

TEACHING NOTES

for *Bear Island* and *Wolf in the Snow* by Matthew Cordell



These notes have been written by the teachers at the [CLPE](#) to provide schools with ideas to develop comprehension and cross-curricular activities around this text. They build on our work supporting teachers to use picture books to enhance critical thinking and develop creative approaches in art and writing. They encourage a deep reading of and reflection on the text, which may happen over a series of reading sessions, rather than in just one sitting. We hope you find them useful.

Although each of the two titles can be read and enjoyed independently of each other, we suggest exploring the books together to explore the style and themes of Matthew Cordell's work more widely and the intertextual links between these two books.

Teachers should be aware that *Bear Island* addresses a child's response to the death of a beloved pet. However, this is dealt with in a sensitive way. Understanding would need to be shown when introducing the book to a class in which a child may have experienced bereavement.

***Bear Island*; Reading aloud and key talking points:**

- Look at the front cover of the book, spending time looking closely at the illustration, considering what clues it might give to the story inside. *What do you notice about the two characters that you can see? How does this image make you feel? What makes you feel that way? Take some time to consider the two characters you are introduced to. Who do you think they are? How do you think this story might connect them? What do you think you know about them from the illustration? How do you think they might relate to each other, and to the story you are about to read? Do you know any other stories featuring bears, if so, do they give you any ideas about this story?*
- Look at the back cover of the book, considering both the illustration and the text. *How do you think this image and these words relate to what you have seen on the front cover? Who do you think Louise is? What do you think you can say about her and the island from what you have seen and read? How do you think the bear from the front cover relates to your predictions?*
- Now open the book to reveal the five spreads up to and including the text, 'Goodbye, Charlie'. Spend time looking closely at the different images and talking about them together. Support the children in closely reading the illustrations, encouraging them to talk in depth about what they notice, what these things make them think about, and how these things make them feel. *What do you think is happening in these spreads? Can you summarise what has happened?*
- Look at the pair of illustrations showing Charlie chasing the ball Louise has thrown, then Louise looking at the ball. *What is the significance of the ball? Why do you think this is shown alone at the start of the book? Why do you think these scenes are coloured in the way they are? How do you think Louise is feeling? What tells you this? Focus in on the spread where we see Louise throwing the ball for Charlie to chase on one spread and Louise alone with the ball on the next. Why do you think the illustrator chose to place these images alongside each other? What impact does this have on you as a reader? What does it make you think about? How does it make you feel?*
- Now look at the two spreads that show Louise packing up Charlie's things into a box, then holding the box with her parents on the facing page. *How do you think Louise might feel as she packs up Charlie's things? What can you see in the illustration that suggests this? What clues do the colours used, her body language and facial expression provide? What else do you notice in the illustrations that gives you further clues about Louise's life and her relationship with Charlie; for example, in the pictures on the walls and the view through the window?*

- Re-read and consider the words chosen to accompany the image on the next spread, *Goodbye, Charlie*. What do you think the author wants to capture in these two short words? How do the words make you feel? Now, focus on the image of the family, framed in a circle. How does this illustration work with and beyond the words to share the family's loss? What might the three characters be thinking or saying? Look closely at body language and facial expression: you could freeze-frame this scene, saying aloud what the characters' thoughts might be. What else do you see in this illustration that gives you clues about the family or story setting? Why do you think this image might have been framed in this way?
- Now, turn to explore the title page. How does the page-turn make you feel? What makes you feel this way? How does it compare and contrast with the illustrations you have seen before? What might this suggest about the story that lies ahead?
- Read aloud the next spread, 'On a lake [...] an island', encouraging children to look carefully the illustration. Allow time and space to reflect on what they have heard and seen, and discuss
 - Were you surprised that the illustrations returned to the muted colour palette from the bright colours we saw on the title page? Do you think this is before or after they have said goodbye to Charlie? What makes you think this? Why do you think the author chose to place an ellipsis in the line *There was... Charlie*? What do you learn about the setting for the story from this illustration? Does it remind you of anywhere you have been or seen in other stories or in real life? Do you think it would be a nice place to live? Why or why not?
- Now, focus in on the island. What do you think you know about this place from what you can see? What part do you think this setting will play in the story? What are your predictions for what might lie ahead, related to what you've already read and seen? Give time and space for the children to make initial predictions on post-it notes and stick these around a copy of this illustration.
- Continue reading aloud the next two pages, taking time to closely read the illustration alongside the text. What do you think it is like in the house? What makes you think this? Why do you think Louise chooses to go out after breakfast? Explore the contrast in the detail shown in the background of the kitchen scene compared to the white space Louise is set against in the opposite spread. What does this make us think about her, her life and what might be about to happen?
- Now, share the double-page spread of Louise rowing to the island. Read aloud the text and take time to explore the illustration. Why do you think Louise chooses to row to the island? Consider the author's choice to repeat the sentence starter 'How he loved to...' for the last three sentences. Why do you think he does this?
- Read aloud the next five pages [share only the left-hand page of the last spread with the deer] capturing Louise's arrival on the island, Louise tied up the boat, up to, *Something new and good was happening in Louise*. Allow time and space to explore the illustrations and reflect on what they have heard and seen, then come back together to reflect. Re-read the short sentences, 'Louise tied up the boat.//It was quiet on the island.//She looked around.' How do you think Louise might feel as she stands on the shore? Why do you think she has chosen to come here? Do you think she has been here before? What makes you think this?



