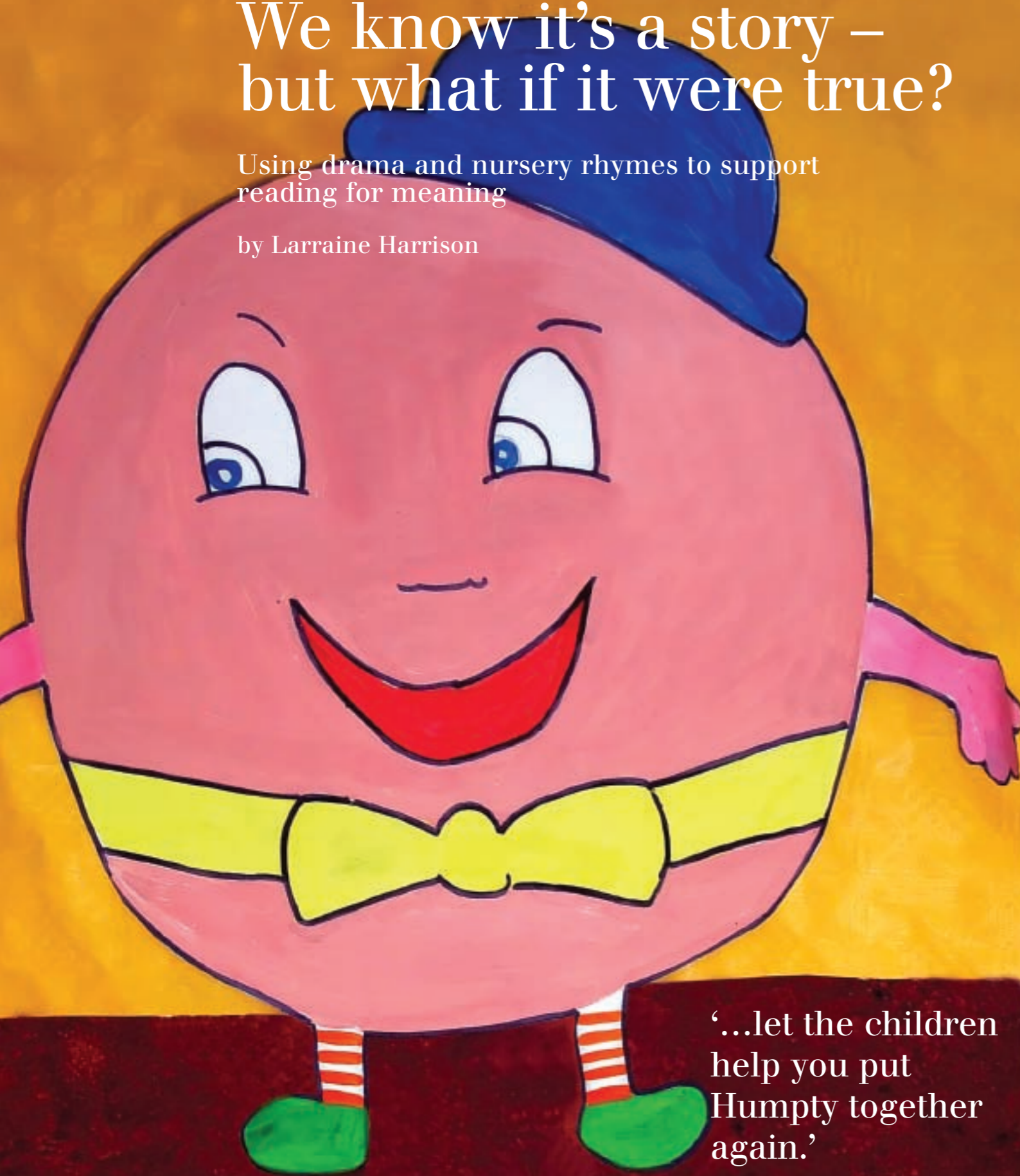


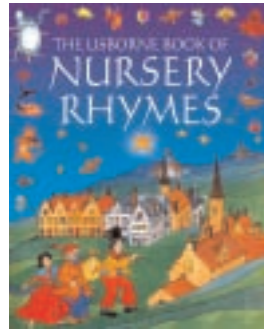
We know it's a story – but what if it were true?

