

Booklist for work with owls and some literacy exercises

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As you can imagine, I have not been able to read all the books about owls so although I can positively recommend some, this does not mean that others are inferior. I thought the best way to start would be to obtain some one else's working list as then at least that would be a list of books available and useful. So this booklist began with a list which was very kindly given to me by staff at the Chestnut Centre near Castleton in Derbyshire. It has been added to by personal recommendations. Coincidentally, one of the books on the list, *Old Hushwing*, also began with a visit to the Chestnut Owl Centre, so maybe you would like to plan in a visit to some wildlife sanctuary near your school. Such visits can have a great effect on writing.

I asked Alan Brown who wrote *Old Hushwing* why he thought owls were so interesting to many people. He said:

'I think that many children (and I am a child at heart) love owls because they are both familiar and strange. Their eyes face forward with a direct gaze that is a little bit frightening, but their trick of turning their heads right round is very funny. They are fierce predators of the night, when we are tucked up in bed, and most of us really only know them from captive birds in cages. So they are both scary and safe.'

Shared text

You might use Alan Brown's message to MAPE as a text to discuss with children at KS2 level, or with some children earlier. It is a marvellous text for comparisons. What is the difference between being an adult and being a child, and what does 'I am a child at heart' mean?

- Owls are 'both familiar and strange.'
- Their direct gaze is 'a little bit frightening' but the way they turn their heads round is 'very funny.'
- They are out at night hunting while we are tucked up in bed.
- They are both scary and safe.

Booklist

- Everything you want to know about Owls*, Dilys Breese. Midsummer Books [Non Fiction, Reference].
- Snowy Owls and Battered Bulbuls*, Richard Brigham. [Non Fiction, Advanced Readers at KS2]. This is about training owls for falconry, and the author writes about his experiences doing this.
- Introduction to British Owls*, Clive Britcher. British Bird of Prey Collection [Non Fiction] well illustrated.
- Old Hushwing*, Alan Brown. Collins Picture Lions [KS1]. A good story to tell or read, with realistic illustrations. When builders come, Billy finds a new home for a barn owl.
- Hoot and Holler*, Alan Brown and Rimantas Rolia. Hutchinson [Picture book, 4–6 years]. Two owls lost in the Great Wood learn to express their true feelings for each other. Interesting use of language, effective illustrations indicating a bird's-eye view.
- Moonlit Owl*. English Language Reader, Cambridge University Press.
- Owl Takes Charge* and *Percy's Friend the Owl*, Nick Butterworth. Collins [KS2]. These books, and many others you can find, use an owl as one of the characters in a story. These are centred on a park.
- Lazy Ozzie*. Coleman Magi [KS1].
- Fly by Night*. Crebbin Walker Books [KS2].
- Owl in the Office*, Lucy Daniels. Hodders Children's Books [KS2]. This is about abandoned owls and animal sanctuaries.
- Owl in the House*, Evans Tiptree [KS2].
- The Frightened Little Owl*, Mark Esra. Magi Publications [KS2].
- Owls*, Keith Graham. C Baxter Photography [Non Fiction, KS2/Reference]. An illustrated book which covers the four native owls in Britain: the tawny, barn, long-eared and short-eared, as well as two introduced varieties, the little owl and the snowy owl.
- Sound Guide to Owls*, Prof. Claus Konig. C. Helm. This is a reference book plus CD for owl sounds, very specialised but if there is one in a library near you it could be very useful.
- Owlsight* and *Owlknight*, Mercedes Lackey. Millennium Books [Advanced readers. Adventure/fantasy which includes an owl].
- Owl at School*, Claire Llewellyn. Cambridge University Press [Non Fiction KS1]. Child's account of a day when a birds-of-prey team visit a school and teach the children about an eagle owl. One of the English Language Reader Series.
- Owl at Home*, Arnold Lobel [KS2].
- Owls*, Chris Mead. Whittet Books [KS2/Reference]. A very useful text as it looks into the history of owls' relationship with humans and conveys a good deal of

information in an interesting fashion. Illustrations are drawn and these offer a contrasting view to photographs which you could show to your pupils.

