

SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2021 CILIP KATE GREENAWAY MEDAL

SMALL IN THE CITY

Sydney Smith

TEACHERS' NOTES




CLPE
CENTRE FOR LITERACY
IN PRIMARY EDUCATION



The CILIP Carnegie
& Kate Greenaway
Children's Book
Awards

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These notes have been written by the teachers at the CLPE to provide schools with ideas to develop comprehension and cross-curricular activities around this text. They build on our work supporting teachers to use quality texts throughout the reading curriculum. They encourage a deep reading of and reflection on the text, which may happen over a series of reading sessions, rather than in just one sitting. We hope you find them useful.

About the book:

I know what it's like to be small in the city...

Being small can be overwhelming in a city. People don't see you. The loud sounds of the sirens and cyclists can be scary. And the streets are so busy it can make your brain feel like there's too much stuff in it. But if you know where to find good hiding places, warm dryer vents that blow out hot steam that smells like summer, music to listen to or friends to say hi to, there can be comfort in the city, too. We follow our little protagonist, who knows all about what it's like to be small in the city, as he gives his best advice for surviving there. As we turn the pages, Sydney Smith's masterful storytelling allows us to glimpse exactly who this advice is for, leading us to a powerful, heart-rending realization...

These notes have been written with children aged 7–14 in mind. However, this is a sophisticated picture book which has scope for it to be interpreted in different ways with pupils of different ages.

Before beginning this sequence:

Collect together a range of art materials that will allow the children to engage in the activities exploring illustration, for example: cartridge paper, sketching pencils 2B–4B, oil pastels, acrylic paints and a variety of brushes.

In order to engage fully with the layers of meaning and the details within the illustrations, it is advisable to ensure that you have access to a visualiser or similar device to enable you to share images from the text with the pupils on a large scale.

Introducing the Text:

- Start by sharing the cover of the book, giving children time to fully explore the image and to consider their response, including anything that puzzles them, how it makes them feel, and the expectations they might have for the story to follow. Start by asking what they can see, encouraging them investigate some of the details in the background of the image as well as the larger foregrounded information. Consider what these observations might tell them about the setting of the story and what they expect to happen. If possible, you might give each group of children a copy of the image that they can annotate with their observations, jotting down what they can see and what that might mean, e.g. *'I can see reflections of tall buildings, which might mean the story takes place in a large city; it reminds me of New York because I've seen buildings like that in a film, what other cities does it remind me of?'*
- The children might discuss the way in which the illustrator has included multiple layers in the painting, including reflections of objects that are 'behind' the reader, giving the image a 3-dimensional quality, situating it in the real world. The white flecks in the foreground could be snow, which might make them think of any other details which hint at cold weather or a winter setting. They might note the edges of a grey frame, and the reflections which imply a glassed window, supporting their inference that this could be a view into a vehicle, further evidenced by the silhouettes of other passengers and the queued traffic.



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- They are likely to draw out observations and tentative predictions about the character which dominates most of the cover. *What do we know about them? What do we want to know? What can we tell about how they might be thinking or feeling based on what we can see of their facial expression?*
- After sufficient time exploring the cover, take in the title. *What does this mean to them in relation to their observations about the cover illustration? How could it relate to the figure we can see? They may also have a response to the name of the author/illustrator of this title that they wish to share, if they have read other books by Sydney Smith.*
- Next, turn to the back of the book and read the blurb: ***I know what it's like to be small in the city...*** Invite children to make personal connections to the story. *How do you think it feels to be small in the city, or in the city depicted on the cover? What makes them feel that way? Have they visited or lived in a city? Who were they with? How did it feel? Consider the author's choice to write the blurb in first person: what impact does that have? Does it confirm or change any of their predictions or ideas for the story?*
- Finally, give children time to respond to the endpapers and the title page of the book. *What can they see here? What does it make them think of? How do they make them feel? How might they be significant to the story we're about to read? How do they connect with what you saw and thought about when looking at the cover? Look closely at the small framed and cropped snapshot of a character walking left to right along the side of a form of public transport, perhaps a bus or a tram that is depicted on the title page. Is this the same character that we saw on the cover? What tells us that? What more might this tell us about the story that we're about to read? Does it answer any questions we had about the cover illustration?*

Getting into the story and exploring the setting:

- Turn to the first double page spread in the story, which is broken up into four similar panels. Give the children sufficient time to fully explore the images – both separately and as a whole. *What can we see? What might be happening here? How are they different? What changes and what stays the same?*
- Children might comment on Sydney Smith's use of colour in these images, and the deliberate blurring and lack of focus on the images seen through the window: the use of solid black silhouette in the foreground of the image and the hazier, softer greys and whites outside the window, with patches of soft pink and touches of red. *What is their eye drawn to? Why do you think this is? How does it make you feel? Does it remind you of anything you've experienced?*
- Encourage them to share any responses to the character depicted in these four vignettes. *Do we think this is likely to be the same character depicted on the cover and the title page? How does their posture change from image to image? What might this mean? How do you think the character might be feeling, or what might they be thinking?*
- Discuss the decision to leave this spread wordless. *Do they think this spread needs words? Why/why not? If there were words, what do they think it would say? Sydney Smith has talked about this spread being similar in his mind to the opening moments of a film, with no speech or narration, just music and sound effects; allowing the viewer into the main character's world and viewpoint and setting up the tone for the story to follow. What do they hear in their mind as they look at this page? Do they visualise any movement in the images?*



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- Turn to the next spread and continue to explore how the illustrations work sequentially to tell the story. *What more do we learn from the 3 panels? What might the character be doing? What are our impressions of this figure? What might we infer from body language, facial expression, clothing, behaviour, setting?*
- Then, turn the page once more and pause on this double page spread to allow children time to experience the impact of this change in composition and layout. Discuss how it felt to move from the smaller vignettes to this double page spread. *If they were there in that location, in that moment, what would they see and hear? How might it feel?*
- Read the single sentence included on this spread. *What do we learn from this text? What questions do we have? Who do we think might be speaking? What makes you think that? Are they addressing the reader or a different audience?*
- Go on to read the next three spreads, up to *"I can give you some advice."* As you read, continue to encourage children to share their responses to the environment, drawing on the choices that have been made in terms of both text and illustration, giving them plenty of time to fully explore each spread. Think about what the text tells us about the city and what more we discover or infer from the illustrations. *How do we think the main character might feel in this environment? How do we know? What helps us to draw those conclusions? What is the cumulative impact of the varied, often abstract, images of the city that the illustrator presents? How does he use light, shadow, silhouette and reflection?*
- At this stage, children could develop their thinking about different approaches to depict environment by undertaking the Greenaway Shadowers' Challenge which Sydney Smith introduces in this short film: <https://carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/take-part/shadows-challenges/>
- Children could use school cameras or tablets within the school environment or the immediate surrounding community to capture a mixture of shots – landscape or abstract, close up, aerial, reflections, cropped, etc. They might then combine these images in a collage that represents their school community and location, or they could use the photographs as a starting point from which to develop drawings or paintings using a similar approach to that depicted in the book.
- On this webpage - <https://theaoi.com/2019/10/24/sydney-smith-talks-about-small-in-the-city-our-review/> - you can see examples of some of the photographs Sydney Smith worked from in developing the look of this book as well as some of his preliminary sketches that you might choose to share with the class.

Exploring character:

- Reread the book so far and revisit children's initial expectations for the story, any questions they might have and the puzzles or ambiguity created by the text and illustrations so far.
- Consider the sentence where we paused our reading: ***If you want, I can give you some advice.*** *What do we know about our narrator, which might help us to consider the type of advice they might offer?* Give the children time to share or jot down the advice that they might give, or the advice they might predict the narrator to suggest. Then, read and explore the next five spreads, up to ***They might get stuck to your coat,*** reflecting on how these pieces of advice compare with our predictions.

- As before, ensure time can be spent on each spread considering what we learn from both the text and the illustrations. *What more do the illustrations tell us that isn't in the text? What does it show us of the city and the worsening of the weather as time passes? What might that mean for the child in the illustrations?*
- Work together to consider what the advice given might imply about the intended audience for that advice. *Why might they need shortcuts, a place to hide, a place to rest, a place to have a nap or seek some food? How might the growing snowstorm increase the urgency of the advice? How does this change in the weather affect our response as readers to what we are reading and seeing in the book?*
- Consider what you know or can tell about the child from what you have read so far. What do they know about their appearance and actions within the book so far, and what internal characteristics are they beginning to infer and deduce? What might the child's behaviours imply about their personality, thoughts and feelings? The group might also use this opportunity to note down anything they would like to find out; any questions they have about the child, what they are doing, where they are going and why they might be undertaking this journey.
- While discussing the character, the children will benefit from being able to turn back through the book and revisit the spreads that have already been discussed (if you want to hold back for now the way in which the story concludes, you might use a bulldog clip or paperclip to hold the last few spreads closed at this stage). During these discussions, keep returning to what it is about the illustrations that informs or affects our response.
- As they consider the ways in which Sydney Smith communicates character, thought and emotion through his illustrations, the children might also discuss the decision to regularly hide the details of the child's facial expressions. *With no eyebrows or mouth in many of the drawings, is the emotion more open to interpretation? How do they feel about that? How does it affect the way that they read the story?*
- At this stage, the children might experiment with pencils or pens to sketch different expressions using relatively few lines on the page. *What emotions can they depict with a simple outline, by altering the angle of the head, the position of the eyes, etc.?*

