than most humans. Read the following statements by the animals:

Bear: "A bear does what a bear must do to keep himself alive. But a man does many things that he has no need to do."

Wolf: "I've told you the reason for everything that happens. Somebody decides that they will have their way."

Kangaroo: "Cages come and get you"

Wild boar: "You persecute the creatures that you fear, yet the species you should fear most is your own."

And some by the humans:

Uncle Marin: "It's a lucky soul that gets put into a rat."

Andrej: "You're supposed to fall down hills and get lonely, and find your own food and get wet when it rains. That's what happens when you're alive."

- Discuss how these statements apply to your life today.
- If time/resources permit, make a piece of artwork or a short film to illustrate the statement that inspires you most.
- What do the children learn from each of the animals?

THE LOST CLAN: GYPSY LIFE

Andrej, Tomas and Wilma are gypsies, known as Rom in Czech. Chapter 10: 'The Kite' reveals the family life among their people that the three children used to share, right up to the moment that it is lost and they are forced to fend for themselves (see Chapter 11: 'The Road'). Also, throughout the book Andrej refers to what his Uncle Marin has taught him about the gypsy way of life.

Taking all this into account:

- Why does gadje (non-gypsy) life seem so unappealing to gypsies?
- How did being brought up as gypsies help the boys when they were left alone?

Look again at Uncle Marin's statement about the rat, above.

- What qualities make a rat likely to survive?'
- How does being like a rat help the boys and their sister?

At one point the invaders compare the gypsies to creatures in an unflattering way. What do they mean by this?



THE ROAD TO NOWHERE

The children intend to spend only one night in the zoo, but none of the creatures in the cages intended to stay there forever.

- Plot on a map of the world the journeys that the various creatures in the zoo would need to make to their homes.
- Andrej, Tomas and Wilma are on another kind of journey, running away rather than running towards something. How will they know when their journey is over?
- Why were they afraid when the soldiers led their clan away from the road?

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Before and during the Second World War, gypsies throughout central and Eastern Europe were a particular target of the Nazis. They also had a complicated relationship with their non-gypsy (gadje) neighbours, which meant nobody came forward to protect them.

FIND OUT MORE: Use the internet and reference books to gather information about the experiences of gypsies in central and Eastern Europe during the Second World War.

- Research Saint Sarah, patron saint of the gypsies, and the celebrations that are held on her feast day, May 24.
- Display your findings.

READ ON: Many novels have been written about:

- Groups of children on a dangerous journey in wartime
- Animals on a dangerous journey home.

Research a selection of these and compile a booklist for the shadowing group to share. Find out which ones have been made into films and point these out.

Why do you think these stories of journeys are so compelling?

- Find stories about Baba Jaga (also known as Baba Yaga), the witch-like figure who often appears in Czech, Polish and Russian folk tales.

