

Expanding Boundaries and Perspectives in ELT through Literature with Raymond Briggs and Salman Rushdie

Introduced by David Valente

Recent reforms in English subject curricula for school settings around the world reflect a necessary departure from the outmoded, simplistic and essentialized notion of culture-as-nation, which has long been perpetuated by English language learning materials. Such curricular innovation helps to better situate interculturality in ELT within an exploratory approach and offers teachers an enhanced opportunity to affirm English learners' diverse cultural identities. As Bland (2022) points out, teachers' explorations of the intercultural domain with children and teenagers in the classroom should amplify intersectional identities and value multivoicedness. She explains that, 'Cultural groups are not homogenous, but characterised by a multiplicity of individual voices, as colourful as a rainbow but similarly intangible' (p. 41).

Speitz and Myklevold (2022, p. 295) likewise highlight the potential of the English subject to act as a 'catalyst' for the development of learners' intercultural (and multilingual) competence. They further outline how this requires educators of English to embrace nuanced views of language learning, language rights, mutual understanding, democratic citizenship and social cohesion. The question which then inevitably arises is: how can the catalytic potential of English for learners' interculturality be realised pedagogically? The Recommended Reads in this special anniversary issue of *Children's Literature in English Language Education* put forth a compelling argument for literature as a vehicle to expand cultural boundaries and learners' intercultural perspectives in ELT.

Two of the recommendations feature Salman Rushdie's fantasy quest-themed books for adolescents. The titles are included here following the brutal attack on Rushdie while he was giving a lecture on 15 August 2022. The decision to showcase these novels reflects a commitment to diverse perspectives and freedom of speech in literature, both of which are important for intercultural exploration within language education. The attack in question has clear links to the religious decree or 'fatwa' which had threatened Rushdie's life since the publication of one of his most famous works, *The Satanic Versus* in 1988. It is noteworthy that the protests which ensued

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against the book on the grounds of perceived blasphemy, and included book burnings and calls for it to be banned, are thought to have started in the UK. Kabir (2022) regards this as ironic given how, 'a novel about remaking the self through migration attracted the ire of Britain's Muslim communities for its supposedly blasphemous depiction of Islam's founder, the prophet Muhammad, among other issues'. The broadcaster and journalist Mobeen Azhar interviewed members of the Muslim community who were involved in the initial protests in the north of England for the BBC2 documentary, *The Satanic Verses: 30 Years On* (Grandison & Usiskin, 2019). In his report, Azhar, described the book as 'a catalyst' and yet, he also discovered that several protestors had not actually read it. For them, it symbolized 'a culture war' which they attributed to their experiences of persistent Islamophobia. Following an interview with a protestor in Yorkshire, Azhar explained how,

For him and a generation of people, the book was a catalyst. So it brought to the surface all the stuff like racism, that feeling like the underdog, not feeling at home here. It brought all that to the surface, and it became a symbol of everything that was wrong. (33:54–34:11)

'The Rushdie Affair' can perhaps be considered as a reminder of the need for critical intercultural awareness (Byram, 2021), for *savoir s'engager* or political education in ELT. And the two recommendations which accompany Rushdie's children's books here offer creative ideas to enact critical literacy for interculturality in the English classroom.

Another creator whose evocative children's literature often embraced significant issues and the political realm was Raymond Briggs, who sadly passed away at the age of 88 on 9 August 2022. As Winner of the Book Trust's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2017, Briggs's picturebooks provide teachers of English with engaging entry points for children and teenagers to explore challenging issues through connections to the visual and verbal text. Themes in his work include loss and death as in the case with the world-famous and much-loved picturebook, *The Snowman*. One of Briggs's less well-known, overtly political titles suitable for adolescent learners is *The Tin-Pot Foreign General and the Old Iron Woman*, which as the following recommendation suggests, could be used as a vehicle to explore colonialism. The two picturebook recommendations share

activities which can create space in the English language classroom for neglected intercultural topics. In turn, this would enable learners to engage with a wider tapestry of cultural perspectives.

