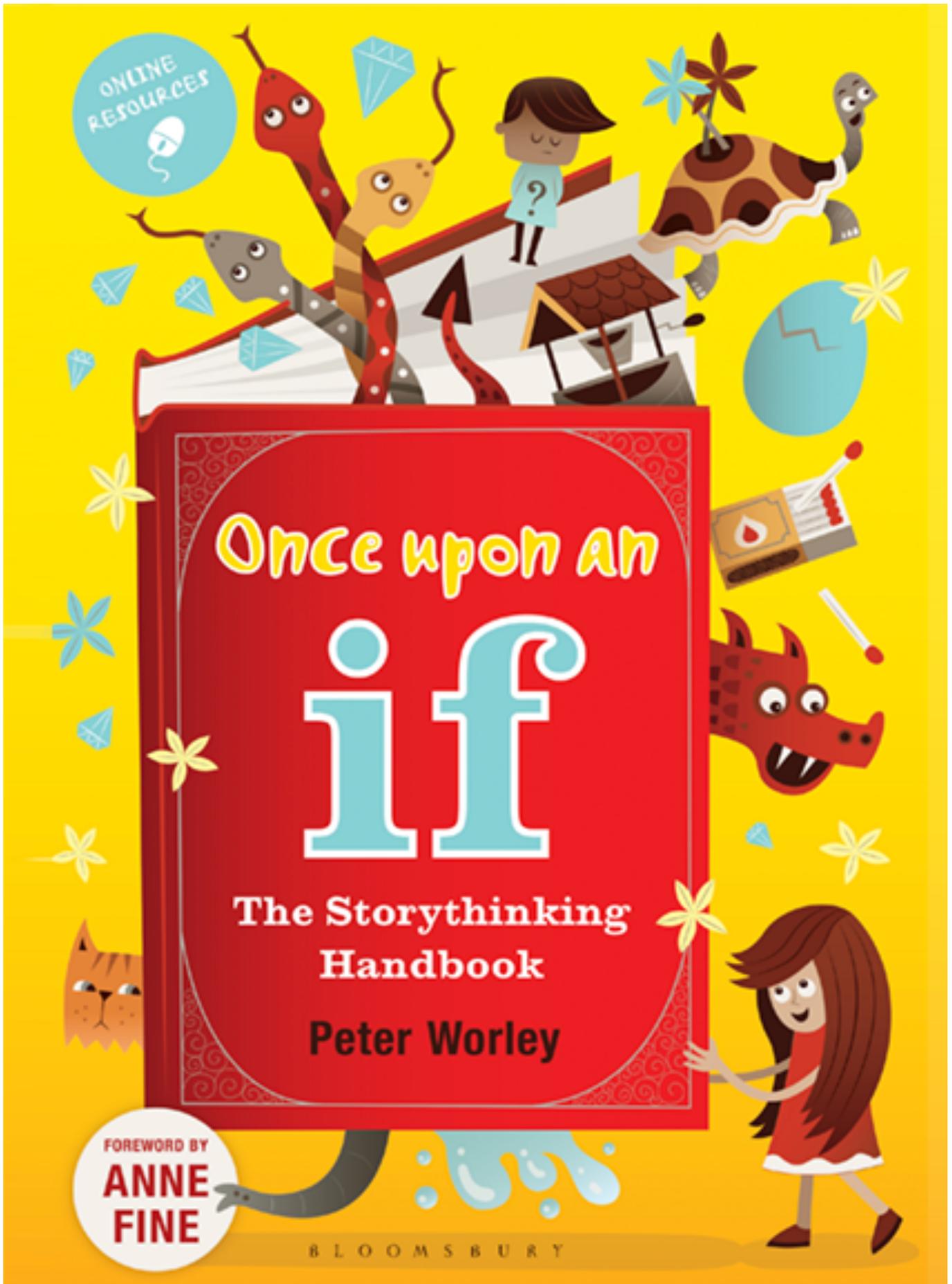


Taken from *Once Upon an If: The Storythinking Handbook*



ONLINE RESOURCES

Once upon an

if

The Storythinking Handbook

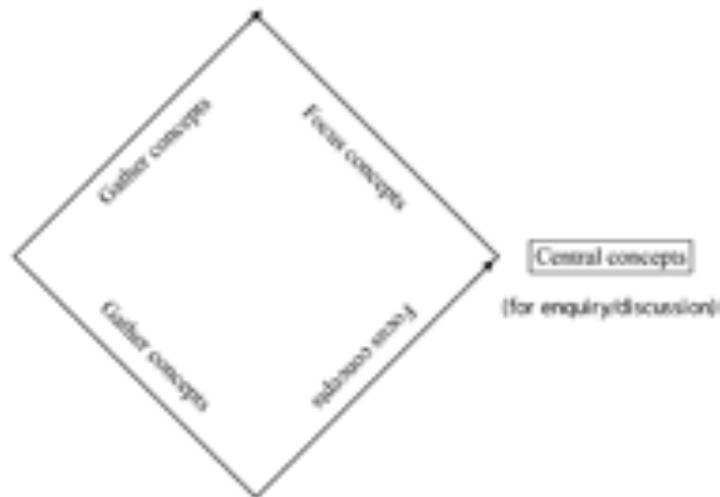
Peter Worley

FOREWORD BY ANNE FINE

BLOOMSBURY

The Concept Box

The *Concept Box* is a general technique for helping children develop their own discussions around central concepts (*fairness, love, punishment* etc.) without the need for task questions. It broadens out and then focuses in, as described in the following diagram:



Isolating concepts in various ways is standard practice in many approaches to doing philosophy with children. The first part (the broadening-out part) of this procedure is called *concept fishing* (a term coined by Grace Robinson of Thinking Space who shared this part of the process with me and from which I developed the full procedure of the Concept Box). The second part (the focusing-in part) I call *concept funnelling* and it encourages the children to identify central concepts.

I find this a particularly useful way of approaching poetry and stories but it can be just as fruitful with all kinds of other stimuli. (All examples are taken from doing the Concept Box exercise following the poem *The Square That Didn't Fit In* on page 172 with some Year 5 children, age nine to ten).

The Concept Box

1. Begin by reading the story or poem.

Comprehension stage

After some Talk Time in pairs, allow the children to say whatever they like in response to the story or poem. Encourage them to ask questions or to put to the group any words or phrases (or anything, for that matter) they don't understand. This is a general comprehension aspect to the process so don't worry too much about them getting off-track. Always invite the group to answer any questions; avoid doing so yourself. (Examples of questions asked during the comprehension stage: 'Why did the monster go to Circle-Land?', 'Why didn't circles fit in his mouth?', 'I think the

square didn't fit in because he wanted to be a circle on the inside even though he looked like a square on the outside.', 'What does malicious mean?')

