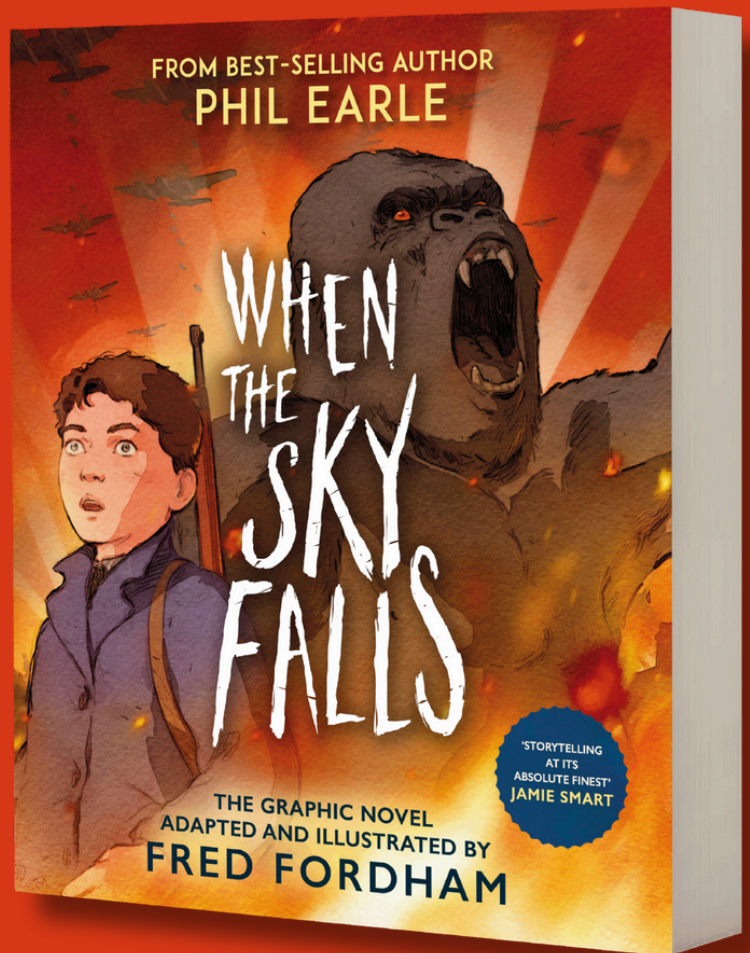


# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR THE GRAPHIC NOVEL OF

# WHEN THE SKY FALLS



FROM THE BEST-SELLING AUTHOR  
**PHIL EARLE**

ADAPTED AND ILLUSTRATED BY  
**FRED FORDHAM**



ANDERSEN PRESS

### **About the book:**

A stunning graphic-novel edition of the multi-award-winning story about the incredible friendship between a young boy and a silverback gorilla during the Second World War, inspired by a true story.

1941. War is raging. And Joseph has been sent to live in the city, where bombers rule the skies. There, he will live with Mrs F, a gruff woman with no fondness for children. Her only loves are the rundown zoo she owns and its mighty silverback gorilla, Adonis. As the weeks pass, Joseph and Adonis become friends, but what will happen when the bombers set him rampaging free?

Winner of the British Book Award for Children's Fiction Book of the Year.



### **Praise for the graphic novel:**

‘A beautiful and luminous interpretation of a modern classic, this is a magnificent achievement.’ Chris Riddell

‘A stunning rendering of a powerful, classic, story. Together, Earle and Fordham have created a masterpiece.’ MG Leonard

‘It’s wonderful to see this fine story in such a brilliant new incarnation.’  
David Almond

‘This is storytelling at its absolute finest, art and story combined into an incredible emotional journey. This new version is a brand new classic.’ Jamie Smart

**About the author:**

Born and raised in the north of England, **Phil Earle** is the author of numerous acclaimed, award-winning books for children and teenagers. He has worked as a carer, a dramatherapist, a bookseller and a publisher, and loves talking at schools and festivals around the world. His novel *When The Sky Falls* won the Books Are My Bag Readers Award and the British Book Award for Children's Fiction. He lives on the side of a very steep hill with his wife, their five children and two dogs.