Owl Tree, Jenny Nimmo. Walker Books [KS2]. Only indirectly about owls.

Owl Light, Maggie Pearson. Hodder Children's Books [Fiction KS2]. This is not focused on owls but does include one. It is really about two children who move into the country and become involved in rescuing badgers. It does of course help to illustrate the concept of 'owl light', or dusk.

The Really Useful Owl Guide, Jemima Parry-Jones. Kingdom Books, Havant. This is a reference book about keeping owls in captivity.

Population Trends in British Barn Owls, Tyto Alba, Tawny Owls, Strix Aluci in Relation to Environment Change, S.M. Percival. British Trust for Ornithology. Very much a book for reference but useful if you wish to take your project further.

Earnest Owl Starts a School, Jane Pilgrim. Brockhampton Press [KS1]. One of the Blackberry Farm Series.

An Adventure with Ozzy Owl, Maurice Pledger. Templar Books [Storybook KS1].

Animal Lives: Barn Owl, Sally Tagholm. Kingfisher Books [KS2]. A year in the life of an owl, good illustrations.

Owl who was afraid of the Dark, Jill Tomlinson. Tiptree [KS2]. Popular classroom reader, with several incidents in which the owl tries to become used to the dark. Has a very matter-of-fact approach to catching prey.

Owl. Collins Educational Series, Collins Pathways [Non-Fiction KS2].

Owls, Connie Toops. Airline [KS2].

Barn Owls and their Prey, Ian Taylor. Cambridge University Press [Non-Fiction Reference KS2]. Barn Owls have lived in close proximity to farms ever since settlements provided spaces for them in which to live and spaces in which they could hunt. Some good illustrations. Useful if you are discussing the environment too.

Project Barn Owl, M.P. Toms. British Trust for Ornithology. [Reference]. An evaluation of the monitoring programme concerning owls.

Owl Cry, Van Der Beek. Hippo [KS2].

Owl Babies, Martin Waddell. Walker Books [Storybook KS1].

Owl and the Woodpecker, Brian Wildsmith. Oxford University Press Early Years [Picture Book].

Sequencing a Narrative – KS1 and KS2

An Adventure with Ozzy Owl is a pleasure for young children and has a familiar story line, where a young creature sets out to find a friend and on the way finds a great many, in this case a duck, dormouse, opossum, otter, rabbit and eagle before he finds a crowd of owls. It is a pop-up book and the creatures pop up in turn as Ozzy meets them. The story is an excellent one with which to illus-

trate sequencing in narratives with older children. They can see each event clearly connected with a new animal or bird and the climax comes with the crowd of owls at the end of the story. They can plot the storyline very easily and then move on to longer and more complex narratives.

KS2 children can devise their own pop-ups electronically, using hypertext links to attach 'hotspots', so that when Ozzy clicks on one space a new screen full of owls 'pops' up. These owls could be scanned from drawings or painted via a paint package.

Electronic texts

One of the most useful items for schools to build up is a collection of electronic texts which can be used for various literacy objectives. This was one of the findings to come out of the ICT project in New-castle as organised by David Moseley, Steve Higgins and their research team (1999) and written about in *Ways Forward with ICT*. In one example a teacher commented on how useful 'Bland texts' had been, texts where the language is very simple and children can change the text. They could add words or change them, perhaps choose different verbs and use additional adverbs and adjectives or concentrate on just one of these changes. These texts can be used by children individually or in pairs or discussed in a whole class/large group presentation. Once you have a suitable text it can be used in any wordprocessor, with or without speech facilities, or in presentations using projector or interactive whiteboard. I suggest one text you may like to use but you could easily create further texts and keep a bank of them. In this case you need to decide beforehand which owl you are going to write about.

Bland text

The owl flew down from the trees in the wood. It was a owl, its feathers were and its eyes were the colour of It flew over the fields. It was hunting. It called out and another owl called back. It was night time, but there was a moon. Small animals were running about. The owl saw one of them. It flew down and caught the small animal.

Promoting discussion about language use

Reasons for owls talking (KS2)

- One male owl hoots to find a female partner. It also calls out to let other owls know where it is

and where it believes it owns the land, its home area or territory.

