

My Mother Saw a Dancing Bear

Poetry

Content domain focus:

- 2a** give/explain the meaning of words in context
- 2b** retrieve and record information/identify key details from fiction and non-fiction
- 2c** summarise main ideas from more than one paragraph
- 2d** make inferences from the text/explain and justify inferences with evidence from the text

Text summary

This narrative poem is one of a number of poems written for children by Charles Causley. It describes how a group of children initially enjoy the spectacle of a dancing bear, but their mood changes at the end of the performance as they become aware of the bear's discomfort.

The poem is probably based on an actual account given to Causley by his mother, who would have been at school before the practice of using dancing bears for street entertainment was banned in England in 1911.

Unit summary

The unit focuses on the narrative nature of the poem and the children's understanding of the final two verses, in which the bystanders change their attitude towards the performance. The emphasis is, therefore, on close reading for literal and inferential comprehension.



Teaching prompts

- Ask the children to work in pairs. Give them the poem cut up into individual verses; ask them to assemble the verses in order to make the complete poem.
- When they have assembled the poem, ask them to practise reading it aloud. Ask: *does it work?*
- Now provide children with a complete version of the poem with questions. Read the poem aloud to them with appropriate expression.
- Direct the children to answer the questions individually.

Revisiting the text

- Ask the children what helped them to assemble the poem initially. What clues did they use?
- Ask them to work in pairs to prepare a role-play in which a mother tells her son or daughter about her experience of seeing the dancing bear when she was a child. Ask the children to think about how the mother would introduce the story, the child's reactions and the questions the child might ask.
- Invite one or two pairs to perform their role-play.
- Use this as the basis for discussing the poem, concentrating on the final three questions.
- Invite the children to undertake research on dancing bears: when they were last seen in the UK; whereabouts in the world they still exist; what is being done to prevent the practice from taking place.

**Answers**

1. his mother [2b]
2. by the schoolyard [2b]
3. summer [2b]
4. a chain and bar/(his voice) [2b]
5. Any three from: play dead; march and halt; roll over and somersault. [2b]
6. bruin [2a]
7. comical [2a]
8. a) To collect money from the children. [2d]
 b) The bear is hot from dancing./Steam is rising from its fur. [2d]
 c) shaming [2d]
9. The bear is feeling unhappy (humiliated)./The bear misses its natural habitat. [2d]
 b) This is where the bear comes from/belongs. [2d]
10. I think he disapproves because he tells us that the keeper keeps the bear on a chain and he shows us how, at the end, the children change their attitude and realise they were wrong to laugh at the bear. [2c]

**Assessment**

The initial questions (1–5) focus on literal comprehension and retrieval. In question 4, the children may say that the keeper controls the bear with his voice, which is an acceptable answer.

The challenge lies in questions 8–10. Accept alternative phrasing of answers to questions 8 and 9, but there needs to be clear understanding of the children's change in attitude resulting from their awareness of the bear's discomfort.

In question 10, expect reference to the poem, not just a declaration of personal feelings.

To demonstrate that they are working at the required standard, the children will need to achieve some success in questions 8–10, not just questions 1–7.

Next steps

If the children struggle with the initial sequencing activity, provide further opportunities to reassemble suitable narrative passages and poems, drawing on and identifying the clues within the passage.

If the children experience difficulty in expressing their views in questions 8–10, model suitable answers that refer directly to the poem.