

Toby and the Silver Blood Witches by Sally Doherty

A Reading Unit of Work for Years 5 and 6

Book overview

Twelve-year-old Toby is a young carer, looking after his mum who struggles with M.E. He loves her so much and wants to do all he can to make life easier for her, even if it makes his own life more difficult. Toby's greatest fear is that someone will find out they aren't coping and he will be taken into care. When boys at school threaten his precariously balanced life, Toby knows he has to do something to stop them.

Just when life couldn't get any more difficult, a witch crash-lands in his attic. That's right, a witch! The wylie clan have been hiding away in their own city in the sky – Little Witchery – to escape the persecution witches have traditionally faced on Earth. But despite their attempts to protect themselves, some witches have gone missing. They need Toby to help them – and maybe he'll be able to help himself in the process.

This is an exciting and uplifting story full of magic and fun. Toby is incredibly caring, brave and the kind of boy anyone would want as a friend. His relationship with his mum is very special and models just how much a child will sacrifice to make sure their mum is alright. This story is sure to build empathy in its readers, helping them to understand the struggle some children go through just to get to school. They'll be cheering for Toby every step of the way as he tries to save the witches and solve the secret of the strange building just over the road.

The Unit of Work - Rationale

The ideas contained in this unit of work support pupils in a sustained study of the book through whole class discussion, small group and partner work, and individual activities. Many of the suggestions are related to enhancing children's enjoyment of reading and to the development of those reading skills that are being developed in Years 5-6. However, writing opportunities are also highlighted throughout. Activities are often open-ended and extendable to provide challenge and opportunities for creative responses.

As the story unfolds, the pupils are drawn into Toby's world. Here they can develop their imaginations, discuss themes and issues, explore emotions, viewpoints and dilemmas and further their ideas of morality. The teaching sequence scaffolds for them a deeper understanding and an engagement with characters and events. Pupils are involved in drama and role-play, visualisation, drawing and presentations, rather than written comprehension exercises, to develop their ideas and feelings and equip them with the skills to respond and to empathise with characters.

The Unit of Work - Delivery

This teaching sequence covers fourteen possible sessions but timings will vary from one teacher to another. Teachers will want to respond to the needs of their pupils and to build on their enthusiasms, splitting, curtailing or extending sessions as appropriate. The unit could therefore cover 2-4 weeks, depending on the opportunities in the school timetable. Some suggestions may lend themselves to activities that could be pursued at home.

For the unit to progress at an engaging pace and to respect the authenticity of the text, some additional time is needed for reading portions of the book outside of the literacy lessons. At times, the teacher may read aloud to the pupils so that they can benefit from hearing the cadences and patterns of the language and so that attention can be paid to vocabulary to enhance meaning.

Before starting work on the book, teachers may wish to create a space in the classroom for a Reading Wall. This could enable them to display the ongoing responses and reflections of the pupils generated during the literacy sessions.

Unit of Work – Appendices

- Suggestions for reading group questions can be found at the end of the Power Point
- Appendix A – Cross-curricular opportunities
- Appendix B -Website links
- Appendix C – text P.157-158 – Activity to read the passage and highlight where the author provides information to show how Toby is feeling as a young carer

Note to schools and teachers:

This teaching sequence is designed for a Year 5 or Year 6 class. Teachers should be aware that the book includes references to sensitive issues around bullying, parental illness and young carers. Without doubt, this is a suitable text to explore additionally in RHSE (Relationship, Health and Sex Education) and PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education) lessons. However, teachers will want to make sure they have read the whole story before they decide if it is appropriate to work and share with any children who are vulnerable and currently exposed to these matters.

Appendix A

Art/D and T

- Create patchwork

The children could work together to make a class patchwork skirt or cloth background to a book themed display.

- Make sock bats

Make stuffed sock bats to hang from the ceiling – can the children think of suitable names and define them by making short profiles to identify their characteristics?

- Design and make wands from natural materials

With reference to P. 52 design and make wands out of natural materials. Consider how it represents their own witch's characteristics and any specific features.

- Paint

The children could paint Little Witchery based on the scenes described in chapters 15 to 20. Children could take different scenes to create a complete reproduction of the city for a display.