- The father owl coming back to the nest with food calls out to let its mate know it is coming, as otherwise she might attack him as a possible enemy.
- Baby owls make noises to let their parents know they are there, that they are hungry, that they are owls (as otherwise the parent owls might eat them!)
- Half-grown owls who have left the nest but are still partly fed by their parents, call out to let their parents know where they are.
- Some owls have hunting cries, loud, quick calls to make small animals jump in fear so that the owl has a chance to note where the animal is.

Listen to the owl calls on this CD (or on websites e.g. <http://owlpages.com>) and decide which calls the owls might be making.

Write down words for what the owls might be saying for each of the reasons above.

Owls by Chris Mead uses cartoons very effectively as well as drawings; pupils could use pictures of owls or ones they have drawn and write the words in as speech bubbles. If you place an owl illustration (picture or drawing) into a word processing program, you can print these out where necessary or the children can type in the words to accompany the picture. Or you can use the writing or text tool in a paint package to write the words in a speech bubble.



For example, using *Kidpix* or other animation software, these pictures can be linked together so that you do get a series of comments. Using words in this way is very direct and pupils have a chance to look closely at speech.

KS1 *Hoot and Holler* as the name suggests is about two owls calling to each other. It is a story book and the illustrations reveal something of what

the world looks like from a bird's eye view. We look down on the trees beneath, the animals' eyes are always bright and easily distinguishable in their faces, parts of the view can be distorted by nearness and so on. Children and teacher can discuss the language used in the text, draw up a list of as many as possible of the words we use for the sounds we make with our voices, from whispering to talking to shouting. You can also do this for birds, e.g. chirp.

Discussion about the reasons for animal and bird noises can promote discussion about human talk. A similar series of pictures can produce a conversation; KS1 children can cope with this quite easily and older children can deal with this in more sophisticated ways.

Names (KS2)

Find out the owls' scientific names (p. 118 in Chris Mead's reference book) and also the names used by people for owls in different parts of the British Isles. For example, the name Hushwing is another name for a barn owl and Alan Brown so liked the name that he used it as the title for his book. It is a very effective name, if you think of it, as the owls' wings have evolved so that they can fly very quietly. 'Screech owl' is a name that can be used for at least two kinds of owl and obviously applies to another feature common to owls. It would be useful to collect the names of owls in other languages, if any children have access to them, e.g. Welsh, Gaelic, Urdu, French, etc. Owls exist across many continents though they may have evolved to look different from each other. Children could see if the sounds or meanings of the names relate to the appearance or sound of owls. You can discuss why we have Latin names for species and how useful these are.

Owlmails

Children can devise emails to send to characters in each of the Harry Potter books. If you as the teacher are prepared to answer these, you can set up tremendous dialogues. Teachers have used such mailings very effectively with other books also, or you could ask your pupils to write some of the emails as characters, this can often give pupils a different point of view of an event.

A useful 'citizenship' discussion could arise, linking some kinds of owlmails with text messages from mobile phones. For example, Ron's mother sends him a very loud, unpleasant message which everyone can hear. Do pupils think this a good idea? Is there any way of preventing people from sending untrue insults?

How do we think of owls?

Different writers give us different views. What is clear, however, is that owls have some kind of fascination for us. Alan Brown has given us his view, Chris Mead quotes from the bible (e.g. Psalm 102) where the owl is seen in desolate places and also *Macbeth* where the owl is linked ominously with death. Owl, in *Winnie-the-Pooh* books, is considered very wise (a traditional view of owls) by the other characters in the books although he can't spell his own name correctly. Edward Lear gives us a nonsense character in 'The Owl and the Pussycat', Jill Tomlinson uses a mixture of factual features, e.g. the diet of small animals that owls usually eat, with the fantasy idea that owls speak English to each other, to friendly animals and to humans. Her story, *The Owl who was afraid of the Dark*, describes a very human predicament, fear of the dark, in terms of a young owl. Liz Cashdan (poem below) and non-fiction writers give us realistic views of owls as creatures in their own right. J.K.Rowling has created a new view: owls delivering post. I am sure there are many other versions you and your pupils can find. Children can create short anthologies of 'owl extracts' which indicate different views of owls and write (or speak) short descriptions of what they think of owls. This topic allows children to express their opinions of representations of animals and birds in a range of writing (KS2).