Using drama and nursery rhymes to support
reading for meaning

by Lorraine Harrison



‘...let the children
help you put
Humpty together
again.’



Have you ever asked a young child to consider how the fictional characters in a story might be feeling at various points in the narrative, only to be reminded firmly by the child that it's just a story and not really true? In my experience this is quite common, especially if the child feels under pressure to perform, or has more pressing things to do than answer your questions! However, it can also indicate that the child has not suspended their disbelief sufficiently to consider the all important question that they need to ask when reading for meaning, and that is; *We know it's a story, but what if it were true?*

Why is this question so important? Once children accept that the fictional world is a world behaving as if it were real, they can begin to consider the consequences of the fictitious events, empathise with the characters and also begin to make meaningful links between the fictional world and the real world. In other words they can begin to read for meaning. So if we can encourage very young children to consider the characters and events in rhymes and stories as if they were real, then we can begin to move beyond the factual recall of events into something that more closely resembles reading for meaning.

‘...Little Boy Blue needs advice on getting to sleep at night...’

Beyond re-enactment

This is where drama can be very useful. By allowing children to have an imagined interaction with the characters and events, drama can give very young children a foothold in the imagined reality of the fiction. At FS/KS1, dramatising a story is often associated purely with re-enactment, but drama can also be used in other ways to support reading for meaning. Dealing with the consequences of events in nursery rhymes and traditional tales for example, can engage children with the characters and events in a very different way to that of a re-enactment.

Nursery rhymes contain lots of unresolved situations that a group of helpful four to six-year-olds might easily rectify through a dramatisation – and if they were asked to do so, they could also write notes to the characters to offer advice or inform them of what they had done to help. The list of suitable rhymes for this kind of work is endless but here are a few suggestions:

- Little Bo Peep will keep losing her sheep unless a fence is built to contain them.
- Jack and Jill will have no water if someone else doesn't go to fetch it .
- Who knows how long Mary Mary's garden will grow without some help with the gardening.
- Rock-a-Bye-Baby needs a much safer place to sleep.

- The old woman in the shoe could do with a much bigger house.
- Old Mother Hubbard needs a shopping trip to fill her cupboard and
- Someone needs to put a safety net over the well to stop cats from falling or being thrown in.
- Miss Muffet might need some information about spiders to allay her fears.
- Little Boy Blue needs advice on getting to sleep at night so he doesn't nod off at work.

‘Make it clear what areas or equipment are not to be used.’

Humpty Dumpty

Using this kind of situation to help children engage with the characters and events in stories and rhymes is fairly straightforward but it does require some understanding of how to set up the necessary dramatic context, so the children can respond appropriately. There are many ways of setting up a dramatic context but here is just one example based on Humpty Dumpty.

Preparation

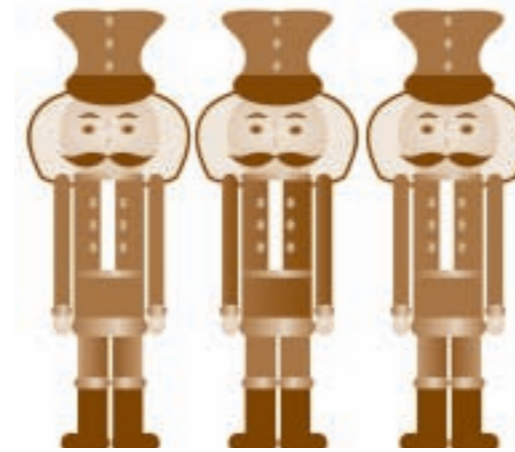
- The children should be reminded of the rhyme Humpty Dumpty, before the drama begins.
- You will need a cleared space, though not necessarily a large space.
- You will need to write a letter to the children from the king, asking them to fix Humpty Dumpty and put him back on the wall. The King could also ask the children to send him a letter to let him know how they get on. If so then you may want to take some writing materials for shared writing during the drama. Alternatively, children can write after the drama.

