

Snake Surprise by J.E. Fison – Teachers' Notes

Snake Surprise is part of a series of books involving Jack Wilde, his little brother Ben, and his friends Lachlan and Mimi. The stories have instant appeal primarily because they are set in the school holidays. In a long term at school, Snake Surprise will bring back good memories of the last holidays and get them thinking about the next set. The novel is fast paced and filled with gentle humour. The issue raised in the story pits the forces of construction and development against conservation and the protection of wildlife. It is an important issue and one that should inspire discussion and persuasive writing.

Teaching the book

Snake Surprise would fit well into a themed cross curricular unit on the environment or the Australian landscape. Fison weaves plenty of information about Australian flora and fauna into the stories without ever coming across as heavy handed or didactic. The setting of the story, Hazard River, which is near an ocean beach, is described in richly evocative terms. Students who have visited Queensland or Northern New South Wales will immediately recognize the landscape. This element along with the fact that the story takes place during the holidays means that the book could be an excellent starting point for some descriptive or reflective writing. For teachers looking for a way to deepen the creative writing skills of their students, Snake Surprise should provide some inspiration. Fison's writing style is highly accessible. The self-deprecating and humorous first person narration provided by Jack Wilde will provide students with a model for developing a personal writing style.

The problem that drives the narrative is the conflict that occurs when development and conservation collide. There are countless examples of these situations and it should be easy to find one in the newspaper or on line. It is an issue that students may even have some experience of in their own neighbourhoods. The protection of animals is a side issue that can also be explored. Fison's detailed description of the snake might also be a starting point for a discussion of the kinds of fauna that are protected and in what manner.

But Snake Surprise is a good read too and one that might just grab the attention of a reluctant reader or a student who needs to build some confidence in this area.

Facts

Australia's koala population has been devastated over the last hundred years and is currently under great threat due to urbanisation and massive, uncontrolled habitat destruction. Although Koalas are not listed as endangered by any Australian state, continued clearing eventually leads to koala populations being isolated in small, fragmented parcels of land. They become totally cut off from other populations and extremely vulnerable to dog attacks and motor vehicle accidents. Bushfires are another major threat, as they become trapped at the top of trees and have the exposed skin areas on their hands, feet and face burnt, and they often succumb to smoke inhalation. Those that do survive often starve to death as their food supply may take several weeks to re-grow. Local extinctions occur because these devastated areas cannot get replenished. The current koala population is

believed to be between 40,000 and 100,000 animals.

Before Reading

Class discussion

What does the title, *Snake Surprise*, tell you about the story?

Describe the cover. Does it give you any clues about the story?

What do you think of snakes?

Why are people frightened of snakes? Is it only the poisonous quality?

Why do people want to protect some places from building and development?

What is the purpose of nature reserves?

Is there a place that you love and would not like to see change? Why?

While reading

Comprehension Questions

Why are Jack, Lachlan and Mimi playing Monopoly?

What does Ben see out the window?

What is the *Zingarra*?

What theories do Jack and Ben have about the abandoned houseboat?

Describe the condition of the boat. What is Mimi's theory about the mess.

Describe Lachlan's prank.

What message do they find on the boat?

What happens to the message?

What kind of snake do they find on the boat? What is it doing?

What do they find in the cake tin?

What do they find out about the owner of the boat?

How do the kids get to Breakneck Island?

What do they find in the shed on the island?

What do they find out about James' brother?

Who gets caught by Iggy?

What does Mimi do while she is captured?

How does Jack rescue Lachlan and James?

Why has James sorted out the problem?

What restaurant does James own? What promise does he make to the kids?

After reading:

The characters

Make a character chart like the following:

Character	Description	Quote
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Jack Wilde		
Ben Wilde		
Lachlan Master		
Mimi Fairweather		
James Forsyth-Snugglebottom		
Money Mad Iggy		
Mr Beachball-Belly		

Discussion Questions:

Is Jack the hero of the story? Why?

What kind of a person is James Forsyth-Snugglebottom

If James and Iggy are brothers, why are they so different? Are most brothers similar?

What part does Mimi play in rescuing James and saving the island?

Why has the writer chosen Jack to narrate the story?

The story

Discussion

Most stories are based on a problem. What is the problem in *Snake Surprise*? How is it solved?

Activities on Story

In small groups decide on five important turning points in the story. Find a key quote to support each of your examples. Share them with the rest of the class.

Create a timeline of the events in the story

In small groups decide which part of the book is the most exciting and why. Share your findings with the other groups. Are there any scenes that stand out? Why?

Activities - KLA Specific

SOSE Activities

Protected Areas in Australia.

James Forsyth-Snugglebottom wants Breakneck Island to be a place where koalas and their natural habitat are protected. Australia has many areas that are protected.

Research Protected Areas in Australia and answer the following questions:

What are some of the different types of protected areas in Australia?

What are some of the reasons that protected areas are established?

How are they policed?

In small groups choose one of the following types of protected areas. Research it and deliver a short talk to the rest of the class:

National Parks

Botanical Gardens

World Heritage Listed Sites

Historic Shipwrecks

Antarctic

Be sure to give examples of each and explain how and why they became protected areas.