- Focus on the page where she thwacks a tree and announces her departure. What more do we learn about Louise from these vignettes? What do her body language and facial expression convey? Why do you think she ends by thwacking the tree, and announcing that she is leaving? Who do you think she is talking to her when She announced, "I'm leaving!"?
- Look again at the double-page spread with the butterflies and chipmunk and the left-hand page of the double-page spread with the deer. Why do you think the illustrator has decided to add a new variety of colour to this spread? Think about the verb and adverb choices in the words used: butterflies, circling, flying, flitting about, the inquisitive chipmunk, the deer approaching carefully and curiously. What do you think these choices tell us about life on the island? How do the animals react to Louise's arrival? Does this give you any further thoughts about why Louise chose to come? Look at the change in Louise from the vignettes we saw first. What do you notice about Louise and her body language? How has this changed since she first arrived on the island? What do you think contributed to the changes you see?



- Now, reveal the right-hand side of the page **CRACK! CHUFF! [...]** breath noise... What do you think is making these noises? How do the three sentences ending 'noise...' change the mood from the previous page? What do you think might be about to happen? What makes you think this?
- Share the next two pages, of the bear confronting Louise, and of Louise confronting the bear. Is this what you predicted? Why do you think the bear is roaring; why do you think Louise roars back? What does this action make you think about her character? Compare the layout, body language and facial gestures of the two spreads: how does the mood change from one page to the next? Why do you think the author chooses to repeat the words **angry** at the start of the last three sentences? What do you think will happen next?
- Read aloud the next four pages, sharing the illustrations and allowing time and space to reflect.
 - Is this what you expected? Why do you think the bear sank down to the ground and Louise crept back to the boat? What do their movements and facial expressions convey? Why do you think the illustrator chose to break this action up into three frames?
 - How does the illustration of the animals that Louise looks back to make you feel? What do you think the familiar feeling [and] sadness might be that Louise feels, inspired by this bear? What does this tell us about her and about the bear?
 - Why do you think the author/illustrator chose not to include words on the final spread? What are you thinking as you look at this image? What does this tell you about the story? What do you think might be happening to Louise, the bear and other creatures?

- Go on to read aloud the next section of the book, from *The next day...* to *And they were changing at home*, sharing the illustrations, looking at how the story develops and allowing the children time and space to reflect on what they have heard and seen. *What do you think is happening in these pages? How do you know? What can you tell from the words, and what can you see in the illustrations?*
- Look carefully at the way the bear is presented across these pages. *Why do you think the author now uses a capital letter for the word Bear, instead of referring to it as the bear or this bear? What does this small change indicate?*
- Consider the frames used in the pages where we see that things are changing on the island and changing at home. *What changes do you visibly see happening, for the people, the animals and the environment? How much time do you think is passing as we pass through these frames? What shows you this? What do you think is changing specifically for Louise? How do you think the story might end after seeing this?*
- Read on to *She searched everywhere*. *What do the four vignettes of Louise searching for Bear convey, how does her facial expression change, and why? Where do you think Bear might be, what might have happened?*