Owls feature in the Harry Potter books and as the books are of course very popular currently then that is very useful as a starting point. The owls are fantasy creatures which cross the boundaries between the ordinary human and the magic human worlds. There are numerous mentions of owls in the four books so far published, though their presence differs widely from book to book. In addition, the film has made their presence very effectively visual. The actual detail in the books is not genuinely realistic (as close study by your pupils will show) though close enough for us to consider it so when concentrating on the narrative. The magic quality becomes particularly obvious once Harry starts sending messages to Sirius. The owls find Sirius wherever he is, although he manages to escape all pursuers. (We don't know why the various authorities fail to send owls after him but perhaps there's another reason for that. Perhaps owlmail will turn out to be even more amazing than we've thought so far.) J.K.Rowling has used the fantasy element to give us some very imaginative scenes, for instance the shop where the owls and other magical creatures are kept in Diagon Alley (Book 1), the post office where there are 300 owls hooting softly and waiting to be sent (presumably) on journeys (Book 3), and the owlery where hundreds of owls live at the school (Book 4).

Pupils can:

- write notes as to where any owls occur and what they do
- indicate in a table which elements are fantastical and which could be realistic.

Poetry

KS1 and KS2

Observation is one of the most useful skills we can help children learn in terms of their writing. Ask the children to look at pictures in books, for example in *Introduction to British Owls* and other reference books and on websites. These are often photographs of extremely high calibre. The illustrations in Chris Mead's book are drawn by an artist and it is interesting to see how both methods are very effective but in different ways. If you visit a place where owls live or are kept, then you may observe them in the flesh. The children can write down what they notice as notes first and then with very few changes, as a poem. This often has the effect of encouraging short, sharp succinct writing.

Children can use a framework already put in place, for example:

I can see

 I can see.....

 I can see

They can add as many lines as they wish between the lines beginning 'I can see'.

Owl shapes: draw the outline of the owl so that the poem fits the shape.

Choose the first letters of any owl's name and use those for the initial letter of a word and line, e.g. the first line could be something like 'Brilliant eyes in the dark'. Children can first write down all the points they wish to put in the poem and then select appropriate words. Once, when I suggested this to a group of teachers they became extremely enthusiastic, so much so that it provided great interaction between school and homes, as parents wrote back with their poems created in a similar fashion. This resulted in several anthologies!

Brilliant eyes
 A
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 W
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KS 2

This poem is about an owl named Lady, who has been trained to hunt for small creatures and bring them back as falcons do. You can hear that the poet, Liz Cashdan, didn't like to see the owl kept like this.

Lady

Real feathers, this is falconer's stuff
 no taxidermist here. Poor owl
 waiting on her sawn-off log
 jangling her jesses, eyeing us all.
 Pebbles, brickwork, bark
 the colour of her own captivity.
 When they let her fly, she keeps
 so close I look for the kite strings.

Liz Cashdan

Liz is happy for you to use this poem. You may like to use it as a shared text, commenting on the effect of her words. For example, why does it matter that the owl is on a sawn off log? (At this point, you may wish to have the photograph of 'Lady' to show the children.) Owls in captivity often just sit and look at us, if they have their eyes open at all. There is the use of very special words such as jesses and taxidermist and what seems a very ordinary comparison with a kite, ordinary in the sense that we all know what a kite is like. There are several books in the booklist which refer to owls in captivity, so pupils could look at the issue of owls in captivity.

Liz Cashdan, like many other writers, works in schools. She belongs to NAWE, the National Association of Writers in Education and she can be contacted through them: L.Cashdan@nawe.co.uk If you wish to contact NAWE itself, the address is paul@nawe.co.uk.



Editor's note

An owl also figures in 'Where Do Hedgehogs Go?', one of the Big Books on the MAPE website (www.mape.org.uk). This story is also available in book form from MAPE – price £5.00.