



Teachers' Notes written by Erina Wamala

The Wishbird by Gabrielle Wang

Summary

Oriole has grown up in a forest, far from human contact. Surrounded by birds, she sleeps in the trees and forages for seeds and nuts for food. Since she was a baby, she has been raised by Mellow, a Wishbird. Now Mellow is dying and in order to save him Oriole must travel a great distance to the City of Soulless and plead with the King. Oriole has never travelled or been to a city and greatly fears what she might find.

Boy has grown up in the city. As a small child, he remembers seeing his parents taken away. As musicians they were considered outlaws and were removed in the back of the Song Stealer's Cart. By order of the King, the City of Soulless has been without music for many years and Boy often wonders what became of his family. Now a local pickpocket, Boy steals from passers-by to please his master, Panther, who gives him food and shelter but punishes severely if Boy's haul is not sufficient. Panther has issued Boy with a great challenge – to find his way into the garden of the Demon Monster and steal all he can. Boy is terrified but has no choice.

On entering the city, Oriole is instantly recognised as having the "singing tongue" and is taken away in the Song Stealer's Cart to the dungeons. Boy witnesses Oriole in the back of the cart and, believing that she may lead him to his parents, he follows. After rescuing Oriole from the dungeon, he learns of her quest and agrees to help. Together they must save Mellow, reveal the treachery of the King's advisor, Lord Chancellor Mzia, and defend the city from the Barbarian Army that surrounds it. They must also learn several important truths about themselves and their past along the way.

These notes have been written in accordance with Australian Curriculum for grades 4 though they may be altered for grades 5 and 6.

Before Reading

Look at the front cover. Create an “I See, I Wonder” list.

- What do you see on the cover? What does it tell you the story might be about?
- What do the things you see make you wonder?

Now look at the back cover. Read the blurb.

- What do you know from the blurb? Does it match with anything you predicted from the front cover? What questions/wonderings do you have now? Does it sound like a book you might choose to read? Why / why not?

Wishing Journal

Create a Wishing Journal in which all your work related to *The Wishbird* will be kept. Create a cover like a book jacket for your journal.

Activity: Chapter Summary

As you read, write a summary of each chapter as you go. Include the chapter number and heading and any wonderings and new words/phrases you come across.

Activity: Glossary

In your journal, create a glossary of any words you are not familiar with. Write a definition, the page number and an example of how the word is used in the book. Create a new sentence using the word and a small illustration.

Banyan Tree

Create a Wishing Tree for your classroom. Everyone can contribute a wish to hang on the tree using pieces of paper in the shape of a bird and in different colours.

Characters

In your Wish Journal, draw an illustration of each character.

Boy/Hero

Boy has grown up on the streets of Soulless, pickpocketing in order to earn his board and keep with Panther. Panther beats Boy regularly yet, having no parents and no other way to support himself, Boy remains in servitude to him. Boy has never given up hope that his parents are still alive and eagerly searches for him when he believes that there may be a chance for him to find them. Boy displays much courage and compassion towards Oriole and becomes integral to the saving of the city. It is later revealed that Boy's real name is Hero.

The Oxford Dictionary defines the word hero as:

- *a person, typically a man, who is admired for their courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities.*
- *the chief male character in a book, play, or film, who is typically identified with good qualities, and with whom the reader is expected to sympathise.*

- How do these definitions apply to Boy?
- Would you consider his actions in the book to be "heroic"?
- Name two events during which Boy shows courage.
- Which other characters display courage throughout the book? Could Oriole be considered a "hero" also?

In order to survive, Boy steals from people on the street:

'I steal things from people's clothing without them knowing,' Boy said proudly.

'Oh, that sounds like a game I play with Mellow! He hides things and I hunt for them. He says it improves my powers of thinking.'

'This is not a game. It's how Panther, Rabbit and me live. The stuff I steal Panther sells. That's how we survive.'

Oriole put her head to one side. 'Mellow taught me that it is wrong to take something that does not belong to you.'

'If you can get away with it then it's okay. That's what Panther says.'

'Well, that Panther is wrong,' Oriole said. (p.79)

- Do you agree with Oriole or Boy?
- Boy says he has no choice, do you think this is true? Is stealing ever acceptable?
- Does this make Boy a bad person?

Boy has a treasure box that he keeps his most precious things in.

- What things would you put in your treasure box?
- Write or draw one object that has a deep memory for you.

Oriole

Like boy, Oriole has also grown up without parents. She has, however, had the protection and guidance of Mellow, the Wishbird. She is a child of nature and has not been witness to the sadness that has surrounded the City of Soulless. When she is faced with the challenge of saving Mellow, and later the City itself, she faces her challenge head-on and does so with courage and humility.