**About the graphic novelist:**

**Fred Fordham** has written and illustrated for various publications. This includes adapting and illustrating the graphic novel version of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, adapting F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, again for a graphic novel, and illustrating Philip Pullman's debut graphic novel *The Adventures of John Blake: Mystery of the Ghost Ship*.



## Discussion Guide:

This book is called a graphic novel. What do you know about graphic novels? How are they similar and different to comic books?

Whilst exploring this story, think carefully about: how the art and text boxes work together, the use of colour and what it might symbolise, the shape of the panels and how they are sequenced, the use of borders and layout, how onomatopoeia is employed, the different kind of fonts and text used, characters' body language and facial expressions.

You may also wish to discuss how you might go about reading this graphic novel – are the normal conventions of reading a book still important? Should you read the words first and then look at the artwork? Should you explore both at the same time? Which would you prefer to do and why?

Look at the following sentences from the first page of this graphic novel:

*The platform was a battlefield: seventy yards of carnage transplanted straight from the coasts of northern France. Smoke billowed; people clung to each other. There were cries of pain, howls of despair as loved ones were ripped apart. There were silent tears too. Quiet reassurances whispered into ears. Against the tide of devastation walked a boy: tutting and huffing at the tears and carrying-on.*

Discuss any unknown or unfamiliar vocabulary. For example, what does the verb 'billowed' suggest about the smoke? What might the boy be thinking and feeling if he is 'huffing and puffing'? What might his facial expression look like? Does it match the image in the book?

Now, can you create your own comic strip using these sentences? Think about layout, design, use of panels, text boxes and speech bubbles. Afterwards, compare your artwork with the first page – how are they similar and different? Alternatively, you could read Chapter 1 of the story by Phil Earle and then create your own comic strip to show the events!

**Cross-Curricular Links, History:** Why were children evacuated during the Second World War? Where were they sent? Can you label a map to show the areas that children were sent to? What was life like for them in the countryside? Afterwards, use a venn Diagram to compare and contrast how Joseph's experience of war would be similar and different from evacuees sent to the countryside.

Look at the speech bubble on **page 3** and the thought bubble on **page 5**. What does the inclusion of '...' and '?!' suggest? What might Mrs F be thinking and feeling? How does the graphic novelist show the man's shock?



How does the use of colour on **page 8** show the strangeness of the situation? Try and use the word ‘juxtaposition’ in your answer!

**Cross-Curricular Links, History:** It may be useful to further explore the impact of the Battle of Britain on the civilian population. You could learn about Anderson shelters, how the underground was used, rationing, and what happened during the Blitz.

Do you agree that Joseph is ‘aggressive’ and ‘surly’? How does the graphic novelist show his moods? (**page 13**) In the story, Phil Earle also compares him to an ‘unbroken stallion’. What does this mean?

In the story, Joseph thinks that Mrs F is ‘cold and lifeless’. How has the graphic novelist represented and shown this?

Can you add a thought bubble to the artwork on **pages 15 and 16**? What might Joseph be thinking and feeling? How do you know?

Who might the man on **page 16** be? Have you seen him before? What do you notice about the use of colour and composition? As you read, keep an eye out for this character, predicting who he might be. The same design style and colour is used on **page 67** – what might it represent?

Look at the body language on **page 19** between Joseph and Mrs F. She is towering over him – what might this suggest about the balance of power between the two of them?

Do you agree with the statement that ‘War might bring out the worst in some people, but it brings out the best in most.’ What might this mean? Do you know of any other stories where ‘war’ is a key theme? (**page 22**)

How is sound conveyed on **page 24**? Where else in this graphic novel is the sense of sound an important theme? Look at **page 27** for example!

How does the graphic novelist make the ‘beast’ on **page 25** seem powerful and terrifying? What might the colour red symbolise?

