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KUMIKO AND THE SHADOW CATCHERS

by Briony Stewart



Teachers' Notes

Written by a Practising Teacher Librarian

in context with the Australian Curriculum (English)

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SYNOPSIS

Kumiko and the Shadow Catchers is the third book in the Kumiko series, a contemporary fantasy series for younger readers. To help save her family and the magical dragons, Kumiko bravely ventures on a journey to confront the Shadow Catchers once and for all.

Not all goes according to plan and Kumiko's courage and perseverance is once again put to the test. Can she help those she loves most?

THEMES**Courage and Perseverance:**

- Kumiko courageously and selflessly risks her own life to save those of her family and the dragons.
- When her original plan fails, Kumiko perseveres and takes another tack.

Fantasy and Folktales:

- Kumiko is on a quest to destroy *The Book of Shadows*.
- Good versus evil is a key theme.
- Folktales tell of the Shadow Catchers' aim to destroy all magical creatures.
- Hatsuo helps Kumiko because of his interest in dragons.

Japanese Culture:

- Aspects of Japanese culture feature in the story.

WRITING STYLE

Kumiko and the Shadow Catchers is written in first person, present tense. Kumiko is the narrator. Her character is forthright and gutsy. Kumiko puts the safety of her family ahead of her own. Her voice is honest and realistic. It is impossible not to be drawn to her strength and courage.

Briony Stewart's writing is beautiful and original. Her use of figurative language results in a rich reading experience in which the reader becomes immersed in Kumiko and the dragons' world.

STUDY NOTES

Authors use prologues to offer the reader an insight into what's to come.

- After reading the prologue in *Kumiko and the Shadow Catchers*, discuss what clues the reader is being given.
- What characters and events are we introduced to?
- If you have read *Kumiko and the Dragon* and *Kumiko and the Dragon's Secret*, what story threads do you recognise?

The prologue refers to folktales.

- Re-read the folktale about the origins of *The Book of Shadows* on p31-32.
- Read some Japanese folktales (readily available online).
- Choose one folktale on which to base some characters and ideas for your own fantasy story.
- Brainstorm possible complications and solutions for this story.
- Develop your main character by considering their appearance, qualities and personality. How would they speak? React to problems?
- Think of questions you'd like to ask your main character. Answer those questions as that character.
- Instead of dragons, create a mythical or magical creature for your story. How will you use this creature in your story?
- What quest will your main character undertake?
- The Story Graph is integral to the success of writing a story. Write a story graph to outline your story. Then, in pairs, workshop each other's story graph before the first draft of your story is written.
 - o Does the story start with action or conflict?
 - o Has your partner thought about the back story they will share with the reader?
 - o Is the building of tension workable?
 - o Is the climax well planned?
 - o Is the resolution and conclusion appropriate?
 - o Are there any suggestions you could make to enhance the story graph?
- Research, if necessary, aspects of Japanese culture to incorporate into your story.
- Use this piece of writing as a way to teach the writing process.
 - o Write your first draft. It's a good idea to use double-line spacing when drafting.
 - o Edit your draft focussing on the mechanics of writing such as punctuation, spelling and grammar.
 - o Now re-edit your draft concentrating on your vocabulary and logical flow of ideas. Are there gaps? Is the reader able to understand your story easily? Does it make sense?
 - o Look carefully at your dialogue. Are you using dialogue to enhance your story? Cut out any unnecessary dialogue.
 - o Examine a chapter of *Kumiko and the Shadow Catchers*, taking note of the way in which dialogue has been used.
 - o Swap with a friend and edit one another's stories. Try to offer constructive feedback.
 - o Publish your story using a word-processing program such as Microsoft Word. You might like to illustrate some of your story in a style similar to Briony Stewart's.
- Share your story with an audience such as a buddy from a younger year level or insert an extract into the school's newsletter

In the folktale on p30-32, the people are so concerned about keeping the magic safe and contained forever that they end up jeopardising it. Compare this with John Heffernan's picture book *The Island* in which the people are so afraid of losing happiness that they too jeopardise it by locking it up.

Discuss the difference between folktales, fairytales and legends. Read various examples of Japanese versions of these stories.

