

The Snow Spider

Fiction

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

2d make inferences from the text/explain and justify inferences with evidence from the text

2f identify/explain how information/narrative content is related and contributes to meaning as a whole

Text summary

This is part of the opening chapter to *The Snow Spider* by Jenny Nimmo. It is a classic fantasy novel for children, set in the Welsh mountains, and draws on Welsh myth and folklore to tell the story of Gwyn's calling to take his place alongside his ancestors as a magician with special powers.

Unit summary

The passage uses many of the conventions of the fantasy genre to introduce the reader to the setting and the characters, and to prepare for the action to come. The focus for the children is on whether they recognise and are alert to these conventions.



Teaching prompts

- Ask the children if they have ever been given something unusual as a birthday present. How did they react?
- If you have already completed Autumn Test 1, ask them if they remember meeting Mrs Malevant, the childminder from *Toby in the Dark*. Explain that they are about to look at an extract from another book by Jenny Nimmo. They will be introduced to a very different character in this opening chapter.

Revisiting the text

- Once the children have completed the task, and you have had time to look at their responses, return to the passage. This time read it to them, providing a dramatic and atmospheric reading.
- Ask the children, in pairs, to discuss the passage, using Aidan Chambers' four elements of book talk.
 - What did you like?
 - Was there anything that you didn't like?
 - Did anything puzzle you?
 - Did you notice any patterns?/Did it remind you of anything you have previously seen or read?
- Take feedback, recording the children's thoughts on a flipchart or board.
- Focus attention on the questions, to see whether these help with any of the points raised in book talk. Use the children's answers to build a picture of what happens in the extract. Pay particular attention to questions 9 and 10 (see the "Assessment" section below).
- Ask: *At the end of the passage, what do you know, and what do you not know yet? Are you tempted to read on?*
- If possible, continue reading the book to the children.

**Answers**

1. She gives him a piece of seaweed, a yellow scarf, a tin whistle, a metal brooch, a small broken horse. [2b]
They are not typical presents for a nine-year-old boy, and they have not been wrapped up. [2d]
2. a basket [2b]
3. She tips them onto the kitchen floor. [2b]
4. Nain [2b]
5. a) Gwyn's sister has died (or disappeared/ran away). [2d]
b) the ache of emptiness [2b]
6. He should give them to the wind. [2b]
7. He puts them in a drawer in his bedroom. [2b]
8. Accept answers such as: predecessors; forefathers; or an explanation of the fact that these were relatives from a long time ago. [2a]
9. The character sketch should be written in continuous prose and should include some of the following details. She likes to be called Nain. She is interested in stories of ancient magicians. She seems eccentric, unusual. She has black hair. She wears bright clothes. She is very active for a grandmother. She might be a witch. [2f]
10. a fantasy story (Allow other answers, if justified with reasons.) The explanation could include: Because it deals in myths and legends; it mentions that Gwyn might have special powers; it includes some unusual objects that might have special significance; it creates an air of mystery. [2f]

**Assessment**

The passage is quite challenging in its setting and language. Questions 1–8 combine both literal and inferential comprehension, as children are invited to look at both what happens, and what it means. Here, they are learning to piece together the clues that will guide them as readers.

Questions 9 and 10 are the most challenging as they require an ability to build a picture from individual details, and ask the children to use their experience of fiction genres to identify the typical characteristics of a fantasy story.

These questions act as both a discriminator – identifying the more able and knowledgeable children – and a challenge, to ensure that, with help, as many children as possible eventually achieve this standard.

Model answers to these questions so all children can see what is expected.

Next steps

This is the second passage taken from a Jenny Nimmo story (see Autumn Test 1 *Toby in the Dark*). You could ask the children to compare the two in terms of:

- the presentation of a character (Mrs Malevant and Nain)
- writing in two different fiction genres (realistic adventure and fantasy).

This would help to increase the children's understanding of the writer's craft and their grasp of the conventions of different fiction genres.

For comparison with another example of the fantasy genre, explore the opening of Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising*, which also features a young central character discovering that he has a particular destiny.