Seeing the whole story:

- Reread the whole book from the start, giving the children the opportunity to add to their response and insights so far in terms of character and environment and the story being told, including any ongoing ambiguity, any puzzles, or any tentative predictions they have for how the story might continue and conclude.
- As you read on to the end of the story, continue to give children sufficient time to engage with each spread, sharing what they notice, discussing any insights into the story and character as it develops and consider the interplay between what we see on the page and what we read in the text.
- Children might note the increased use of wordless spreads as the story reaches its climax. *Why might Sydney Smith have made that decision? What impact does it have on the reader?*
- They might also comment on the escalation in the snowstorm as the story continues and how that affected them as readers and the way in which they empathised with the main character. For example, the double page spread which begins: **But home is safe and quiet**. *Why might Sydney Smith have chosen to combine this*



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image with the snowstorm at its most severe with text relating home comforts: safety, quiet and warmth? What is the impact of this juxtaposition? How do you respond as a reader? What other choices did the illustrator have? Would it have been as effective if the text described the tumult of the snowstorm; or if the illustration depicted the cosy home, blanket and full bowl?

- Once you have read to the final illustration, discuss children's response to the way in which the story ends and whether they feel the mysteries have been solved, or whether there are still puzzles that they feel the book has not answered. *What do we know about the main character that we didn't know at the start? Why had they travelled to the city? What were they trying to do?* They might share at what stage they suspected or knew what the child in the story was doing and what they read or saw that suggested the possibility.
- Having read the whole story, the children could watch this short film (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFBapZ3gSHU>) in which Sydney Smith welcomes them to his studio and demonstrates how he created the layered look of the illustrations within *Small in the City*. You might choose to provide children with similar materials to those used by Sydney Smith in the clip so that they can try to create similar levels of depth and texture on the page. They would need heavy watercolour paper, watercolour paints and brushes, a water insoluble ink pen, and oil crayons/pastels. They might note the impact of returning to the painting on multiple occasions, adding and refining as each layer of paint and ink dries, in order to achieve the intended result. They might then wish to look back through the book to see if they can note the illustrations in which Sydney Smith has used the methods and materials demonstrated in the film.

Revisiting the story:

- Come back to the book again and re-read the entire story as a whole. *What do they notice now that they have read and discussed the end of the story? Why do you think Sydney Smith chose not to reveal the child's aim at the start of the story? How would it have felt different if we had seen the child pasting up a flyer on the first spread, or on the cover or title page?* They might consider how this choice helps to give the story an ambiguity or a universality that can mean more than one thing, welcoming multiple and varied responses to what the text and the illustration mean to us across a group of readers and keeping us engaged with the story, keen to know what is really happening. *How do they think the story has ended – is it a happy ending, hopeful, open-ended, worrying? How did it make them feel when they reached that final moment?*
- Listen to Sydney Smith talk about the book and his inspiration for it in his interview on the Greenaway website: <https://carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/books/small-in-the-city/>. *How does what he says compare with their own thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the book?*
- Allow the children to begin to explore their responses to the book overall through booktalk with the help of what Aidan Chambers calls 'the four basic questions'. These questions give children accessible starting points for discussion:
 - Tell me...was there anything you liked about this story?
 - Was there anything that you particularly disliked?
 - Was there anything that puzzled you?
 - Were there any patterns...any connections that you noticed? Did it remind you of anything else you've read, experienced or seen?



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The openness of these questions unlike the more interrogative 'Why?' question encourages every child to feel that they have something to say. It allows everyone to take part in arriving at a shared view without the fear of the 'wrong' answer.

- Asking these questions will lead children inevitably into a fuller discussion than using more general questions. You may, for example, ask the children if they had favourite parts of the story, and why this was.
- Extend the children's thinking through a more evaluative question, such as:
 - Why do you think Sydney Smith chose to write this book?
 - Do you think the book has a message? If so, what might it be, and what makes you think that?
 - Who do you think would like this book? Why?
- If possible, leave copies of the book in the book corner for the children to revisit and re-read in independent reading time, by themselves or socially in a group, or to take home and share with their family.

Other books illustrated by Sydney Smith that the children may wish to explore include:

- **Footpath Flowers** by JonArno Lawson and Sydney Smith (Walker Books)
- **Town is by the Sea** by Joanne Schwartz and Sydney Smith (Walker Books)
- **I Talk Like a River** by Jordan Scott and Sydney Smith (Walker Books)

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.

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>.