Science

- Make a fact file on bats, identifying specific features, habitats etc (see Appendix B for links to websites)

Why are they associated with witches?

Maths

- Geometry – properties of shapes when exploring patchwork patterns
- Tessellation

RHSE

- Research support for young carers and consider the everyday challenges. (See Appendix B for links to websites)
- Reflect on the demands for young carers with reference to the text P.157-158 see resource sheet with extract
- Read the passage (PDF provided) where Toby admits how hard it is for him being a carer for his mum. Recreate the scene through drama and extend into a class discussion on how children can find help.
- Bullying – read the school's anti-bullying policy and materials on campaigns to address this in schools. List ideas and suggestions to support addressing this in their own school. (See Appendix B for links to websites)

Appendix B – Website Links

Author website: www.sallydohertyauthor.com

Character quiz: <https://quiz.tryinteract.com/#/618675f00ed91c00185d3f05>

Young carers: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/young-people/young-carers

Information and support on M.E.: www.actionforme.org.uk www.meassociation.org.uk

Bats: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/58675894>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/49447808> [Cool Facts About Bats | Things You Wanna Know - Bing video](#)

Anti-bullying materials: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/curations/anti-bullying-week>

Appendix C – RSHE and PSHE activities – Highlight how Toby is feeling as a young carer

Toby toppled into his kitchen and collapsed onto a chair. It took a few moments to get his bearings, and when he did, his jaw dropped. The room had been struck by a great catastrophe. Dirty pots and pans covered every surface. On the hob, a giant saucepan bubbled over. Blue goo splattered both ceiling and floor. Amidst it all, also coated in blue splodges, stood Witch Hazel. “I thought I would prepare us all a little sustenance ... only I couldn’t quite get the hang of this cooking machine.” She looked at the floor, unable to meet their eyes.

Didn’t he have enough to deal with? Toby had been completely caught up in all the extraordinary events of Little Witchery. But now the reality of his life hit him once again. It enveloped him like a heavy cloak and everything felt too much. He buried his face in his hands. He didn’t want to have to deal with this, have to deal with anything anymore. He let out a strangled gulp.

“It must be difficult for you with your mother ill,” said Willow gently.

“It all happened so quickly!” choked Toby. “One day she was fine. And the next she couldn’t get to work. Within a week, she was stuck in bed.” He’d never spoken to anyone about this before. Now the floodgates were open, his words tumbled out. “The doctor came. Asked questions. Did blood tests. But he couldn’t do anything. She just has post-viral fatigue, he said. She just needs rest and she’ll get better.”

Another gulp. Toby wiped his nose. “But she hasn’t got better! She’s so fatigued. And in pain. And now they say it’s M.E. So we’ve been left without help. I can’t tell anyone because they might take me away. I don’t want to leave my mum! This is my home. I belong here. I belong with her. So it’s just the two of us. And I have to do everything.”

Bumble rushed forwards, but Willow motioned her back.

The kitchen was quiet. The silence roared at him: *Don’t say it! Don’t say it!* Toby took a deep breath and grabbed hold of his courage. “It’s tough ... REALLY tough.” His voice was loud and defiant.

There. He’d said it. He’d finally admitted it. To himself. And to someone else. But instead of feeling foolish, a wave of relief swept through Toby. His shoulders gave way, his spine loosened. Like a row of dominoes being knocked down, muscle after muscle from his head to his feet gave a sigh and let go. Had he been tense all these years, clenching every cell of his body?

Witch Hazel placed a hand on his shoulder. “I understand.” Then she removed her hand, leaving a blue stain on his top.

Trust the witches – making a mess even when trying to help. Toby could only smile.

Willow raised her wand, and at once the kitchen came alive. Four sponges rose from the sink and dashed off in every direction. One set to work scrubbing the walls, another the ceiling. One feisty cloth even attempted to clean up Hazel. Squinting through her spattered spectacles, she tried to dodge its soapy clutches and bat it away. Arms flailing, legs hopping, she looked like she was doing a crazy dance. In five minutes, the kitchen was spotless, much cleaner than it had ever been on Toby’s watch. The black work surfaces and white tiled walls gleamed, and his reflection shone back at him everywhere he turned.

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