Concept fishing

Next, set the class the task of trying to say *what the story or poem is about* to their talking partner but then stipulate that they must try to reduce this to just *one word* (you could allow hyphenated words). Say that you want as many of these 'key words' as possible but that there must be no repetition (Facilitator: 'If someone says your word either put your hand down or think of another one'). Encourage everyone to take part. Again, don't worry if they miss the point or choose inappropriate words, as steps four and five will help to re-focus the discussion. (Examples of keywords following *concept fishing*: 'confused', 'mysterious', 'strange', 'shapes', 'crazy', 'weird', 'alive', 'lonely', 'unsure', 'misunderstanding', 'hungry', 'death', 'squircle'.)

Concept funnelling

Once they have completed step three ask them to look at all the words that have been gathered and to choose the one word they think *best captures what the whole poem or story is about* – the word that 'really gets to the heart' of the story or poem. I often ask for someone to give an example to the class of a word they think *won't* be on the final list (in this case someone said 'hungry' and then, when asked why, he said, 'because that only happens in one bit'). I then ask someone to give an example of the kind of word they *do* think will be on the final list (in this case someone said, 'misunderstanding' and when asked why: 'because the square is misunderstood by the other squares and the monster misunderstands the square when he said he's a circle...'). Ask them to be ready with a reason why they chose the word they did. Limit this exercise to a set number of concept-words, such as five, so that they are encouraged to choose the more central ones. (You could make this longer if you feel that they have not quite got there yet, but only have as many words as necessary). Once this is done, rub off, delete or separate the other words. (Example central concepts by the end of *concept funnelling*: 'shapes', 'unsure', 'confused', 'misunderstanding', 'squircle'.)