Fraser Island

Research Fraser Island and find out why it is a protected area. Create a poster for visitors to Fraser Island. The poster should be both informative and attractive. Think about what information will appear on the poster and what images you will use.

Consider the purpose of the poster. What is the best way to introduce the island to visitors, especially those from overseas?

Science Activities

Snakes

Research Carpet Snakes to determine the following:

What do they look like?

How big are they?

Where are they found in Australia? Do they appear in any other countries?

What do they eat?

Why are they called 'Carpet' snakes? What is their real name?

What snake group do they belong to?

Is there a Carpet snake in your local zoo?

There are many different kinds of snakes in Australia. Choose one and make an informative poster with pictures and text. Display it in your classroom.

Many people like Money Mad Iggy are frightened of snakes. Create a survey to find which of your classmates is frightened of these creatures and why. Determine what percentage is afraid of snakes. Are you surprised by the result?

Despite their reputation, many poisonous snakes are protected in Australia. For instance,

the maximum penalty for killing a Tiger snake in most states of Australia is 18 months in jail! Why do we protect such dangerous creatures? Write an expository essay that explores the issues surrounding the protection of poisonous snakes in Australia. Make sure that you include the scientific reasons for protection.

Media Activities

Write a newspaper article about the events on Breakneck Island and the role of Jack and his friends. Remember that the first paragraph of a newspaper article always includes Who, What, Where, When, and some indication of why the event is newsworthy.

An editorial is an opinion piece that states the newspapers position on a newsworthy issue. Pretend that you are the editor of the Hazard River Tribune. You are very disappointed that Iggy's plan will not go ahead. State your reasons in a persuasive editorial.

Draw a cartoon for the editorial page on the issue.

The film of the book

In small groups, put together a proposal for a film version of Snake Surprise. Include the following:

A brief outline of the story

A storyboard to show how you will film the story

Suggestions for casting. Who will play the various parts?

Suggestions for a soundtrack. What songs could be featured?

A poster advertising the film

Propose the film to your classmates in a presentation

Drama Activities

In small groups of four, choose one scene to present to the class. You will need to write a script and consider the props and costumes you will need.

English Activities

'Snake' by D. H. Lawrence. Read the following poem:

Snake

A snake came to my water-trough
On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there.

In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob-tree

I came down the steps with my pitcher
And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the trough before
me.

He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the gloom
And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down, over the edge of
the stone trough
And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,
i o And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small clearness,
He sipped with his straight mouth,
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body,
Silently.

Someone was before me at my water-trough,
And I, like a second comer, waiting.

He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,
And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,
And flickered his two-forked tongue from his lips, and mused a moment,
And stooped and drank a little more,
Being earth-brown, earth-golden from the burning bowels of the earth
On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking.
The voice of my education said to me
He must be killed,
For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous.

And voices in me said, If you were a man
You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.

But must I confess how I liked him,
How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink at my water-trough
And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankless,
Into the burning bowels of this earth?

Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him? Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him? Was it
humility, to feel so honoured?
I felt so honoured.

And yet those voices:
If you were not afraid, you would kill him!

And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid, But even so, honoured still more
That he should seek my hospitality
From out the dark door of the secret earth.

He drank enough
And lifted his head, dreamily, as one who has drunken,
And flickered his tongue like a forked night on the air, so black,
Seeming to lick his lips,
And looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air,
And slowly turned his head,
And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice adream,
Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round
And climb again the broken bank of my wall-face.

And as he put his head into that dreadful hole,
And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and entered farther,
A sort of horror, a sort of protest against his withdrawing into that horrid black hole,
Deliberately going into the blackness, and slowly drawing himself after,

Overcame me now his back was turned.

I looked round, I put down my pitcher,
I picked up a clumsy log
And threw it at the water-trough with a clatter.

I think it did not hit him,
But suddenly that part of him that was left behind convulsed in undignified haste.
Writhed like lightning, and was gone
Into the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure in the wall-front,
At which, in the intense still noon, I stared with fascination.

And immediately I regretted it.
I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!
I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.

And I thought of the albatross
And I wished he would come back, my snake.

For he seemed to me again like a king,
Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,
Now due to be crowned again.

And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords
Of life.
And I have something to expiate:
A pettiness.

Taormina, 1923

What is the narrator's first reaction to the snake? How does it change?
Why does he lament his 'accursed human education'?
Why does he call the snake 'one of the lords of life'?
What does this poem say about our view of snakes?

Write your poem called 'Snake'. Is it similar to Lawrence's? How is it different? Why?

Have you ever encountered a snake? Write about your experience? Use interesting verbs to bring the story alive for your reader. If you have never seen a snake, write about an experience with another animal.

Choose an episode from the story and tell it from Ben's point of view. Remember that he is a very young and imaginative little boy. Use quotes from the book to get his voice right.

Has J.E. Fison written other books? What are they called? Are there any in your library? Read one and tell your classmates about it. How is it similar? How is it different?

Write a short review of Snake Surprise. Post your review in your classroom and read your classmates' reviews.