Re-read p38-39 in which the eclipse of the moon is explained through the folktale of a dragon swallowing the moon.

- Write short folktales to explain other events that occur in space such as a the new moon, the Winter Solstice, a falling star etc.

The prologue also refers to artworks and tapestries.

- Using a search engine, find a selection of Japanese artworks and tapestries to use as stimulus for generating story ideas. Teach students specific search techniques.
- Using these artworks and tapestries, practise brainstorming ideas and using these to plan interesting and well-structured stories. Repeating this task with several different stimulus pieces will help students to develop effective story-writing skills.

The Book of Shadows is written with ink made from the shadows of magical creatures.

- What might the shadows of these creatures represent? Why do their shadows hold the key to the magic?
- Compare the role of shadows in *Kumiko and the Shadow Catchers* with those in the story of Peter Pan.
- Try writing some 'spells' with invisible ink. There are many instructions available online for making invisible ink such as:
<http://www.kid-craft-central.com/invisible-ink.html>
http://www.ehow.com/how_2043476_make-invisible-ink.html
<http://www.sciencekids.co.nz/experiments/invisibleink.html>
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the various techniques suggested online. What worked best? What needed altering? Write up your observations and conclusions in a science report.

Using the illustration of *The Book of Shadows* on p84 as inspiration, create a 3D mobile that represents the shadows being released from the book and being returned to their owners.

After reading Chapter 1, reflect on Kumiko's character.

- How would you describe her character?
- How has the author conveyed her character to the reader?
- How do the illustrations help develop Kumiko's character? Discuss body language both in the written text and in the illustrations.

Take time to study the illustrations such as those found on:

- P7 – Examine the use of line to create the reflection of the Shadow Catcher.
- P12 – What can we tell about Arisu from this picture?
- P22-23 – Read the last paragraph on p21 in context with the illustration on p22-23.
- P35 – What is going through Kumiko’s mind at this stage of the story?
- P43 – What can we tell about the relationship between Kumiko and Obassan?
- P54/55 – ‘Read’ the picture. What is happening in this illustration in addition to what the text tells us?
- P62 – How is line used to represent various aspects of *Kumiko and the Shadow Catchers*.
- P84 – Compare the shadows coming out from the Book of Shadows with the shadows on the front cover. What is happening in both illustrations?
- Find illustrations from the book that indicate we can trust Hatsuo.
- Which is your favourite illustration in *Kumiko and the Shadow Catchers*? Why? Share this either orally or in a written reflection.

Use the illustration on p40-41 as a writing stimulus. Possible examples include:

- Choose one of the dragons on this page. Imagine one of them is your guardian dragon. Write a short description of your dragon, including their characteristics, qualities and magical powers.
- In the role of Kumiko, write a diary entry to reflect on your meeting at the Council of Ancients.
- Write a newspaper report for the *Daily Dragon* that reports on the Council of Ancients meeting with Kumiko.
- Imagine you are one of the dragons in this illustration. Write a journal piece telling your story.

Create a freeze-frame ‘story board’ of *Kumiko and the Shadow Catchers* to share with a younger class. Taking turns, explain each freeze frame in one or two sentences.

The author uses beautiful figurative language throughout *Kumiko and the Shadow Catchers*. Take time to discuss this language, such as imagery, similes and metaphors, analysing and evaluating the contribution it makes to the text.

- Allow students to recognise and share examples of these devices with the class.
- Have students experiment with writing their own figurative language.

There are many examples of figurative language in the text. Some examples are listed below:

- P11 – ‘like they’re hot coals under my feet’
- P11 – ‘mountain of cascading scales’
- P11 – ‘they move gently, like the fans of graceful dancers’
- P16 – ‘look like golden circles of the setting sun’
- P19 – ‘tiny beads of water turn to ice, making everything glitter like the jewelled belongings of an empress’
- P27 – ‘around me the wind continues its thunderous melody on the waves’

- P27 – ‘the dragon from high above the earth is crying blue tears of blue flames into the sea’
- P29 – ‘boats like slippers lined up against the steps of the shore’
- P36 – ‘weighs down on me like a sack of rice and my skin prickles with worry’
- P45 – ‘makes me feel as alive and alert as a rabbit or a sparrow that knows it’s near a fox’s den’
- P46 – ‘he smells like wood in the hot sun, or the first scents of a new log on a fire’

Children are often required to make inferences when reading. Practise this skill by discussing selected extracts from *Kumiko and the Shadow Catchers* such as:

- The last paragraph of p21 and onto p22.
- the first paragraph of Chapter 6.
- the first paragraph of p66.