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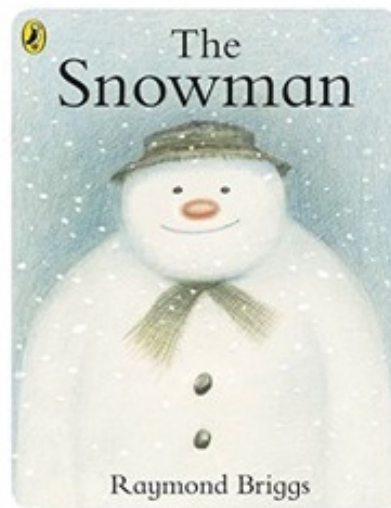
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Briggs, Raymond (1978)

The Snowman

London: Hamish Hamilton

Recommended by Gail Ellis



The Snowman has been described as a ‘melancholy masterpiece’ (Heritage, 2022). This may come as a surprise as the well-known story is often associated with the animated Christmassy version first screened in the UK on Channel 4 in 1982, and which has become a regular feature in festive TV schedules. *The Snowman* is a wordless story told through pictures in soft muted colours and according to Louise Lockwood’s documentary, *RAYMOND BRIGGS Snowmen, Bogeymen & Milkmen* (Lockwood, 2018), it has sold over five and a half million copies in 21 countries and is beloved by generations of families.

The picturebook tells the story of a boy who builds a snowman which comes to life and the friendship they develop over a 24-hour period. It does not have a happy ending as the next morning the boy wakes to find only the snowman’s hat and scarf and a pile of melting snow. Most powerful of all is the single, small image on a white background in the middle of the final page to depict the boy’s grief. It comes as a stark contrast to the previous images which show their happy frivolities together and reflects the harsh reality of life as the boy processes his loss. In Lea’s (2022) *Guardian* article, Raymond Briggs explains, ‘I create what seems natural and inevitable. The snowman melts, my parents died, animals die, flowers die. Everything does. There’s nothing particularly gloomy about it. It’s a fact of life.’

The Snowman was the first picturebook I used with children in an ELT context. The children were 9-year-old beginners attending a state primary school in Paris where English was part of a two-year pilot to introduce foreign languages into France’s primary curriculum in 1989. *The Snowman* seemed an ideal selection for a number of reasons. I was certain the children would be

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enchanted by the story and given their limited English proficiency, they would be able to 'read' the pictures and construct their own mental narrative. They would learn lexical sets typical of early language learning such as clothes and colours, the weather, the rooms in a house. It also suited the season of winter as it offered opportunities for cross-curricular links and winter festival-related activities, although there is no reference to Christmas in the picturebook.

At that time, I was unaware of the skills required by the teacher to mediate and scaffold children's language as they interpret the pictures in a wordless picturebook. Furthermore, the small strip format pictures would be difficult for a whole class to see without moving around the classroom or passing the book around. However, these challenges were overcome. Mediating the pictures through French, we built up our story orally in English. I applied a language experience approach that I had used in the early 1980s when working with newcomers to the UK, mainly from Pakistan and the Punjab at the Pathway Centre in Southall. A written version of the co-created story was produced as a record of key language and as a summary for the children. It also enabled them to recount the story to family members at home.

This approach gave children a voice and a sense of creativity, and freedom as they felt active and powerful as they interpreted the illustrations and found words to shape the story. They became aware of their contribution in making the pictures tell a story and entered a partnership with the picturebook creator and their teacher. A wordless picturebook such as this one offers an open invitation where personal interpretation counts rather than finding a right answer. Walking around the class silently with the picturebook enabled the children to experience the power of the pictures and exercise their imaginations. We also produced origami snowflakes which we hung from the classroom ceiling to create a wintery atmosphere and to emphasise the silence of falling snow.

Raymond Briggs had a remarkable ability to convey emotions. The simple line of the mouth, the inclination of the head and using the arms, Briggs allows readers to meet this polite, naive, curious, vulnerable, mischievous, imaginative, generous, and critical snowman. Wonder is expressed by a raised arm covering the mouth when the snowman discovers an electric light switch or false teeth. Humour is shown when he recognises a photo of the boy in his parent's bedroom, and mischief by a smile, slightly tilted hat and raised arms and legs when he and the boy play with balloons in torch light. Pleasure is indicated by a broad grin as he luxuriates in the chilly air from

the refrigerator. And total ecstasy is shown by closed eyes as he lies in the deep freezer. Concern is shown by two arms coming up to the mouth and the little coal eyes fastening on the boy's when they need to return home before dawn from their flight through the sky.