Exploring central concepts

1. Next, have them debate these inclusions and / or say why they think (i.e. *justify / explain*) the story or poem is about the chosen concept-words or not. (Examples of questions and contributions from both the facilitator and the children: 'Are *confused* and *unsure* the same?', 'Can you be unsure without being confused?', 'It's about misunderstanding')
2. Now, use these concept-words to focus the discussion by asking the children to – as well as *justify* and *explain* – *compare, connect, clarify, challenge, analyse* and / or *revise* the concept-words in the context of the story or poem. This makes the discussion both general / abstract (Facilitator: 'What is it to be *unsure*?') and concrete / particular (Facilitator: 'What in the story makes it about *misunderstanding*?'). Used carefully and with considered questioning from the facilitator during the steps one to six you should be able to generate an enquiry without the need for a task question or for a process of question formulation and selection.

Optional Emergent Question

If a suitable question for enquiry emerges from this process, then it should not be ignored; this could be the question that the enquiry is then based around. In the example of *The Square That Didn't Fit In* one Emergent Question was 'Was the square a *squircle*?' This included the Nested Questions: What is a squircle? Can a square also be a circle? (Not only was the question emergent, but so too was the word 'squircle', invented by nine-year-old Élody as part of the *concept fishing* part of the process).

Quick Guide

The Concept Box

This is a new procedure, introduced in this book and designed to approach a story or poem conceptually.

1. Present stimulus (read or tell story). See Sheherazad's handbook (chapter two) for suggestions of how to do this effectively.
2. First Thoughts: allow comprehension discussion. (See 'First Thoughts' on page 57.)
3. Concept fishing: collect key concept-words (one from each child, no repetition). *Question: what's the story about?*
4. Concept funnelling: reduce keywords to just five. Questions: Which word best describes the whole story? Which one best gets to the heart of what the whole story is about?
5. Exploring concepts: use the chosen key concept-words for your discussion of the stimulus. Have the class explore the concepts in at least some of the following ways:
 - justify ('The story is about X because...')
 - explain ('What I mean by X is...')
 - challenge ('I don't agree that the story is about X because...')
 - analyse ('There are different kinds of X. There is... and there is...')
 - clarify (Teacher: 'Can you say in your own / in different words what is meant by...?')
 - compare ('X is the same as Y because...' / 'X is not the same as Y because...')
 - connect ('X and Y are both kinds of...' / 'X is a type of Y because...')
 - revise ('I think we should take X off the list and replace it with Y because...').

Stories in verse

Stories in verse often require the audience to work harder than they would with a prose narrative because of certain features of form and style (words limited within stanza; strict rhythm and / or rhyme) so connections between stanzas are not always spelled out, as they might be in a prose story. For this reason there may be greater rewards but it is also – for the same reason – important for the teacher/facilitator to take certain steps to maximise the class’s capability to access narrative in verse.

A story in verse is the ultimate test of the storyteller’s art. If a class of children is able to understand the narrative of a story in verse through your telling, then you may feel confident that your telling is of a high standard. This section of the book, therefore, is for the more advanced storyteller. It is also a good way to self-assess. All of the poems included in this book have been tested with classes and so have proved accessible, which means that it’s now down to you to maximise their accessibility.

Unfamiliar words

When approaching a poem for its poetry (language, metaphor, conceit etc.) then, and especially if there are only a few new words or phrases, it is preferable to read the poem first and approach new words and phrases in the context of the poem itself. However, if you are using a poem primarily for its narrative content, I would suggest learning the new words before reading or telling the poem. I have included an *Unfamiliar words* list before each poem to help prepare for this. The procedure I use is as follows:

1. First, write up the unfamiliar words list on the board and ask if there is anyone who thinks they already know any of the words. Write up meanings of the words they know first. *Note:* I keep the meanings simple and relevant (e.g. ‘*fortune*, for our purposes today, means *luck*’). As long as you have the meaning that allows the children to follow the story, then that should be sufficient and will not clutter their minds. But certainly don’t dismiss other correct suggestions made by the children.
2. With any words they don’t know, provide a context and then ask if anyone would like to have a go at inferring or guessing what they think the word means (e.g. If the word is ‘*cease*’, the context could be: ‘Then the teacher said, “Could you please *cease* your chattering?”’) With each context, and if appropriate, try to perform an action to accompany the sentence, this will be helpful for recall. Tone of voice may help too. (See ‘*Vocabulary*’ on page 50 for more on this.)
3. (Optional) Once all the words have meanings, ask them to look at them and to try to remember as many as possible, then after 30 seconds or so, rub them off / delete them. Randomly select members of the class to recall a word, if they get stuck then, first of all, repeat the context (with the action if there is one), and if they are still stuck ask, ‘can you remember any of them?’ Carry on until all the words have been recalled and are written up again.