Introduction

- Explain to the children that you are going to do some work about the rhyme Humpty Dumpty to help them understand it better.
- Comment on how sad it was that the King's men couldn't repair Humpty. Ask the children to pretend that the King has sent them a letter. Then read out the letter from the King.

Be prepared

You may need to remind some children during the drama that what is happening is only pretend. It may seem incredible to us as adults, but some young children need reassurance during this kind of drama that what is happening is not real. The secret of a good drama is that because everyone behaves as if what is happening is real, it actually feels real, but this confuses some children. If this happens, just gently remind the child or the whole group that this is only pretend and then carry on.



Negotiate the space

- Ask the children to pretend that the space you are in is actually the wall and garden where Humpty has fallen. Ask them to pretend that there are sheds around the garden with tools in.
- Define exactly where this wall and garden will be in the space. Make it clear what areas or equipment are **not** to be used. It is really important to define the space before you start, especially with young children. If they move out of bounds during the drama you can just remind them what has been agreed without disrupting the flow of events too much.

Set up the activity

- Ask the children to pretend that Humpty is in pieces by the wall.
- Ask for ideas on how to fix him together again and talk through the feasibility of a few suggestions. For example, nails would break the shells but glue would be better.
- Whatever is decided, ask the children to watch as you demonstrate how to carry out the mending, using equipment in the imaginary sheds. Use mime when demonstrating but talk as if you are really carrying out the task. Stress the need to move carefully and slowly so as not to tread on Humpty's bits of broken shell as they work.
- Then let the children help you to fix Humpty together. Don't be too worried about the accuracy of the mime; just strive to create belief in the situation. Don't expect children to work on this for long, but if some finish in seconds then ask them to help you fix a particularly difficult piece.
- When some children appear to be losing interest, stop the group and ask them to sit in a circle around the newly mended Humpty. Admire their work and praise their skills.

The main activity

- Explain that now Humpty is in one piece, he is likely to want to sit on the wall again, but it is very high. Ask the children to help you knock down some of the bricks on the wall to lower it. They can use the tools from the shed but warn them to be careful not to go near Humpty.

‘...some young children need reassurance ... that what is happening is not real.’

- When the wall has been lowered ask them to sit around Humpty again and on a given signal, lift him back onto the wall.
- Explain that the land below the wall is very hard and if Humpty were to fall again, he would break, even with a lowered wall. Ask the children to suggest what would make his landing softer if he were to fall – or ask them to choose from your suggestions such as foam, grass, mats or water etc.
- Once a decision has been made, ask them to carry out the necessary work, using the sheds for materials. Then admire the work.
- Finally suggest they write a note to the king to inform him of what they have done.
- Some time after the drama, send the children a thank you note from the King and Humpty.



‘Tie up the horses...’

Further suggestions for older KS1 children

You can extend this drama even further for older KS1 children by suggesting that the children travel to the garden on horseback, like the King's men. Using mime, demonstrate how to mount a horse carefully and then lead the line of horses in a trot around the space until you announce that you have arrived at the garden. Tie up the horses and after Humpty has been put back together, ride them back to their stables and give them some water and hay.

Reflection

Make it clear when the drama has finished. Then talk to the children about the drama out of role to give them time to reflect on the experience. . For example you might simply ask them what part they liked best when they pretended to fix Humpty for the King.

The above drama can last anything from 10-30 minutes, depending on what you want to put in. That decision of course depends on how you anticipate the children will respond and how they actually do respond. In my experience of working with very young children in drama, you need to be flexible but you also have to develop the ability to repress your sense of humour, because some of the things they say can be so amusing that it is difficult not to laugh. Good luck with that one! ■

Lorraine Harrison

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‘Good luck with that one!’