An Oriole is a bird, many types of which live all over the world. The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines the Oriole as being '*shy and not easily seen in the treetops but may be detected by their loud whistling and jarring notes*'

(<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/432646/oriole>).

The Oriole bird is particularly significant within Chinese culture. Gabrielle Wang presents several references and definitions on her website, <http://gabriellewang.com/books/the-wishbird> including:

There are many references in China to the oriole bird. It is famed in China for its beautiful appearance and song. The Chinese character consists of li meaning beautiful and niao meaning bird. During the Ming Dynasty the oriole was depicted on the front of the gowns of high-ranking court officials.

There are a few Chinese sayings with the word oriole in them -

ying ge yan wu – literal meaning 'orioles sing and swallows dart'. True meaning – a scene of peace, peaceful, prosperous.

ying sheng yan yu - literal meaning 'trill of an oriole, song of a swallow'. True meaning – the sweet delicate voice of a woman.

In the Summer Palace outside Beijing, there is the Oriole Listening Hall because the ancients liked to compare beautiful music to the singing of orioles.

- How do these definitions apply to the Oriole in the story?
- Do you consider her to be shy? If so, how does she overcome her shyness?
- How does Oriole's "song" play a major role within the story?
- Oriole must learn to control her anger and use it in a positive way. Write in your Wishing journal about a time when you were angry. What colour do you think anger is? Can anything positive come out of anger?

Friendship

Boy and Oriole have a really important friendship. They teach each other things, support each other and save each other.

- Write about an important friend in your life.

Panther & Rabbit

We do not know a lot about Panther and even less about Rabbit. Rabbit found Boy when he was left behind as a baby and seems to be relatively kind. Panther, on the other hand, has taken advantage of boy and leads him into a life of crime. He is violent towards Boy and eventually betrays him.

- Why do Boy and Rabbit stay with someone so cruel?

The King

The King has been growing steadily more ill over the years, his condition caused by a broken heart. The loss of his son brought the King much grief and he turned his back on his kingdom, which effectively allowed Chancellor Mzia to rule in his stead.

- Can we excuse the King's actions?
- How might life in the City of Solace have been different if the King had not banned music and driven away the birds?
- What is the role of the Wishbird to the King? How might this be useful?

Lord Chancellor Mzia

As previously mentioned, Chancellor Mzia has taken advantage of the King's ill health to secretly rule the kingdom. As a result, music was outlawed, the birds driven from the city, the surrounding forests burnt to the ground and the Prince murdered.

- Oriole knew on first meeting the Chancellor that he was an evil man, how did he fool the King?

Activity: Character Portfolio

Using Voki, create avatars for each character then assign each character with four words that you think best describes them.

Themes

Music, family, friendship, environment, power, bullying, belonging, death, loneliness, bravery, love, forgiveness, connectedness, loss, multiculturalism.

Courage

- In what ways do Boy and Oriole show great courage?
- Courage is not always shown in grand gestures, could Lord Taku and Lady Butterfly be considered courageous for saving birds and savouring music? Or perhaps by looking after Boy and Oriole?

Loss

Loss is a significant theme throughout the book. Many characters have experienced loss of some kind:

- The King lost his son.
- Boy and Oriole both lost their parents.
- The people of Solace lost their freedom to make and enjoy music.
- The birds lost their homes.

People deal with loss in different ways. Consider how the King dealt with his loss compared with Boy for example. The King lost all hope and became ill as a result. Boy, however, never gave up hope that his parents would be found.

- List some other things that people in the book lost.

Making assumptions on appearance and hearsay

How often do you make up your mind about someone and have been wrong?

For example: people's ideas of the Demon Monster were very far from reality.

Power

In a story about good versus evil, there is always a struggle for power. The King should hold power over the kingdom but Chancellor Mzia managed to take the power away from him. Oriole, however, ends up holding more power than she realised.

- What do you think power means?
- How does Chancellor Mzia abuse his power?
- How can power be used for good and evil?
- Oriole is only a small girl, how does she gain power over the Barbarian Army?
- Will Oriole one day be a good queen? Why/why not?
- What does it mean to be a King?

- Is a King all about ordering other people around or does the King have a duty to perform? What is the difference between a King and a Prime Minister and a President?
- What would you do if you were King?
- Does Australia have a King?
- In the story, how do the personal feelings of the King (in this case grief for his lost son) affect the entire Kingdom? Why do you think the Wishbird is sick?

Birds

Birds play a significant role in many myths and legends from cultures around the world. They can be bringers of life or death, represent wisdom, strength or purity or act as mediators between humans and the supernatural. For example: the dove represents love and peace and has a history of being released at both weddings and funerals.