Perform the poem

Once the unfamiliar words have been made familiar, you are ready to recite or read your poem. How well the children follow the poem’s story will depend very much on how well you read or recite your poem, once the vocabulary is in place. If your memory is good then reciting the

poem is the best way, as it frees up your hands, eyes and body for gestures, eye contact and movement (see 'Sheherazad's handbook' on page 20). These all help to support the class's understanding because the communication is direct and immediate.

If, as is more likely, you choose to read the poem, then practise reading it so that you clearly convey the meaning and dramatic structure of the poem / narrative. (See 'Speaking and lifting from the page' on page 28.)

Piecing together

Ask the class to say what they think happens in the story and / or to ask questions about anything that is unclear or that they don't understand. Wherever possible, enlist the class to answer questions rather than do it yourself. Read or recite, again, any lines or sections that would help them answer their questions if they struggle to do so.

Repeat your performance

Once they have had a good attempt to work through the poem repeat your performance. Having worked through it, they will find the second reading much more comprehensible. Your actions and gestures will help here too.

Going deeper

Once their comprehension is in place you are in a position to move to the enquiry part of the lesson.

- *Emergent Enquiry*: Sometimes a question or discussion emerges from the comprehension part of the exercise. For instance, one boy said, after hearing *The Luckiest Man In the World* (see page 177), 'You can't create your own luck'. This is what I call an emergent question (see Emergent Questions and Enquiries on page 59). Either reframe it as a question ('Can you create your own luck?') and put it to the class, or simply put it to the class as said, (Teacher: 'Abdul said "You can't create your own luck"; what do you [the class] think about that?').
- *Task Question*: If using this book, you could turn to the task questions after the poem. If you find a more appropriate question among the nested questions then use that.
- *The Concept Box*: Alternatively, you could use the strategy described on page 77; if you have already done the comprehension part above, then use only the *concept fishing* and *concept funnelling* parts of the Concept Box procedure.

(See 'Stories in verse' on page 166 and Appendix 1 'Quick view steps' on page 207).

The Magic Crown

Starting age: seven years

Themes:

- Power
- Rulership
- Rules and laws
- The legitimacy of rulership
- Choices

This is a long poem for young children but if read in three sections, with questions and an enquiry at the end of each, it becomes perfectly digestible. Despite its having enjambment and a few unfamiliar words I have found that, with the correct delivery, children as young as seven have been able to access the thought-experiment the poem puts to them. If you are uncomfortable exploring the legitimacy of monarchy with very young children, then the poem still sounds complete with the last stanza omitted. It's nice to read this with a prop – a crown if you can find or make one (see 'Minimal prop principle' on page 47).

UNFAMILIAR WORDS:

These are the words that are likely to lie in the way of your class's understanding of the narrative in the poem. (See 'Unfamiliar words' at the beginning of this section on page 166 for more on this part of the process.)

- citizen
- to happen upon
- pose
- don
- wrestle
- opt
- enact
- to *pass* rules.

The story

*You live in a land somewhat different from ours
This land has a crown with magical powers
The crown looks – if you look – like an ordinary one But is far from ordinary when placed upon
The head of a citizen, be it boy or girl,
Because any head under it rules the whole world!*

*One day you happen upon this magic crown And when you see it, you scratch your chin, Strike a thoughtful pose, and frown.
You frown because now you've got to decide Whether you'll don it or just continue to glide Right past so someone else has to wrestle instead
With whether or not they'll place this weight on their head.*

Task Question 1: If you found it, would you put the magic crown on?

Nested Questions:

- Would you be able to do what you want?
- Are there any responsibilities involved in ruling?
- Do you (the ruler) decide whether there are any responsibilities or not? If not, then who does?
- Would it be fun or hard work?

*Let's now imagine that you opt for the crown
To sit on your head instead of the ground.
The first thing our new queen or king must enact
Are some rules that the rest of the world respect.
What rules would you pass that all must obey?
Write a list! So that everyone knows what they say.*

Task Question 2: If you were to 'don it' (put it on) what rules or laws would you enact?