Children who can talk about *The Snowman* in terms of it being a dream or a fantasy of the boy can also explain their sorrow at the end of the story. It is not only the melted snowman but also the end of the boy's dream. They have come to empathise with a distinctive and believable character. Briggs also uses colour to depict the magic and excitement the boy feels when he wakes up at the beginning of the story and sees the cold, bluish light through the window. In contrast, the next day when he wakes up, he sees the yellow sunlight through his window. This alerts the 'reader,' and we know the boy fears the worst when he rushes downstairs, past his parents at the breakfast table and into the garden. By positioning the boy so we look at his back with his arms held limply and head bowed, as he looks down on the melted snowman, we share the boy's grief. Had Briggs drawn the boy facing us we would be watching him feeling that emotion rather than experiencing it with him. Children may not verbalize these feelings and thoughts, but they can read them from the pictures in the same way as they interpret people's behaviour in real life, which develops their emotional literacy.

Story notes with suggestions for how to use *The Snowman* in primary ELT appeared in the first edition of *The storytelling handbook for primary teachers*. I was also lucky enough to create activities for children learning English in an edition of *The Snowman* published by Oxford University Press. This book interspersed ELT activities into the original picturebook and was accompanied by a teacher's book. More recently, I have written about how *The Snowman* can be used to develop multiple literacy (Ellis, 2018) including cultural literacy. In summary, the potential of *The Snowman* is endless. It can support primary English teachers to expand boundaries and perspectives beyond the development of language and helps them to address themes rarely found in ELT coursebook materials.

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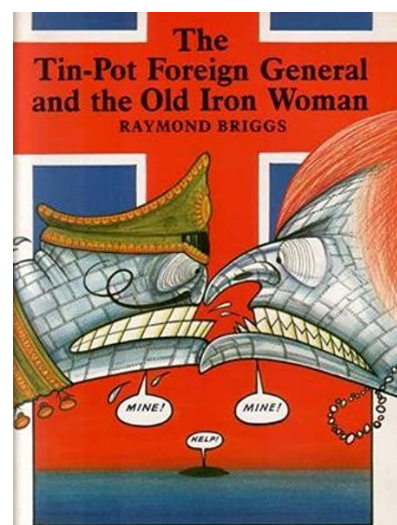
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Briggs, Raymond (1984)

The Tin-Pot Foreign General and the Old Iron Woman

London: Hamish Hamilton

Recommended by Sandie Mourão



Raymond Briggs has left us with a visual legacy and some of his work abolishes the traditional boundaries between children's literature and adult literature, representing what Sandra Beckett (2013) refers to as the crossover phenomenon. One such picturebook takes us away from the world

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we know so well of Briggs' snowman fantasies and tackles a clearly political theme. *The Tin-Pot Foreign General and the Old Iron Woman* is a satirical critique of the 1982 conflict between Argentina and the United Kingdom - the Falklands War / *la Guerra de las Malvinas*.

Briefly to contextualize: the Falkland Islands are an archipelago in the South Atlantic Ocean, around 500 km from the southern point of Argentina. There is controversy over its discovery, and it has been inhabited by Argentinian and European settlers. Since 1833 it has been under British rule; nevertheless, Argentina maintains its claim to the islands. On 2 April 1982, Argentina occupied the islands and in retaliation the British government responded with unexpected military force. The undeclared war lasted ten weeks with huge casualties and losses for both countries. The final surrender of the last Argentinian general on 20 June brought the hostilities to an end. In Argentina, 2 April has become a national holiday, in memory of the veterans of the war.

The Falkland Islands, the former British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, and the Argentine dictator, General Galtieri are never named, but the large garish caricatures are unmistakable. Their names are derogatory, with 'Tin-Pot' implying a minor insignificant thing and 'Old Iron Woman' a play on Thatcher's well-known nickname 'Iron Lady.' Both are depicted as metal monstrosities, who play war games and behave like children "It's MINE!" she screeched. "MINE! MINE! MINE! I Bagsied it AGES ago! I bagsied it FIRST! DID! DID! DID!" (Briggs, 1984, unpaginated). The story of the war alternates between brightly coloured, sharp-outlined illustrations of the despots and their warring or victorious activities and greyscale, graphite pencil sketches for the 'sad little island' and the casualties. The latter are often accompanied by matter-of-fact statements. An example is the final opening showing a mother and son with an elderly man next to a grave; the words underneath read, 'And the families of the dead tended the graves' (Briggs, 1984, unpaginated). Janet Evans (2013) describes the picturebook as:

... an overtly political book whose content is harrowing in places and still not easy to digest [forty] years on. It tells of the futility of war, with Briggs openly scorning the principles of power that saw men sent to fight over an irrelevant, disputed territory, the Falkland Islands. (p. 14)

The Tin-Pot Foreign General and the Old Iron Woman could be used with upper secondary

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English language learners as part of a text set on colonization. This could include an ensemble of other graphic narratives and even films, however my suggestions for picturebooks would be *The House that Jack Built* by Gavin Bishop (1999), which employs the cumulative nursery rhyme as a metaphor for the arrival and settlement of Europeans in New Zealand, and *The Conquerors* by David McKee (2004), a modern-day parable which questions who is eventually conquered.

Tasks and activities could start with an investigation into colonization, which countries were colonized and why? How to approach this would depend on whether your learners were from countries which were the colonized or the colonizers, for these picturebooks represent different perspectives of colonization. When sharing the picturebooks, discussion and critical reflection could be developed around topics such as possession and oppression, the disappearance of indigenous cultures, and the influences of one nation on the other. There are also evident cross-curricular connections to be made with other subjects such as history and geography, if relevant.

Additionally, *The Tin-Pot Foreign General and the Old Iron Woman* offers the opportunity for learners to investigate the controversial historical conflict of the Falklands War / *la Guerra de las Malvinas*. An example of such an activity has been documented by Porto and Yulita (2017), who developed an intercultural citizenship project between student teachers in Argentina and the UK in 2012 to mark the 30th anniversary of the war. Although they did not use this picturebook, it would have been a very useful vehicle to support their approach to challenging perspectives and prompting criticality, reflexivity, and critical cultural awareness through English.

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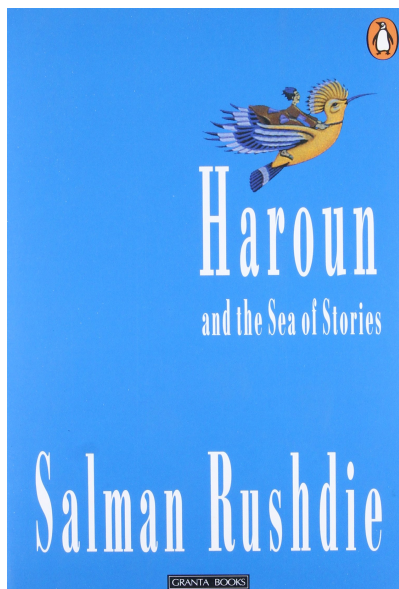
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Rushdie, Salman (1990)
Haroun and the Sea of Stories
London: Granta Books

Recommended by Janice Bland

The themes of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* are the power of stories, of books and of dialogue, and the importance of freedom of speech. Rushdie penned the story, fulfilling a promise to his young son, while he was in hiding due to the fatwa issued against himself as author and others involved in the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (Rushdie, 1988), by Ruhollah Khomeini – at the time, the political and religious leader of Iran. Since then, Rushdie as well as other champions of the literary use of freedom of speech have suffered decades of intimidation and danger. The Japanese scholar of Arabic and Persian literature, and translator of *The Satanic Verses*, Hitoshi Igarashi, was lethally stabbed in 1991, and in August 2022, an attempt was made on Rushdie's life,

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resulting in life-changing injuries.

In 1990, Rushdie dedicated *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* to his son, whom he was not able to see while in hiding. The book opens with an acrostic on his son's name, Zafar:

Zembla, Zenda, Xanadu:

All our dream-worlds may come true.

Fairy lands are fearsome too.

As I wander far from view

Read, and bring me home to you. (Rushdie, 1990, p. 11)

Haroun and the Sea of Stories is about the young hero's quest to protect his father, and the power of the imagination and the art of storytelling that his father represents. Despite the seriousness of the themes, and the backdrop of death-threats while Rushdie was writing, the exuberance of the author's inventive language sustains a comic and mostly light-hearted tone throughout. At the same time, secondary school language learners (mid-secondary and above) are likely to appreciate the fanciful allegory on censorship. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* has also been adapted as a playscript (Rushdie, adapted by Supple & Tushingham, 1998). This could provide further opportunities to enjoy Rushdie's vibrant and innovative use of language through prepared reading aloud (readers theatre) in the classroom.