Activity: Presentation (*Plan, rehearse and deliver presentations incorporating learned content and taking into account the particular purposes and audiences, Australian Curriculum Year 4*)

Choose a bird that you are interested in. It might be an Australian native, like the Emu or Kookaburra, or perhaps a Nightingale or Eagle. Prepare a short presentation on your bird and what it symbolises.

- What can you find out about the Hoopoe Bird?
- Why do you think the author chose this bird to represent the Wishbird?

From Gabrielle Wang's website:

** Hoopoe birds were depicted on the walls of tombs and temples in Ancient Egypt as they were considered sacred.*

** The Hoopoe featured in Greek mythology. He is the king of the birds in the Ancient Greek comedy *The Birds* by Aristophanes.*

** In Islam, the Hoopoe is associated with King Solomon who spoke with animals, (in Arabic the Prophet Suleyman) and he tells him of the Queen of Sheba and her magnificent land. Quran 27:20-28.*

** In classical Chinese poetry, the Hoopoe is a celestial messenger often symbolising the coming of spring. It is also considered very lucky.*

** In Persia, the hoopoe bird was seen as a symbol of virtue. In *The Conference of the Birds*, one of the central works of Sufi literature, he is the leader of the birds.*

Music

'Music reflects what's in one's heart' (p.180)

Music is significant to cultures around the world and has been for thousands of years. Think about the ways music plays a part in your life: in the everyday (listening to music in the car), growing up (nursery rhymes and lullabies), celebrations (Happy Birthday, Christmas carols, weddings, funerals).

- Imagine your life without music. Could you go for a whole day without hearing any music at all? Write down all the ways you hear music throughout the day.
- Is there any music within your family that is particularly important? Perhaps there is music used to celebrate a religious festival. Or your mum's favourite song that you have heard many times. Share the music that is special to you with the rest of your class.
- How did music being banned affect the people of Solace?
- Do you think it was right of the King to outlaw music? Why would he have done so? What was he hoping to achieve?

Activity:

Choose a piece of music or song that you feel best represents you. Write a short paragraph on why this music is important.

Song: Snail and the Oriole

Watch/listen to the Chinese children's song *The Snail and the Oriole*, <http://youtu.be/-NL-3qnPB9I>

Gabrielle Wang provides the lyrics on her website:

A'mén A'qián yì ke pútao shù,

In front by the door there's an old grape vine,

A'nèn A'nèn lu de gang fayá.

Just sprouting green with its leaves so fine.

Woniú beizhe nà zhòngzhòng de ké ya,

The snail on its back has a hard heavy shell yes,

Yí bù yí bù de wang shàng pá.

But up the vine it goes nonetheless.

A'shù a'shàng liang zhi huánglíniao,

Two little birds sit up in a tree,

A'xi a'xi ha ha zài xiào ta.

And laugh at poor snail haha heeheehee.

Pútao chéngshóu hái zao de hen na,

Those grapes won't be ripe for a long long time so

Xiànzài shàng lái gan shénme?

Why climb now? We would like to know!

A'huáng a'huáng lí'ér búyào xiào,

Oriole Birds, don't you laugh at me,

Deng wo pá shàng ta jiù chéngshóuliao.

By the time I get there, ripe they'll be!

(song translated and adapted by S. Clavey)

You might like to learn the song (perhaps in English and Chinese) and perform it.

The City of Soulless/Solace

'But birds are the most beautiful creatures on earth. And everybody needs music. Without it our souls would die,' Oriole said, horrified.

'That is true, Oriole, and it is the very reason why the city eventually became known as the City of Soulless instead of the City of Solace. The people came to forget how to sing and laugh and love.' (p.16)

- What is the significance of the name of the city?
- Look up the meanings of "soulless" and "solace". How do they differ? How do they represent the city, both before music was outlawed and after?
- Why might the author have chosen these names?

Activity: Map of the city

Using the information given by the characters in the book, mainly Boy, draw a map of the city as you see it. Label all the areas that you think are important, for example: the market place, the palace, the garden of the Demon Monster. You may also like to include the surrounding forests.

Colour

The City of Soulless is grey and bleak. Imagine a world without colour.

How do colours affect our feelings?

- Describe a place where you feel happy.
- Describe a place where you feel unhappy.

Nature

Oriole's dresses are made from spiders silk and her cloak from feathers.

- Make a piece of clothing out of nature – a necklace, a hat, etc.

Genre

Gabrielle Wang describes *The Wishbird* as a fantasy novel. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the fantasy genre as 'a genre of imaginative fiction involving magic and adventure, especially in a setting other than the real world'

(<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/fantasy>).

- How does this apply to *The Wishbird*?
- Can you think of other novels you have read that could be fantasy?

