Every picture tells a story

The Chicken Thief: a story in pictures

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This regular feature on picture books continues by looking at a completely wordless picture book.

A twist in the (bushy) tail

Continuing our series on the use of picture books with older readers, I've a real treat for you this time around. Remember *The Silence Seeker* (Morley 2009) with its creative use of language? This wordless picture book manages to be creative without the use of language. I invite you to come on an unexpected journey with *The Chicken Thief (*Rodriguez 2009).

The Chicken Thief: a story in pictures

As this is a story told through illustrations (and didn't someone wise once say that a picture is worth a thousand words?), I need to use some words to relate what happens in the book.

Told through 24 pages of illustrations, most of which are double page spreads, the story opens outside an idyllic cottage in the woods. There's a bear, a rabbit and a cockerel, and some hens and chickens in the garden (there are also some delightful little details such as the rabbit garden gnome and a toy tow truck). Not quite so delightful is the fox in the bushes, looking longingly at the chickens...

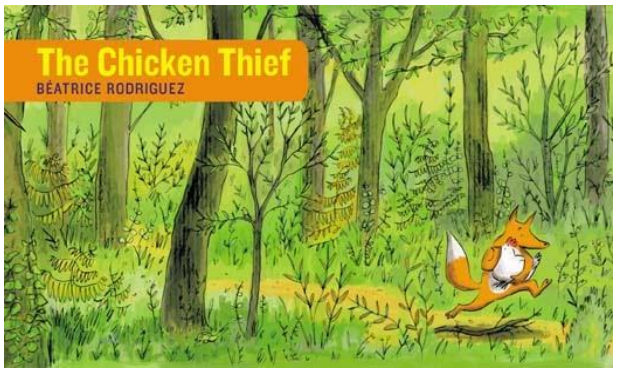
You guessed it! The fox steals a chicken, just as the inhabitants of the cottage are having their lunch. As the chicken cries out, her friends decide to give chase. Following the fox through the woods, they look a little nervous as it starts to get dark, but still they keep up with the thief. They camp out under a new moon, high in the branches of trees, and in the morning follow the thief up a hill. When the fox enters a tunnel, Bear's too big to follow, but what's this? Inside the hill, the fox and the chicken are... playing chess by candlelight?

Bear, Rabbit and Cockerel (for those are clearly their names!) camp out by a hillside fire that night, whilst deep inside the hill, Fox and Chicken snuggle up together. What's going on? Dawn reveals them running to a beach on the far side of the hill. As Fox and Chicken set out to sea in a boat, Rabbit and Cockerel use poor Bear as a make-shift raft. Oh, and whilst the three rescuers sail through stormy waters, it's sunny where Fox and Chicken are, so Chicken sports a pair of sunglasses. A girl's got to look her best!

A long time later, a bedraggled trio of rescuers arrive at a sandy shore. There's the abandoned boat, a house amongst the roots of a tree and a lit window, so our brave friends creep up to look in; Bear is armed with a stick. It's rescue time!

They break in, like three mean members of the animal mafia. But, all is not as it seems - Fox and Chicken are sipping cocoa by the fire. There's explaining to be done, so Chicken starts speaking, then kisses Fox - clearly, they are in love! Cockerel faints, Bear looks perplexed and Rabbit blushes. They all gather round the fire for hot drinks, even if Cockerel doesn't look too happy. The story ends with Fox and Chicken waving goodbye from the beach, as their friends sail off in the little boat (a welcome rest for Bear, no doubt). Cockerel still looks a little rejected though...

And maybe there's another romance in the air – on the beach, there's a seagull and a crab looking at each other.



Ways to use the book

How can you bring the thief into the classroom? Not literally, obviously, but we do need to consider how this book can be used with children. Its style makes it ideal for smaller group work, especially with children who might be at best, 'book-resistant'. Its lack of words encourages conversation and there's plenty to think about in the pictures.

The 'tone' of the pictures

Consider how the darkness of some of the pictures matches the mystery of the moment, or how during the sea journey, it's stormy for the rescuers, whilst for Fox and Chicken it's sunglasses weather. What does this mean? Does this help us as readers to understand the story and how the animals might be feeling?

What's the back story?