What do you notice about the panels on **page 26**? Why might there be so much white space when Mrs F says, “Terrifying beast, isn’t he?”

Think about ‘size’ on **pages 28 and 29**. How does the graphic novelist convey the size of the animal in the cage? Why do you think we haven’t seen its face yet?

Discuss the sequence of the three panels on **pages 40 and 41**. Why do you think the reader is shown such a close-up view of Joseph? How does it help us empathise with him? How are past events shown?

Conduct a group discussion or class debate about zoos and whether or not it is ethical to keep animals in captivity. Do you agree that it's cruel to keep animals alive during times of conflict and war? (**page 43**)

Do you think the graphic novelist successfully conveys 'movement' on **page 49**. Why? Why not? Can you think of another way to illustrate this page?

What do you notice about the colour scheme on **pages 50 and 51**? How might it create a sense of confusion and fear?

Compare the artwork on **page 52**. Can you think of five adjectives for each panel? How is colour used to show the passage of time?

Discuss how the artwork is set out and how it is framed on **page 58**. What might the graphic novelist be trying to say about the theme of 'freedom'?

Compare the conversation on **page 60** with the conversations so far between Joseph and Mrs F. How are they similar and different? Does the conversation between Syd and Joseph flow more easily? How might the graphic novelist show this? Think carefully about how the relationships are developing and changing as the story progresses.

Again, look at how the illustrator uses white space on **page 61**. What do you notice about the bars of the cage? Why might this be? Now look at **page 63**. What do you notice about Joseph? Are either of the characters truly free?

Joseph says, "It's only an animal" on **page 71**. Do you think he means this? Why? Why not?

How are the headmaster's words displayed on **pages 80 and 81**. Why might this be? Have a go at reading them out loud!

Discuss the dilemma on **page 98**. What might Mrs F mean when she says, "Sometimes, doing the right thing feels completely wrong"? What does it refer to?

Discuss the layout of the artwork on **page 105**. Why might it be set out like this? Does it help us understand the relationship between Syd and Joseph more? How does it help develop the setting?

In the story, Phil Earle says that fights have 'fed' Bert's ego. How does the graphic novelist portray Bert on **page 110**?

**Cross-Curricular Link, Poetry:** Syd asks Joseph what 'A' stands for on **page 113**. Can you create your own war-themed alphabet poem? For example, 'B' might stand for 'bombs' or 'Blitz'.

How does the graphic novelist show the balance of power between the characters on **page 118**? Think about the characters' body language and how they are posed and framed.

How does the theme of 'gender' play out on **page 128**?

How successful is the dream sequence on **pages 130-134**? Talk about how colour and composition work to create a frightening atmosphere. What do you notice about the use of perspective on **page 134**?

Look at the sentence, "But soon as I try to read them off the page, they start dancing" on **page 138**. Can you create a comic strip to represent Joseph's relationship with reading? How might you make the words seem like they are 'dancing'?

**Cross-Curricular Link, Art:** Before exploring **page 141**, spend some time looking at a range of photographs and pieces of art linked to the Blitz. You could use this website: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/art-and-photography-in-the-blitz>. Create your own piece of artwork linked to the Blitz, thinking carefully about the colours you will use. This would be a great opportunity to learn about complementary and contrasting colours!

Look at **page 148**. How does this piece of artwork make you feel? Whose perspective are we seeing things from? Why?

Discuss how 'lines' are used on **page 149**. You might notice, for example, that the bars of the cage are drawn with straight, bold lines whereas Adonis is drawn with a range of curved, broken lines. What might the vertical lines of the cage suggest? You might also notice that the artwork is framed by a box with straight lines rather than it being a 'bleed', 'spot' or 'vignette'. Why do you think Adonis has been positioned in the centre of the page? As you look at the artwork, think about where your eye is drawn to. Why might this be? You may also wish to use this as a chance to discuss the name 'Adonis'. What does it suggest? What connotations does it have?