Read pages 166-170. How does the author make this scene exciting? (*Discuss how [authors](#) and illustrators make stories exciting, moving and absorbing and hold readers' interest by using various techniques, for example character development and plot tension.*

Australian Curriculum Grade 4)

- Choose some words or phrases from this scene that create tension. For example:
 - 'warning chill'
 - 'Oriole smelt blood and death'
 - 'ghostly shapes'

Further activities:

Book Review (*Discuss literary experiences with others, sharing responses and expressing a [point of view](#).* Australian Curriculum Year 4)

Write a short review of *The Wishbird*. Include the following:

- A brief summary of the plot (do not give away the ending).
- Aspects of the book you liked/disliked.
- Your recommendation to other students.

Illustrations (*Explore the effect of choices when [framing](#) an image, placement of elements in the image, and [salience](#) on composition of still and moving images in a range of [types of texts](#).* Australian Curriculum Year 4)

Gabrielle Wang has used a distinct illustrative style throughout the book. Choose a scene that you think is particularly important within the novel and represent it as an illustration, mimicking the style of the author.

Letter (*Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive texts containing key information and supporting details for a widening range of audiences, demonstrating increasing control over [text](#) structures and [language features](#).* Australian Curriculum Grade 4)

Imagine you are a member of the Barbarian Army. Write a letter home to your family about your journey, the city you will be attacking and hearing Oriole's song.

Chinese characters

Visit <http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/chinese/games/characters.shtml> to try writing Chinese characters. You may have some students in your class who can already write with Chinese characters, ask if they will give the class a tutorial. See if you can find out the characters for some of the characters in the story: Oriole, Boy, Panther, Rabbit, King, etc.

Language

In *The Wishbird*, Oriole is put in prison because she has the 'singing tongue'. As a class, brainstorm groups in society that might be treated differently because of lack of understanding.

- What is the role of language in our lives?
- How would you feel if you had to go to a strange place where you couldn't speak the language and everything you saw was unfamiliar? Migrant, refugee experience.
- Do you speak a language other than English?

Metaphor and simile (*Understand, interpret and experiment with a range of devices and deliberate word play in poetry and other literary texts, for example nonsense words, spoonerisms, neologisms and puns. Australian Curriculum Grade 4*)

Gabrielle Wang uses detailed descriptions, metaphors and similes to describe place, people and things. Choose your favourite simile and draw an illustration to go with it. In pairs make up your own similes and metaphors. See who comes up with the most original and funny similes or the most colourful.

Senses: sight, sound, smell, taste.

Throughout *The Wishbird* there are many examples of text and scenes using one of the four senses. Find an example of each one.

E.g. P110

'Mellow could sense the Prince. He had the familiar smell of the Palace on him.'

- Make a list of what a Palace might smell like. In contrast, make a list of what the market might smell like.

'She could even hear insects in their tunnels underground' (p50)

- Imagine you have super hero hearing. What are some of the sounds you can hear that nobody else can? E.g. perhaps you could hear people's wishes or their heartbeats or their eyes blinking.

Menu (taste)

Gabrielle Wang writes detailed descriptions of food. E.g. P90.

- List the foods that she has written about.

- Create a menu for a special dinner. Make up foods if you like, be creative. Or create an illustrated menu.
- What does Oriole eat in the forest?

Two worlds

There are two worlds in *The Wishbird*. Boy's world is cold and grey without music. He is surrounded by high walls.

Oriole's world is filled with trees and birdsong fills every space.

Create two very different worlds of your own. Illustrate them if you would rather.

Family

What are some of the different families in *The Wishbird* e.g. Boy lives with Panther and Rabbit, Oriole is raised by Mellow.

Did any surprise you?

Connectedness

Mellow is connected by a thread to the King.

- What does Gabrielle Wang mean by a thread? Are these physical threads?
- In your Wishing journal write down a list of people who are important to you. Do you feel connected to them? Draw a map of your connections to people.

P145 Gabrielle Wang writes about memory, music and laughter

- As a class talk about some of your funny memories.

Walls

'There has to be walls,' said Boy. 'Nobody would know where they belonged or what belonged to them and everything would be a mess.'

'There are no walls in my Forest. Yet everything that lives in it knows its right place.' Oriole said. (p83)

- What would a school be like without rules?
- What would a school be like without walls?
- What would a country be like without borders?

The importance of dreams

Mellow gives Oriole dreams. She has never seen a city of another human except in dreams. What would that be like?

- Write down one of your dreams for the future and tie it on the Wishing Tree
- Find out what people from other cultures think about dreams e.g. dream catchers, finding answers to problems in this world, in the dream world etc.

Environment

In *The Wishbird* all the birds have been killed or driven away. What would a world be like without birds? What role do birds play in nature?

Oriole has to enter a world without trees. Discuss what a world like that would be like? What places in the world do not have trees?

What are other things that are essential to life? E.g. water, air.

Drama

Choose your favourite scene from *The Wishbird* and in groups act it out.