What do your pupils think happened before the story starts? Had the Fox and the Chicken met before, or was it 'love at first sight' for Fox? Maybe Fox originally stole Chicken to eat. If so, what might have made him

change his mind? How long have the animals in the cottage been living together?

Society expects

Okay, here's the big issue. Society doesn't usually put foxes and chickens together. Popular culture (and the laws of nature) teach us that foxes usually eat chickens. Look at the trouble Roald Dahl's Fantastic Mr. Fox went to in order to eat chickens. Then there's the folksong, *The Fox*. It may be about geese rather than chickens, but the message is clear; foxes steal poultry to eat. Yet here, the fox and the chicken live, quite literally, in harmony.

A good starting point would be to help your children explore how society views the fox. Get some non-fiction books on foxes from the library, some extracts from *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (Dahl 1985) and play them *The Fox* (Nickel Creek performs a wonderful bluegrass version of the song). Then let them read this book. At what point do they realise what's happening in the story? Is it wrong for Fox and Chicken to fall in love? Is it important that they are both happy, even though not all of Chicken's friends are happy with the outcome?

You can easily consider PSHE issues here, and even use the story to explore family breakup. How does Cockerel feel at the end of the book? It's a happy ending really, but not for him. Is he right to be upset?

Newspaper reporters

How might a local paper report the story at its start? Here the Fox is the outsider, and if the reporter speaks to Cockerel the story might be anti-Fox. How about the Fox's local paper? Suppose Fox and Chicken decide to marry and the local paper runs a story on how they met. Maybe Fox is a well known member of the community where he lives, and perhaps there'll be excitement about the wedding?

Simply tell the story

It's an obvious one, but why not ask your pupils to write the words to the story? They'll each pick up on different things; some might tell the story from Fox's perspective, or from Chicken's point of view. Each character in the story seems to have a distinct voice, so with a small group of pupils, ask children to tell the story from the point of view of a different animal – each story will have different tones.

Bear might be grumpy when he's being used as a boat, or might start complaining he needs to go on a diet when he can't fit in the hole in the hill. Perhaps it's his house and he lets the other animals live there? If so, he's probably generous and kind. Or is Rabbit just visiting?

Rabbit probably feels scared in the woods, and then he's embarrassed when he reaches Fox's home and finds out the Chicken is in love. Has Rabbit known Chicken for a long time? Maybe they went to school together?

Chicken herself may be shocked to have been snatched from her home, or perhaps she was waiting for it to happen. When she seems to be shouting to her friends, is it for help or just to say goodbye? Has she been longing for adventure, or is she a little scared about the long journey ahead of her? Does she know her friends keep following her?

Cockerel obviously thinks Chicken needs rescuing; does he love her, is that why he's so dejected at the end of the story, or is it just because he thinks it's been a wasted trip and he's going back to see the other chickens? Perhaps he thinks it's his job is to look out for the chickens, and he thinks he's failed this time.

Fox may have been planning to take Chicken for a long time. Maybe he's seen her from afar and felt she could never love him back, or perhaps he's a vegetarian fox? He obviously had to travel a long way to reach Chicken. Why did he first visit the cottage in the woods, or was this his first visit?

Lots to talk about – even without words

Hopefully this has given you some ideas for using this book. It's not well-known in the UK, so your pupils will probably not have seen it before. As it will be new to them, you'll be able to really see who responds to the book, (if you've ever had problems assessing reading abilities with Oxford Reading Tree books when parents have been buying copies of books to help their children get ahead, you'll probably know what I mean). It's worth mentioning that the book was first published in France, but the lack of words mean that anyone can understand the story.

One final thought – maybe you could ask your class to draw their own version of a story with a twist in the tail, and give it to another class to look at?

Children's books

Rodriguez, B. (2009) *The Chicken Thief*. Gecko Press. ISBN 9781877467318. Originally published as *Le voleur de poule* in France, 2005.

Morley, B. (2009, illus. Carl Pearce) *The Silence Seeker.* Tamarind Books. ISBN 9781848530034.

Dahl, R. (1985) *Fantastic Mr. Fox.* Dramatic Publishing Company. ISBN 9780871296702.

Songs

The Fox by Nickel Creek on the album *Nickel Creek* (Sugarhill 2000) ASIN: B00004NK9T.