Haroun and the Sea of Stories (Rushdie, 1990) has an eccentric contemporary setting – more fantastic than magic realist – that recalls the Arabian Nights. Favourite scenes of mine include the passengers' frantic scrambles to reach departing buses at the manic bus station, and the bus journey into the mountains, accompanied by roadside warnings that the madcap, daredevil bus driver Butt deliberately ignores:

IF YOU TRY TO RUSH OR ZOOM

YOU ARE SURE TO MEET YOUR DOOM

ALL THE DANGEROUS OVERTAKERS

END UP SAFE AT UNDERTAKER'S

LOOK OUT! SLOW DOWN! DON'T BE FUNNY!

LIFE IS PRECIOUS! CARS COST MONEY! (Rushdie, 1990, p. 31)

and

IF FROM SPEED YOU GET YOUR THRILL
TAKE PRECAUTION – MAKE YOUR WILL. (p. 35)

The companions who help Haroun fulfil his quest to save his father are as extraordinary as Dorothy's three friends in the Land of Oz. Apart from Butt the reckless bus driver (who later reappears in the parallel world of the Moon Kahani), there is Iff, the Water Genie, and Mali, the Floating Gardener, whose job it is to keep the Ocean of the Streams of Story free of pollution. When Haroun first sees the Ocean, he realizes it consists of

a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity; and Iff explained that these were the Streams of Story, that each coloured strand represented and contained a single tale. [...] the Ocean of the Streams of Story was in fact the biggest library in the universe. And because the stories were held here in fluid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and so become yet other stories. (Rushdie, 1990, p. 72)

The villain of Kahani is Khattam-Shud, and Haroun soon discovers he must save not only his father, but also the entire world from Khattam-Shud's evil determination to destroy all stories by poisoning the beautiful Ocean of the Streams of Story. On their meeting on the shadowy and silent Dark Ship, which carries the deadly poisons, Haroun asks Khattam-Shud why he hates stories so much, exclaiming,

'Stories are fun . . .'

'The world, however, is not for Fun,' Khattam-Shud replied. 'The world is for Controlling.' [...] And inside every single story, inside every Stream in the Ocean, there lies a world, a storyworld, that I cannot Rule at all. And that is the reason why. (Rushdie, 1990, p. 161)

The value of story had been doubted by Haroun at the beginning of the narrative. When his mother left the family home, Haroun shouted in anger at his father '*What's the use of stories that*

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aren't even true?' (Rushdie, 1990, p. 22). As this betrayal seemed to be the cause of his father's sudden failure as a professional storyteller, it is no wonder that Haroun takes up the mantle to rescue both his father and the Sea of Stories. Reading against the text in the classroom we notice, however, that not only the main protagonists, but also most of the fantasy characters are male. I would want to discuss this with the students, and what may have changed in the three decades since the book was first published. The students will have little difficulty in discovering *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* does not pass the Bechdel text – there is not a single scene where two named female characters talk to each other. This is an important exercise in critical literacy, a competence that becomes ever more important in the age of disinformation when meaning itself is threatened. We must also read books that we enjoy and appreciate critically.

Another exercise in critical literacy could be to focus on examples of 'stories' that are intended to manipulate – offered by many politicians, influencers, and the like – and how we might differentiate these from stories that are about true emotions, which help us rehearse empathy even if they are not true. In an essay on wonder tales, Rushdie (2021) has expressed the real power of magical, literary story:

We know, when we hear these tales, that even though they are 'unreal', because carpets do not fly and witches in gingerbread houses do not exist, they are also 'real', because they are about real things: love, hatred, fear, power, cowardice, death. They simply arrive at the real by a different route. (p. 24)

It is important for education and for democracy itself that the power of stories is recognized and understood, and the key reading strategy of resistance is trained. But banning specific kinds of stories for certain cultural reasons is always going to be about pre-conceived dogmas, bias, and control.