Do you agree with Kumiko when she says, ‘hiding and being afraid means that we are not free.’ (p26) Explain.

Discuss the scene where the tiny dragon says to Kumiko, ‘the plan failed, not you.’ (p71) Why is this an important concept for Kumiko to take on board? How can you remind yourself of this when things go wrong for you?

AUTHOR MOTIVATION written by Briony Stewart

The Kumiko and the Dragon trilogy started as an activity. My university tutor asked to, ‘remember a time you were afraid when you were a child.’ When I got thinking, I didn’t think of my own childhood, probably because it was a very safe and normal one. Instead, I started imagining my grandmother’s life because she grew up in Japan during World War II.

I remembered a story she told me about one day when she came across an American soldier. It was the first time she’d ever seen any kind of foreigner before and he turned to her and said, ‘I eat little girls for breakfast.’ Well, the soldier was probably joking, but he really frightened my grandmother. She ran home terrified of being eaten! From this memory, I started forming a story about a little girl called Kumiko who lives in Japan, and is afraid of being eaten by a monster. In fact Kumiko is afraid of quite a few things.

Looking at ideas of fear and bravery prompted me to write a series. In each book, as Kumiko grows braver, she also learns that there are different kinds of fears, and even big ‘scary’ things like dragons, monsters and baddies have their own fears too.

Kumiko learns that there are different ways of being brave.

One of the most important things I ever learnt was to be brave. To dream big dreams, believe in myself, and go out and make things happen. I learnt this from another Western Australian author called Tim Winton. If I hadn’t learnt this, I might never have been brave enough to write books! So this was something I wanted to convey a little bit in this story, that sometimes amazing and seemingly impossible things do happen, and that you can lead an extraordinary life if you dare to go out and solve big problems and dream big dreams.

In my final story, *Kumiko and the Shadow Catchers*, there was an extra motivation there for me. This came out of my own fears after the Gulf of Mexico oil spill in 2010. I was worried about how we could fix such a

big problem, and the effect it would have on nature. In *Kumiko and the Shadow Catchers*, the idea of magic is closely tied with nature and animals because, as I was writing, I actually came to realise how much ‘magic’ there is in the natural world – from how a butterfly forms, to how sardines swim in giant protective spheres – it’s amazing! So I decided I wanted to end this trilogy on an idea that perhaps magic is real. Not so much the sparkling on the end of a wand type of magic but the power of belief, of possibility, of there being things we’ve never imagined before, or don’t know yet and in our ability to make changes in things.

This series was my chance to explore some of the things I love about my grandmother’s culture, and to go off on a grand and mysterious adventure like I always dreamed of doing when I was a kid. But what started out as a story about a small girl’s personal struggle to find confidence and freedom, ended up being a story exploring greater ideas of freedom, fear, confidence, open-mindedness and valuing what is special about the wider world. My hope is that this might make readers thirsty for their own adventures, and discoveries, and brave enough to face the things they fear most.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Western Australia, Briony Stewart grew up in the inner-city suburbs of Perth, peeping over alleyway fences in search of great mysteries and honing her excellent tree climbing abilities. Despite dabbling in entomology, crime solving and a desire to own a deli, Briony showed a talent for both art and writing during her school years. At fifteen, she decided she would not be happy unless she could become both an author and an artist. After receiving a scholarship from the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Briony studied a double degree in fine art and creative writing at Curtin University. Shortly after graduating, she published her first book, *Kumiko and the Dragon* (UQP, 2007), which won the Aurealis award for children’s short fiction, and was a CBCA notable book of 2008. The second book in the series, *Kumiko and the Dragon’s Secret* (UQP, 2010) has received much acclaim since its release. Briony currently lives in Perth with her husband Harry and their beloved pet rabbit Winston.