Nested Questions:

- What rules would be good rules?
- What would *make* them good rules?
- Are there any rules that you *must* or *must not* have?
- Are there any rules that the ruler has to follow?
- Who or what rules the ruler?

(Optional section, see above.)

*Is it right that a ruler be picked like this?
If not, then just what do you suggest?
Are there rules that rule which ruler should rule?
Or do rulers decide for themselves just who'll
Be the Queen – or King, for that matter – over us?
Would it be better if nobody does?*

Task Question 3: How should a ruler be selected? Nested Questions:

- Is there a fair way to select a ruler?
- Should someone be more important than everyone else?
- Is the ruler more important than everyone else?
- Should there be no ruler?
- Maybe everyone should rule. What do you think?
- What would make a good ruler?
- Should there be rules to protect the people from the ruler?

The Square That Didn't Fit In

Starting age: nine years

Themes:

- Difference
- Alienation
- Misunderstandings
- Shapes
- *Squircles* (an imaginary shape which is a combination of a square and a circle. Word invented by nine-year-old Élody.)

This story can be used for a number of contrasting issues for thinking. It allows for a discussion on the nature of logical possibility in the notion of 'round squares' or, more simply, it can be used to explore the features of a square and / or a circle. It also touches upon personal identity (such as discussions around gender) in that it allows for a discussion about what it is that makes a person who he or she is.

UNFAMILIAR WORDS:

- equality
- malicious
- devour

The story

*'I don't want to be a square anymore!
Said the square that didn't fit in
'I feel too round and circular
And I roll – at least when dreaming.*

*'I was born with a sense of equality
But don't want to be treated the same
Because I have a different quality,'
Said the square that didn't fit in*

*'I may look like a square to you
But I'm a circle on the inside.
Were lines to cross my heart
They would measure the same distance wide,'*

Said the square that didn't fit in.

*One day a shape-eating monster
Arrived with a square-shaped mouth
Each day it would eat a square
And then fly back off to the south.*

*But our square that didn't fit in
Had no reasons left to live
So he took himself to the monster,
His life to the monster he'd give*

*The monster took one look at the square
And said, 'Square, you look delicious!'
He'd never seen such a tasty looking square
'And you,' said the square, 'look malicious.
'But I'm not a square,' explained the square,
'I'm really a circle, you see.'
'What!' said the monster, 'You mean: you're not a square?
'Oh, my mistake, I am sorry!'*

*Then the monster flew off, embarrassed,
Looking for squares to devour
Thinking that circles are squares
It reached Circle-Land in less than an hour.*

*But the circles, of course, didn't fit
Into its square-shaped mouth
So the monster, by now starving hungry,
Flew off back down to the south.*

*From that day on the squares agreed
They'd regard the square a 'circle'
'Oh thank you, my friends! For that
I will be eternally grateful,'*

Said the square that didn't fit in.

Task Question 1: Can a square be a circle?

Nested Questions:

- What is a square?
- What is a circle?
- Can these two ideas (the idea of a square and the idea of a circle) go together?

Extension activity: drawing a round square

Set the class the task of drawing a *round square*. Allow them to try, on a small whiteboard or piece of paper, and then get them to share their attempts with the rest of the class. With each attempt that's shown ask the class: 'Have they succeeded in drawing a round square?' and then *open it up* (see 'Iffing, anchoring and opening up' on page 74) with 'Why?' or 'Then how would you do it?'

Nested Questions:

- Is it possible to draw a round square?
- Could you succeed by inventing a new shape called a ‘Squircle’ – a combination of a square and a circle? Would it be a round square?
- Are all things possible, or are some things impossible?
- Does impossible mean that you can never do it?
- Exactly what does ‘square’ mean? Exactly what does ‘round’ mean? (Look them up.)
- Do the meanings help you answer the question, *Is it possible to draw a round square?*

Task Question 2: What did the square mean when it said ‘I may look like a square... but I’m a circle on the inside’?

Nested Questions:

- What does it mean to say that you are one thing on the outside but another on the inside?
 - Can a dog be a cat on the inside (or a cat a dog)? (See the story *The Cat That Barked* on page 112.)
 - (Optional, age-appropriate question) Can a girl be a boy on the inside (or a boy a girl)?
-

Extension activity: stories and poetry

Here is another (the original) version of *The Square That Didn't Fit In* but this time written as a *poem* instead of a *story in verse*.