How does the graphic novelist create a sense of tension on **pages 153 and 154**? It might be interesting to reflect on what we can and can't see. What do you notice about the character's facial expressions, for example?

Who are the characters at the bottom of **page 156**? Do you think these illustrations have any significance? What might the graphic novelist be trying to say about the relationship between Adonis and these men?

How does the graphic novelist show Joseph's confusion and fear on **page 163**? Does this artwork remind you in any way of the earlier dream sequence? Think about how the characters are positioned around Joseph.

What 'act of deceit' has been carried out on **page 167**? What do you notice about the font and text on **page 168**? Why might this be?

Does the artwork of Mrs F snapping the cane on **page 170** remind you of any other illustrations in the graphic novel? How is the colour red employed again? What might it represent?

We can't see Mrs F's facial expression on **page 171**. Why might this be? What might she be thinking and feeling?

The artwork on **page 179** isn't framed by a border. Why might this be? Could it suggest that Mrs F and Joseph have finally 'broken free'? You may wish to try drawing your own borders around this artwork – how does it change the feel of the illustration? Would a heavy, black outline suggest something different to a curved or rounded border?

There's hardly any text on **pages 182-185**. Why might this be? Does it allow the reader a chance to focus on the relationship between Joseph and Adonis? Does it allow us to sit quietly with the characters after the rather heavy, emotional and sad conversation about Joseph's father? If thought bubbles were added to these pages, how would it alter our experience of reading? Why might the graphic novelist have chosen to focus on the artwork rather than text on these pages?

Look at **pages 195-198**. How does the graphic novelist show that the planes and bombs are getting closer and closer? Does it successfully create a sense of fear? What information does it give the reader that Joseph doesn't have?

Look at the layout of **page 202**. Have you seen this layout before in the graphic novel? When? Why?

Talk about the position, size and body language on **page 210**. What might the bright colours suggest?

How are Joseph's emotions shown on **pages 216 and 217**? Think about the use of 'negative space' and how the graphic novelist uses both red and black to show what has happened.



**Cross-curricular Link, Music:** Can you work in a small group to create a soundscape to accompany **pages 206-217**. You could use a variety of percussion instruments, as well as your voices to create a soundtrack for this scene. You may even wish to create a graphic score to represent your composition.

Before reading the final page of this graphic novel, look at the text:

*They didn't move for what felt like an age, and together, amongst the dancing flames, they both cried: for what they had lost, for who they had lost, and for what they had finally found.*

What have Joseph and Mrs F both lost? What have they found? Once again, try and create your own comic strip that links to these sentences. Afterwards compare your artwork with the illustration on **page 222**, talking about what you have tried to achieve in your comic strip.

If you have read the novel of *When the Sky Falls*, you may wish to compare it with this graphic novel. How are they similar and different? Has the graphic novelist done justice to the story? Are there any scenes in particular that stand out for you? Has anything been edited or left out? You could choose your favourite scene from Phil Earle's novel and turn it into a comic strip!

Whose point of view is the story told from? How do you know?

Which character do you think has developed and changed the most over the course of this story?

Is there a pattern to how the graphic novelist uses colour? When are bright oranges, yellows and reds used? What about blues and greys? What might these colours represent?

How important is the theme of 'bullying' in the story. Who are the bullies in the story? What happens to them? Do they deserve it? Are there any other important themes in this story? Perhaps you could order them for least to most important!

Spend some time in groups reading a variety of poems which explore the theme of war. You could read:

- 'Ballad of a Hero' by Kate Tempest
- 'For the Fallen' by Laurence Binyon
- 'Dreamers' by Siegfried Sassoon
- 'In Flanders Field' by John McCrae
- 'Dulce et Decorum Est' by Wilfred Owen
- 'War History' by Sam Hunt
- 'During the War' by Philip Levine
- 'We Remember' by Laura Mucha

Think about how your chosen poem makes you feel. Can you turn one of these poems into a comic strip, using everything you have learned about colour, framing, perspective, speech and thought bubbles, text boxes and so on?