

The Wolves in the Walls by Neil Gaiman

The Wolves in the Walls written by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by Dave McKean is a mysterious and at times dark picture book where a young girl, Lucy, confronts her fears. Lucy's family lives in an old house. Lucy hears noises at night which she is certain are caused by wolves in the walls. Despite her family's skepticism, Lucy is proved right. The family is driven from their house when the wolves come out of the walls. Lucy's courage inspires the family to reclaim the house.

The suspenseful, ominous atmosphere of the book is created by repetition and language dripping with cagey adjectives and furtive verbs creating aural shadows to match the dark eclectic collage illustrations:

"Quick as the flick of the wing of a bat, Lucy slipped into the wall. She crept through the house on the inside, through the downstairs, up the middle and into the wall of her bedroom."

Gaiman invites the reader into Lucy's imagination with descriptions such as this:

"Lucy heard noises...They were hustling noises and bustling noises. They were crinkling noises and crackling noises. They were sneaking, creeping, crumpling noises."

The reader can't wait to find out whether the wolves will come out of the walls and what will happen when they do. Unfortunately, the pace of the story lags during the time the family spends in the garden and the "twist" ending doesn't live up to the promise of the first half of the book.

The author uses humour to lighten the mood with references to take away meals with "little apple-pies with astonishingly hot filling" and Lucy's father's "second-best tuba" which had "sustained severe jam damage".

This story would be suitable for grades 3 - 4. Younger children may find the book too scary and older children might find it too immature.

Possible activities for classroom use may include:

- Discussion of the illustrator's choice of line, colour, texture to create the "shadowy" feel in the illustrations.
- Comparisons between the illustrations and the collage illustrations of other illustrators such as Ezra Jack Keats and Jeannie Baker.
- Read and discuss other children's stories with themes of childhood fears
- Investigate the stereotype of the wolf as villain in children's stories
- Draw an emotional story map which indicates which main characters emotional state at key points in the plot
- Brainstorm the dark descriptive language to write descriptions of other "dark" topics such as midnight, witches, ghosts and the like.

Debra Bristow, Buddina State School, QLD

This remarkable picture book is striking in both design and storyline. Pitch black end papers and beautiful, thick pages entice and delight with the clever collages of Dave McKean, an artist in his own right. Mixed media, including painting and photography awash in sepia tones, bring to life the story of a family living in fear. Lucy is the only one in her family who can hear the wolves clawing and gnawing in the walls of their family home. Even though her mother, father and brother do not believe her they all have one rather daunting piece of advice for her "If the wolves come out of the walls it's all over!" Well the wolves do come out of the walls and as the family flees from their home the wolves take over. While the rest of the family contemplate their escape to one remote part of the Earth or another, young Lucy overcomes her fear to sneak back into the house, inside the walls, to rescue her pig-puppet. Talking her family into moving into the once wolf-inhabited walls they observe the wolves through the "eye holes of paintings and through the cracks of things". They see the wolves watching television and eating popcorn, wearing the family's clothes, singing, dancing and telling jokes. Finally they have "had enough" and once again Lucy takes the lead and the family comes out of the walls. "Arrgh!" howl the wolves

“...when the people come out of the walls it’s all over!” After the family has established control over their domain once again, things appear to have returned to normal until Lucy hears rustling and scratching in the walls that sound exactly like elephants!

McKean’s use of shadow, line and texture all add to the movement and eeriness of the story. Scratchy pen and ink bring the wolves bursting to life on double pages, jaws agape, eyes glowing. The language is positively delicious and while the story will deliver a chill down the spine there is no blood-shed and no direct violence. This book could be used to explore many themes and issues in the classroom - fear and overcoming fears could be discussed; fantasy versus reality; wolves and urban legends are all important considerations. Children should be encouraged to try their hands at collage construction using photographs of realia, painting, pen and fabric. Who could resist a joint construction within the classroom of the next part of the story after the elephants come out of the wall? It would be a worthwhile edition to a unit on Fairy Tales or in a comparison activity of storybook wolves. “The Wolf” by Margaret Barbalet and Jane Tanner would be an excellent book to compare and contrast to *The Wolves in the Walls* as it similarly explores the notions of a young boy’s fear and trepidation at the “wolves” approaching his family home.

