



Teachers' Notes  
Written by Dr Pam Macintyre

## *The Boy and the Toy* by Sonya Hartnett and Lucia Masciullo

### INVITATION INTO THE TEXT

'Reading' the cover: A smiling boy places a hand gently onto the head of a cheerful looking toy. Behind them at the end of a pier is a strange 'house'. The sky is blue, the sand golden. A man in a flying boat is moving towards the boy and the toy, observing them closely through his telescope. Is his expression alarm or delight? This ambiguity sets the tone of a story in which young readers are invited to make their own meanings, looking at the clues and filling the gaps.

### SYNOPSIS

A boy lives with his father at the end of a pier, in a house-cum-lighthouse that resembles a static Howl's Moving Castle. Before his father departs on a journey, he makes the boy the '*best toy in the world*'. The toy is to keep the boy company while his father is away. At first all proceeds happily, and the boy enjoys his clever toy, which does whatever he asks it. But then it becomes apparent that the toy is perhaps smarter than the boy and competition enters their relationship. The toy wants to play all the time, and when the boy ignores it, it becomes destructive in the manner of a thwarted, jealous child. The boy devises a plan to deceive the toy, preserve his independence and seek help from his father. When the father returns he examines the toy and discovers something essential is missing. He presents his son with a true friend.

This simple tale is delightfully ambiguous and open for young readers to explore their own interpretations. Is the boy self-absorbed and only likes the toy when it does what he wants and in the way he wants? Or is the toy too demanding, selfish and naughty? Readers will decide with whom they most identify, and whether the boy is a true friend.

## THEMES

- Loving and being lovable
- Loneliness
- Compromise
- Friendship
- Compassion
- Selfishness/Unselfishness

## STYLE

- The story is told in simple prose and dialogue allowing space for the illustrations to supply the tone and mood of the story. And also space for the young reader to interpret events.
- Nevertheless, there is rich vocabulary to enjoy, such as – somersault, fidget, banister, wistful, wily, horizon.
- Not everything is spelled out for the reader. There are also moments in the story for predictions: pause at the page in which *'the toy was...sparkling like a star'* (also a chance to appreciate the simile). What is going to be on the next page? What is strange about the toy?
- Pause again on the following spread and predict what the boy's plan might be. Remember that it has to be *'wily'*.

## VISUAL NARRATIVE

- The illustrations add whimsy and magic to the story of the boy and his toy and the exciting place they live on the edge of the beach.
- The illustrator has added much to the story. Find examples of this interpretation, where we wouldn't know from the words alone, what had happened, such as *'The toy was busy that night too'*.
- Spend time looking closely at the choice of colour and how it affects the mood of the story.
- Also look at the use of white space and full colour pages and how they contribute to the meaning of the narrative.
- There is also powerful use of perspective to signify relationships, mood and story elements.
- Looking closely at each spread will produce delight and discovery. For instance, invite speculation about the drawings that the boy does and puts on his wall. They are not mentioned in the story. How many are there? Was the boy trying to give a message to his father all along? Also talk about the spread with the father and son coming down the spiral staircase. What is the effect of this on the reader – creating anticipation, for example?
- Would you like to live in the boy's house? Make a list of all the things you like about the house from looking closely at the illustrations.
- Would you like to live at the end of a pier at a lonely beach? Why do you think the illustrator chose this location?
- How does the illustrator show us what the toy is thinking? For instance on the page where the boy is making the harder puzzle.

- Look closely at the inside front endpapers and talk about what they suggest about how the boy is feeling. How do we know – open landscape, footprints, his expression etc.
- Then compare with the final endpapers. What information do they give us that is not told in the story. Do readers feel differently about the story now they have seen the endpapers?

## **EXPLORING RESPONSE**

- Why does the toy sleep on the floor?
- Do you think it would rather sleep on the bed with the boy?
- Who decided it had to sleep on the floor?
- Why does the toy throw out the puzzle, tear out the pages of the book, and throw out the toys?
- If the toy is clever, why doesn't it see that the replica of the boy is just that, rather than the real boy? What does this suggest about the 'character' of the toy?
- What was missing from the toy?
- Do you think the boy, the dog and the toy will ever be friends together?
- When the father says to his son that the toy can't ever be a good friend to him, did you feel sad for the toy? Why or why not?
- Why is a dog a true friend? Will it do what the boy wants?
- Who do you like best in the story – the toy or the boy? Give reasons.
- Who do you feel most sympathy for – the toy or the boy? Give reasons.

## **READ AS A FABLE**

- Talk about the idea that the boy and the toy have no names. Explore the characteristics and purposes of fables.
- Discuss reasons for the author not giving names to the characters. Did she intend the story to be a fable, or are there other reasons for not naming the characters? How different would the story be if the boy were Tom for example?
- Name the boy, name the toy, name the dog, name the country in which they live. Then read the story with the names instead of the boy and the toy, and see how particular names change the feeling and power of the story.
- Have the class write morals for the story and discuss whose are the best and why.

## **WRITTEN RESPONSES**

- In the written text, we only get the boy's point of view because the toy doesn't speak, although his thoughts are given to us in images.
- Using sticky notes have the students put in what the toy is thinking or feeling in thought balloons. Read various versions to the class. Talk about the different interpretations of the story that are evident from this.
- Write the letter from the boy to the father.

- Write a letter the toy could have written to the boy to explain what had been happening from its perspective.
- Write about who or what would be your ideal best friend.

## **ARTISTIC REPOSES**

- Draw or make a model of your ideal house.
- Design your best toy in the world. What does it look like, what does it do? Does it have a personality? Favourite things it likes to do?
- Draw or design your ideal friend.

### **Related Reading**

*Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak

You might like to read to the class Russell Hoban's marvellous *The Mouse and his Child* or E B White's *Charlotte's Web* also about friendship.