UNFAMILIAR WORDS:

- declare
- rigid
- congregate
- tessellate

The Square That Circled

The story

*I've got four sides,
I'm four-corners-wide,
Equally spaced apart.*

*They say I'm a square
But I have to declare
I'm a circle in my heart.*

*Squares are too rigid
With no space in between
When they come together to congregate.*

*I, however,
Don't seem to fit in,
I simply refuse to tessellate.*

Task Question: What is the difference between *The Square That Didn't Fit In* and *The Square That Circled*?

Nested Questions:

- Are they both poems?
- Is *The Square That Circled* a story?
- Is *The Square That Didn't Fit In* a poem?
- What is the difference between a story in verse and a poem?

The Luckiest Man in The World

I have *versed* this story, which comes from Herodotus' *Histories* (see bibliography, circa 430 BCE), thought by many to be the first history book by the first historian of Western Europe. There are many versions of 'the returning ring' theme but this is the earliest I know of, told, not as a fiction story but as history.

This story has, what is known as a 'reveal', in the last two words. I have interrupted the rhyme pattern to delay the reveal thereby giving the audience a little extra time to anticipate it: the horror of the reveal all the more *horror-able* for having been anticipated. This is a classic example of a *tale with a twist* (see page 6).

UNFAMILIAR WORDS:

- Luck / skill
- Providence
- Fate
- Destiny
- Power

The story

*Polycrates of Samos was the luckiest king in the world
Fortune always favoured him in battles that unfurled;
The wind blew his ships faster,
His enemy's ships off-course;
At times a natural disaster
Would lessen his enemy's force.*

*Now, Amasis of Egypt was the most fearful king alive,
As Polycrates marched closer he had come to realise
That he would have to ask the king of Samos
To enter an agreement,
Protecting each from the other
And making both a tyrant.*

*Polycrates and Amasis were the most powerful kings there were,
But no instance of misfortune ever once occurred.
Amasis was fearful
So he complained to Polycrates,
Fearing the gods wrathful
If his fortune did not cease.*

*A beautiful, jewelled ring was the most valuable thing in the world
To Polycrates, who stood upon a cliff from which he hurled
The ring into the raging tide
Which carried it out to sea
Proving to the gods on high
He could find misery.*

*Amasis and Polycrates were the happiest men on Earth
Free of his ring and the wrath of the gods they sought to find some mirth;
The cooks prepared a swordfish,
The biggest ever seen!
But when they sliced it open
Inside they found –
– To the horror of the tyrants –
Inside they found...
The ring.*

Note: With the verse version of this story I suggest using the **Concept Box** technique described on page 77 instead of using the Task Question that follows the story version. (For the prose story version log on to the online resources that accompany this book.) **Hint:** You may want to try both versions with different (or the same) classes to compare and contrast presenting a story in two very different ways: a prose narrative and a verse-story. Make a note of the differences, advantages and disadvantages that come with each mode of presentation.

Extension activity: luck

- Play any game that involves an element of luck such as *Pig* (See Fisher's *Games For Thinking*, 1997) to use as a vehicle for discussing instances of good / bad luck and skill.
- *Black!* This is a card game that can produce some astonishing results if played with large numbers of players. To play:
 - Tell the class that the aim of the game is to get a black card.
 - Shuffle a deck of cards.
 - Deal the cards so that each player has one card in front of him or her, placed face down so that they can't see it.
 - Ask everyone to turn their card over simultaneously and to see whether they have a black or a red card – the winners of the round are those that have black cards.
 - Now play a second round, as above. Then a third, a fourth and perhaps a fifth and sixth (when you stop is up to you). After each round see if there is anybody who got a black card successively on each round.

If there is a good number of players, then, statistically, there should be someone who gets a black card for most, if not all, of the rounds (this usually happens successfully with a class size of 25-30 children). This can seem extraordinary but is simple probability and makes for a good starting point for a discussion. For instance, the aim of the game – to get a black card – is completely arbitrary; it could have been a red card. Some people may have had red every time but they are less likely to have seen this as extraordinary, given that it was not stated to be the aim of the game.

The Monty Hall Problem: Research this famous, but complicated (too complicated for me to explain here, I'm afraid) probability problem. Use it as the starting point of a discussion about probability and luck. Like the Mobius Strip, this is a wonderful example of how something logical and demonstrable goes counter to our common sense, thereby showing the limits of common sense reasoning.