The Wolves in the Walls is a must for any library collection, this remarkable picture book will delight children aged 9 and above as it will entice all adults who pick it up.

Denise Tarlinton, Kurwongbah State School, QLD

Lucy hears sounds coming from the walls of her family home. She tries unsuccessfully to persuade her jam-making mother, her tuba-playing father and cynical young brother that wolves are living in the walls, but they are all dismissive and disinterested.

When the wolves do indeed burst from the wall and force the family to flee their home and spend a cold and forlorn night at the bottom of the garden, it is Lucy who confronts the situation and turns the table on the wolves thus driving them from her home.

This is typical of the fairytale and myth genres that deal with the power of demons/fears in our lives. To diminish the demons/fears powers, you have to turn around, face them and name them. If they're not confronted and named, they control you.

This book is a visual feast with beautiful and powerful illustrations which visually portray Lucy's emotions those of the family.

The arrangement of the text, page lay out and the illustrations marry to make a beautiful and intriguing picture book that begs rereading.

It would be useful in a unit studying heroes and a perfect text for studying visual literacy at all levels.

Robyn Dorney, Merriwa Central School, NSW

Neil Gaiman's *The Wolves in the Walls* will be a great addition to your 'Picture Books for Older Readers' list. Author and illustrator have combined to create a multi-level story which will allow for many discussion topics. These include family relationships, the worries and insecurities of children and coping with problems.

Wolves in the Walls is a little dark for children to read alone even though everything turns out okay for the family. However, the quality of the writing and illustrating makes it a worthy inclusion as a class read.

Patricia Andersen, Nanango State High School, QLD

Gaiman’s interesting picture book will either be loved or despised. It follows the strange, twisting story of Lucy who hears wolves in the wall. When reporting this to family members they offer

copious suggestions as the source of the noises, though each speech concludes with, ‘...if the wolves come out of the walls, it’s all over.’ Eventually the wolves do come out of the wall and the range of consequences which result range from the family leaving the home to live in the garden, the wolves eating toast and jam, and being involved in numerous other antics. The family eventually reenters the house resulting in the wolves believing that there are humans in the walls and if they come out...it’s all over. The humans do come out and reclaim their house. Beware though. Lucy hears elephants in the wall, to which her pig puppet replies that the rest of the family will soon know about.

When read to an eager group of youngsters they reported a mixed reaction. Wary, as it was initially ‘scary’, humour at the wolves antics, ‘strange’ at the family living in the garden, and ‘never-ending’ as they identified that the story would continue with elephants replacing the wolves. A book that is suitable to share with a well adjusted group of children but one to be steered away from if differentiating between fact/fiction is a concern. It is felt that with 6-7 year olds discussion following the sharing of the book is vital.

Illustrations by Dave McKean are excellent, his use of collage, colour, lines make the book worth looking up.

For classroom use it presents a wonderful model of enriched descriptive language (hustling, bustling, clinkling, crackling, sneaking, creeping, crumpling – noises). Language that can be utilized either orally or in written format for older students. Great as a platform for imaginative written and visual work. An interesting model for older students to study how mood and style influence the work. A study of the illustrations would be beneficial to all involved.

A book that is a little different from the ordinary that will appeal to some.

Lisa Ward, Tamrookum State School, QLD

“The Wolves in the Walls” is a seriously scary book. It tells of an ordinary family with interesting relationships. It tells of one girl's experience of noises in the walls of their house. The tension builds as the noises become louder and the wolves appear and take over the family home like a pack of wayward adolescents and drive the family out.

The language has a poetic quality with its repetition, alliteration and that old favourite onomatopoeia.

They were hustling noises.

They were crinkling noises and crackling noises.

They were, sneaking, creeping, crumpling noises.

The quasi-realism of the illustrations produced as a montage of photography, puppets, line drawings and painting add to the immediacy of the text.

This well crafted book is for older readers grade 5+ and for use in High School where students can see the technique of combining illustration and language to unfold the story. Each page can be discussed to find out just how the author and illustrator have worked together to heighten tension and then surprise the reader. Questions about fear, about realism, about what can be true beg to be discussed and related to the students' experiences. Illustrations based on the methods used in “Wolves in the Walls” for the students own creative writing would add layers of meaning to their text.

A clever, intriguing and scary book for older readers.

Betty Davidson, Ouse District High School, TAS