- Share the next spreads, up to the wordless spread where Louise and Bear face each other, and discuss. *Is this what you expected? How do you think Louise and Bear each feel about Bear having to hibernate? How might it affect their friendship? What do you think each is thinking as they face each other on the wordless double-page spread? Encourage the children to take on the role of Louise or bear here and write thought bubbles to capture the character's thoughts and emotions at this point.*
 - Go on to read aloud the next spread, up to "It's not fair..." thought Louise and allow time and space to reflect on and discuss the words and pictures. *What do you notice about the colour change in the illustrations here? Why do you think the illustrator chose to do this? How does the framed illustration of the bare tree with Louise's stick leaning against it make you feel? What makes you feel this way? The children might observe that 'Goodbye, Bear' echoes the 'Goodbye, Charlie' with which the story opened.*
 - What do you notice about the change in Louise? Allow the children time to consider what she may be thinking or feeling at this point, then ask them to think about what they might say to Louise as an outsider, looking in, to offer her comfort at this moment. Encourage them to consider everything she has gone through up to this point and to write her a note to empathise with her situation and offer advice or comfort.

- Share the next pages, as Louise visits Charlie's memorial, hangs up her things, and comes in to find her parents with a surprise. *What did you think about these events? Why do you think she chose to go back to Charlie's memorial after she came back, instead of going straight home? Why do you think her parents chose to get her a new puppy? Do you think it is significant that the puppy is playing on the spot where we previously saw Louise holding the box of Charlie's things? How do you think Louise might react to the new puppy?*
- Now read on to the end of the book. *What do you think the page of falling snow represents, how does Matthew Cordell use it to break the story? What changes can you see from the puppy's arrival to these final spreads? What do these final pages add to the story? Why do you think Matthew Cordell chose not to end on the page of falling snow? Look at how Louise and Milly are always shown together, how she has taken her hat off, how colour has returned. Do you think that Bear existed? Why? Why not? How do you explain Louise's experience? What do you think happened in her head in the sentence, 'Louise thought for a while'? How do you think Louise is feeling now? How can you tell? Come back together to talk about the range of emotions she has experienced.*
- Re-read the entire book from beginning to end. Allow the group to begin to explore their responses to it through booktalk with the help of what Aidan Chambers calls '**the four basic questions**'. These questions give children accessible starting points for discussion:
 - *Tell me...was there anything you liked about this story?*
 - *Was there anything that you particularly disliked...?*
 - *Was there anything that puzzled you?*
 - *Were there any patterns... any connections that you noticed...? Did it remind you of anything else you've read or seen?*
- The openness of these questions, unlike the more interrogative 'Why?' question, encourages every child to feel that they have something to say. It allows everyone to take part in arriving at a shared view without the fear of the 'wrong' answer. As children reply it can be useful to write down what they say under the headings 'likes', 'dislikes', 'puzzles', 'patterns'. This written record helps to map out the children's view of the text and the important themes and ideas around the story from their perspective and is a way of holding on to ideas for later. Asking these questions will lead children inevitably into a fuller discussion than using more general questions.
- Extend the children's thinking through more evaluative questions, such as: *Why do you think Matthew Cordell chose to write this book? Do you think the book is sad or happy? Why? Who do you think would like this book? Why? What might you tell them to encourage them to read it and what might you hold back so as not to spoil their reading experience?*

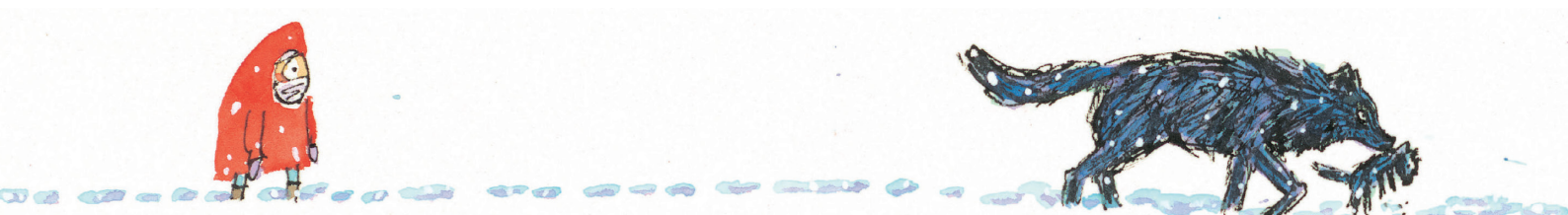
Wolf in the Snow; Reading aloud and key talking points:

Matthew Cordell won the **2018 Caldecott Medal** – America's equivalent of the **UK Kate Greenway Medal** – for *Wolf in the Snow*. As a wordless picturebook you will want to ensure that children can all view the spreads clearly and have time to read illustrations in depth and that discussions focus on children's understanding of the story told in the images and their understanding of characters, events and settings shaped in the illustrations.

- Begin by looking at the front cover of the book, spending time looking closely at the illustration, speculating on what it might convey about the story inside. *What do you notice about the two characters that you can see, the figure in red and the small creature? How do you think each character is feeling? What makes you think that way? How do you think they might relate to each other, and to the story you are about to read? Where and when do you think this scene is happening? What thoughts do you have about the story you are about to read? What makes you think these things?*
- Look also at the back cover of the book, considering both the illustration and the text. *How do you think this wolf and the blub relate to what you have seen on the cover? What do you think you can say about the two figures on the cover from what you have seen and read? How do you think the wolf from the back cover relates to your predictions? What do you know about wolves and their behaviour, from real life or in stories, that might influence your predictions?*
- Now open the book to reveal the spreads up to and including the title page. Spend time looking closely at the different images and talking about them together. Encourage the children to talk about what they see, and how it makes them feel. *Can you summarise what has happened so far? What links can you make with what you read in Bear Island? What similarities and differences can you see in characters, settings, ideas, themes and illustration style?*
- Look at the opening illustration of the girl petting her dog, watched by her Mum and Dad. *What do you think the different characters might be feeling, thinking or saying? You could **freeze-frame** this scene and/or add **thought-bubbles** to articulate their emotions. Where and when do you think this scene is taking place? What else do you notice in the illustration, what else might these things tell you about the story? The children might notice the items on the mantelpiece, the connection between the girl and the dog, the girl's red coat. Think about the position you are seeing this scene from. How does it feel to be looking in from outside, through the window?*
- Share the next spread as the girl walks away from home. *Where do you think she is going? What do you notice about the weather? How do you think she feels? What makes you think this? How does the dog react to her leaving? Why do you think it reacts in this way? What do you think will happen next?*
- Turn the page and explore the images on the next spread. *What can you see here? What do you notice about the different members of the wolf pack? What does this make you think about the story? How do the images make you feel? Why do you think the illustrator chose to enclose each image in a circular frame? Read on to the title page, against its background of falling snow. What story do you think these pages have set up? How do you think it will develop? How does this reflect the outline shared on the back cover? Allow the children time and space to note their predictions on post-it notes and stick these around a copy of the title page.*
- Share the next two double-page spreads of the girl leaving school, and the wolves loping through the blizzard. *What do you think is happening in these spreads? How does the weather compare to the girl's morning walk to school? How does the page-turn to a pack of wolves make you feel? What do these images make you think about the wolves? What do you notice about them? How close do you think the wolves are to the girl? What makes you think this? They may note that, as before, the girl is heading left to right and the wolves right to left: do they think the girl and the wolf pack will meet? What might happen if they do?*
- Read the next two double-page spreads, and ask the children to summarise what they think is happening, and how the story is advancing. *How do you think the increasing snow is affecting the girl's walk home? How do you know? What do her body language and facial expression suggest?*

What do you notice about the wolf pack? Do you think they realise a wolf has been left behind? What do you notice about this particular wolf?

