



## Teaching Notes

### *The Rabbit and the Shadow*

by Mélanie Rutten

## **Synopsis**

In this enchanting story an eclectic group of characters meet as they make their way through life. A stag, a rabbit, a soldier, a cat and a book, they are all beset with their own fears and anxieties. They team up and together they journey through a magical, natural world of forests, holes, the night sky, hills, fast flowing rivers and a fireworks-spitting volcano. In the course of their adventures they share their fears, learn to trust each other, and resolve their problems.

The main characters are the Rabbit and the Shadow. The Rabbit is young. He is afraid at night and he wants to grow up. When he gets lost down a hole, he is separated from his loving caregiver, the Stag, and he has to face his fears and make his way in the world. His rescuer, the Soldier, is full of anger and the Cat is shut out of a dream of happiness. As the story progresses, the characters face their fears and share their security blankets. Rutten tells their stories delicately and at times obliquely so that the reader is challenged to read between the lines, make inferences and draw their own conclusions.

The Shadow is the Great Bear who is there (perhaps) at the beginning of the story when Rabbit is born and who is always in the night sky dancing with her little one. She is both frightening and at the same time, the comforting Earth mother.

This is an unusual adventure story, suitable to be read to children from five years upwards. However it is a challenging text that lends itself to close reading to or by students up to level 4 of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (12-year-olds).

This is a useful text for primary school classes studying philosophy as it explores ideas about life and living well.

## **The Author**

Mélanie Rutten was born in Belgium and spent most of her childhood in Africa and Central America. After studying photography in Brussels, she took evening classes with Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award winner, Kitty Crowther. *The Rabbit and the Shadow* is her fifth title.

Mélanie Rutten was awarded an honourable Mention in the Bologna Ragazzi Awards in 2014.

## **What the jury said:**

*A flowing, expressive line and delicate transparent washes characterise Rutten's highly individual visual language. She creates a world of anthropomorphic creatures and walking books that are somehow immediately convincing as they lead us into their bizarre world, a world that is nevertheless full of warmth and friendship.*



## Themes

In this story Mélanie Rutten explores the themes of trust, friendship and kindness and how these qualities have the power to dissolve our deepest fears.

The characters in the story are beset with the common fears and anxieties of life. However by forming a team and climbing the terrifying volcano together, they let down their defences, share their worries and resolve their problems.

The story is also about love and the fear of losing it. While the Stag fears the Rabbit growing up and leaving him, the Rabbit is afraid of the Stag growing old and dying.

## Activities

Introduce the book by reading about the characters in the introductory pages. The book is sectioned into a series of short stories or chapters. If you are reading the book aloud to students, read one chapter at a time and discuss each chapter before moving on to the next one. The book works well as a series of short stories to be read daily over a fortnight. The following activities are designed to be carried out after the complete story has been read. However they require that students revisit the illustrations, reread parts of the text, and locate information throughout the text.

Adapt the activities to suit the level of your students.

Discuss the characters in the story. Who is your favourite? Why?

Consider why the writer has made her characters different people, animals or things (the book). How would the story be different if all the characters were people? Would it be as good a story? Is it easier to understand the differences between characters when they are all different sorts of living things?

Does the type of person, animal, or thing that each character is, tell us something about the character? Would you expect a rabbit to be a friendly, kind sort of character or a stag to be a good parent? Why is the Soldier a soldier? Would you expect a cat to be confident?

How do the characters change throughout the story?

On what page does the soldier start to look different? Why?

Although the characters are all very different, what do they have in common?

Locate all the information in the story about the Book. Write it down as a list and consider how well it describes the character of a book. Can you create more details that explain the character of a book?

What does the Soldier mean by "*Sometimes, it's easier to be angry*"?

### Character continuums

Students can analyse the characters' personalities and behavior by drawing character continuums. Model how to do this by co-constructing one on a whiteboard before students compose their own.

Reread the chapter titled *the Cat*. Have the students draw a horizontal line to form a character continuum. At one end of the continuum have them write *scared* and at the other, *brave*. They can then place the characters on the continuum according to where they feel they fit. They can do this by drawing the character or writing the character's name at the point they have designated on the continuum. Students can explain other qualities of the characters, using continuums (for example, sad/happy, shy/confident, secure/insecure or friendly/unkind).

Reread the chapter *at night*. List the things that make the characters feel secure and take away their fears. Compare the list with the things the Rabbit, the Cat and the Soldier did at night in the chapter called *the Cat*. What do you notice?

Make a list of the things that make you feel secure.

In the chapter *growing up*, the characters talk about how you can tell when you've grown up. Discuss how you know when someone has grown up.

Why did the Stag's heart not want the Rabbit to run too fast?

Do you think the Stag and the Rabbit were anxious about the same thing?

In this story the Shadow and the Volcano can be read as metaphors. They stand for things that are abstract ideas. If the Shadow is an Earth mother, what do you think the climb up the volcano stands for?

Read and discuss the last chapter *this is the story ...*

Does this chapter provide a good summary of the story?

Does it help you to understand the story?