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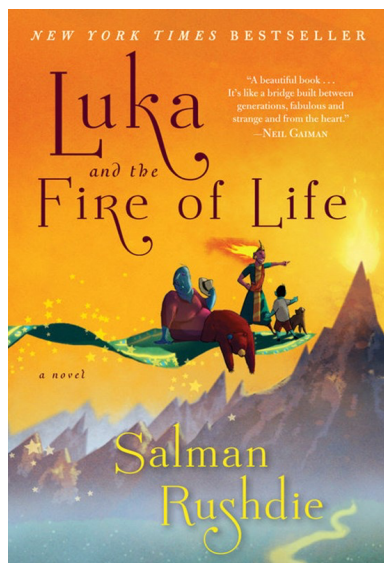
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Rushdie, Salman (2010)

Luka and the Fire of Life

London: Random House

Recommended by Griselda Beacon

Luka and the Fire of Life is one of Rushdie's young adult novels and is suitable for secondary students. It can appeal to their imaginations and help them to transcend worldly limitations. Set in the fictional city of Kahani in the land of Alifbay, the protagonist, twelve-year-old Luka, strives to save his comatose father from dying. Arranged as eight chapters, this literary format explores the quest theme and the power of storytelling to create communities. Quest stories, in their varied forms, are often an integral part of the cultural backgrounds of diverse peoples. In this novel, Luka is in search of the fire of life to save his father and needs to leave his home to enter the world of magic for such an endeavour.

From an intercultural perspective, the novel can help adolescent students to inhabit magical

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storyworlds. Through their imaginations, while reading the book in English lessons, students can learn about diverse ways of living and connect Luka's life and adventures with their own lives and personal quest stories. To foster this kind of personalized creativity, a class project could include collating stories from students' local communities to share a text set of bilingual, illustrated stories, legends and anecdotes. Through the process, students can have opportunities to engage with 'the experience of otherness' (Byram, 1997, p.4) and show respect for and have dialogue with different perspectives.

Rushdie combines his love for language in the book with a magic realist narrative to enthrall readers in an evocative sphere of phantoms and mythological creatures. In this imaginary universe, fire is guarded by 'forgotten' gods from various cultural contexts, such as Polynesian, Sumerian, Assyrian, Aztec, Southern and old Norse gods, brought together as sentinels of the fire. This becomes a unifying element in the narrative as in a plethora of cultural contexts, fire represents the origin of life. Rushdie's linguistic playfulness is further reflected in the characters' names whose combinations result in amusing, confusing and absurd situations, such as Luka's pet dog named 'Bear' and his pet bear named 'Dog'. Luka's father is the Sha of Blah which is a nod to his storyteller role and the prefix *In-* creates a new title: the Insultana of Ott. Nobodaddy combines two different words: 'nobody' and 'daddy' and as his name suggests, this character is a contradictory ghostly figure who both supports and betrays Luka. Magic realism as a narrative mode brings the supernatural into the natural world unquestionably, as readers learn to accept it as part of everyday life. And thus, it becomes possible for spells, curses, translucent people, fairy-tale animals and flying carpets to dwell within the liminal space.

The blurry borders between the two worlds are juxtaposed and by immersing himself in magic, Luka embraces his father's teachings and discovers powers to transform reality. His journey is a rite of passage into a realm which he already knew from his father's invented stories. Readers can become entangled in the vivid storytelling as they discover how the magical universe was his father's creation all along – born out of the power of storytelling.

In my teaching experience in Argentina, I have found that young adolescents often enjoy adventurous quests into the supernatural, where story heroes undergo successive challenges to achieve their goals, which in Luka's case, is a matter of life and death. These stories can be also integrated into English language education through a variety of multimodal formats, for example,

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graphic novels, films and video games. During a talk on his book at the Jimmy Carter Library in Atlanta/GA, Rushdie (2010) explained that he was inspired by video games to create this world of magic, with superheroes, alternative pathways and surreal scenarios. Luka's multiple lives similarly reflect a classic video game plot, in which heroes can continue the quest if they manage to overcome the tests put in their way. English lessons could include speaking tasks where learners create new characters and brainstorm ideas for their roles within the quest setting. Collaborative creative writing could include students working in groups to craft their own play scripts where heroes and ambivalent characters engage in a multitude of exciting adventures.

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