- Share the next three pairs of pages, allowing the children time and space to reflect on what they have seen and to discuss:
 - How do the two frames of the girl and the lone wolf heading towards each other make you feel? What is the effect of framing them in two circles? The children may be reminded of binoculars.
- Look at the double-page spread where the two encounter each other. What do you notice about the lone wolf now? What do the words 'huff huff' and 'whine whine' add to your understanding about the characters? What might they be feeling as they first see each other? How does the spread that zooms in on the girl reaching out to the cowering wolf cub make you feel? What makes you feel this way?
- Share the next spreads, as the girl carries the cub towards the distant howling, negotiating various obstacles and difficulties until they reach the 'HOOWWLL' that fills the top of the right-hand page. Allow the children time and space to reflect on what they have seen then discuss.
 - What do these spreads tell us about the girl and her character? How would you describe her? What leads you to describe her in this way?
 - What stands out for you in the illustrations? Why?
 - How do you think the girl might feel as she hears then heads towards the adult wolves? What do her body language and facial expressions tell you about how she might feel as she navigates each of the challenges then climbs the final hill to where the wolves are howling? What do you think the cub might be thinking through all this? What do you predict might happen over the page?
- Turn to share the next page as the girl and cub meet the pack leader: how do you feel as you look at this image? What makes you feel this way? What do you think the three characters might be thinking as they meet?
- Now read on, to the two face-on views: why do you think the illustrator has chosen to show you the characters face-on, framed as before in circles? What is the impact of focussing on their facial expressions like this, what emotions do these convey? What do you think might happen next?
- Read on to the next spread, and discuss: is this what you expected? How is the tension briefly heightened then resolved? How do you think the girl might feel as she kneels in the snow and the wolves leave her? What does her body language suggest?



- Share the next spreads, as the girl carries on towards home watched by the wolves, then collapses in the circle of trees. How do you think the girl might feel as she nears home and can see the lights and hear her dog barking yet the snow deepens and she falls? How do the illustrations convey this? What does the spread where the wolves close in on her as she lies in the snow make you think about? What do you know of wolves' behaviour? What do you think might happen next?

- Read on to the end of the book, then allow the children time and space to discuss how the story is resolved. *Is this what you expected? How did you feel when you saw the wolves repay the favour the girl had done them; the cub licking her face as her own dog had licked her before she left home; the wolves standing guard and howling; her discovery and safe return? What do you think the girl and her parents might have felt as events unfolded? How does the final fireside scene make you feel, what do you think each of the characters might be feeling at this point?*
- As with *Bear Island*, re-read the entire book and allow the group to begin to explore their responses to it through booktalk using Aidan Chambers's '**four basic questions**', co-creating a shared view of the text without the fear of the 'wrong' answer. It will again be useful to record their thinking to map out their view of the text and the important themes and ideas around the story from the children's perspective before you go on to discuss the two texts together.
- As before, extend the children's thinking through more evaluative questions, such as: *Why do you think Matthew Cordell chose to write this book? Why do you think the judges awarded it the Caldecott Medal? Have you read a wordless book before? What did you think about this kind of book?*
- Invite the children to begin to make links between *Wolf in the Snow* and *Bear Island* by comparing and contrasting the two stories and looking for intertextual links between them. They may begin with obvious differences – one is about dogs/bears and one about wolves, one has illustrations and texts, one is wordless – and similarities – both have girl central characters, both have a 'prologue', both use face-to-face confrontations – before you then support them to consider more sophisticated reflections, for example, noting the way that the action of *Wolf in the Snow* takes place between breakfast and supper, whereas in *Bear Island* it spreads over a whole year. Or considering:
 - *What do you think the two books tell you about the importance of family and of the home?*
 - *What do you think the two books suggest about what happens when children spend time alone in nature?*
 - *What do you think the two books tell us about human relations with animals and nature; how can humans help nature, and how can nature help humans?*
 - *Why might these books be important at the current time?*
- The emphasis is less on arriving at a definitive list of similarities and differences than on moving towards and facilitating discussion of intertextual connections and a deeper engagement with and understanding of both texts and the work of the author-illustrator.
- Leave multiple copies of the books in the book corner for the children to revisit and re-read in independent reading time, by themselves or socially in a group.



This sequence of activities was designed in partnership with CLPE. To access more free resources from CLPE, visit: www.clpe.org.uk. To find out more about using picturebooks as a means to develop children's visual literacy and increase engagement with and attainment in writing, visit the Power of Pictures part of the website at <https://clpe.org.uk/powerofpictures>.