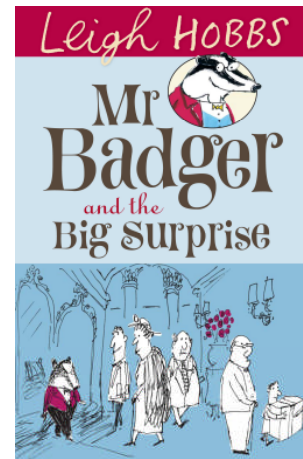


CLASSROOM SUGGESTIONS: MR BADGER AND THE BIG SURPRISE

TITLE: *Mr Badger & the Big Surprise*
AUTHOR: Leigh Hobbs
PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin
PRICE: \$13.99
ISBN: 9781742374178
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AUDIENCE: 6-11
READER: Leonie Jordan, Allen & Unwin



SYNOPSIS

Meet Mr Badger and discover the world of the Boubles Grand Hotel!

Mr Badger is in charge of special events at a splendid old London hotel where his father and grandfather have worked before him. He and his faithful assistant, Miss Pims, have been asked to organise the seventh birthday party of Miss Sylvia Smothers-Carruthers, an over-indulged and extremely fussy primadonna.

A lavish feast has been prepared, an orchestra assembled and a cloud of balloons hung in the hotel lobby. However, all does not go as planned at the party, and it quickly becomes clear that Miss Sylvia is sorely lacking in manners, throwing tantrums, ripping open her presents and wrestling guests during musical chairs! Will Mr Badger be able to maintain the quiet order for which the Boubles Hotel is renowned? And what is the secret he's keeping?

This is the first book in a delightful new series about Mr Badger and his London life. The second, *Mr Badger and the Missing Ape* is also available now, while two other titles have been scheduled for release next year.

AUTHOR STYLE

The *Mr Badger* books have a gentle charm and whimsy reminiscent of *Paddington Bear* or *Wind in the Willows*. They have a quintessentially English feel which evokes a sense of nostalgia or innocence and is uniquely connected to the author's fondness for England, and for London life in particular. A quiet sense of history pervades the stories, adding to the strong sense of place.

The language used is simple, vivid, and imbued with subtle humour. Direct address is employed to both draw the reader into the world of the story and suggest its immediacy: 'Mr Badger lives in Mayfair. However, if you ever find yourself in this part of central London, I wouldn't bother searching for Mr Badger's house.'

The narrative is a unique blend of action and reflection, combining humorous events with a sense of thoughtfulness, as Mr Badger reminisces about his grandfather and father who

worked at the hotel before him. There is also a pleasing contrast between the grand and lofty Boubles Hotel and Mr Badger's own humble cottage marked by its quiet domesticity.

As is usual in Hobbs' work, text and artwork not only complement, but extend each other:

'...perhaps what kids love about my characters is that they are funny, but more likely I think they respond to the fact that there are two voices. There is the voice of the text and the voice of the pictures. The text is the adult's voice and the pictures are the child's voice.' – Leigh Hobbs

The illustrations reflect Hobbs' distinctive bold, scribbled style and are reminiscent of Quentin Blake. Hobbs is also particularly skilled at reinforcing character through his illustrations; for instance, capturing Mr Badger's modest, unassuming personality – as well as his dapperness.

'Few illustrators can capture with such precision the emotions and personality of a character, allowing the artwork to say much more than the brief wry text.'
– Sonya Hartnett

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Hobbs cites his fascination with English history as being a constant influence in his life. He is particularly attached to London, which he has visited numerous times throughout his life, returning to old sites and discovering new ones. In a recent interview for the 'Write Away' website he states:

'I've felt a connection with England since I was a little boy. I was obsessed with visiting London because my passions have always been art and history, especially English history. I first came to London when I was twenty three and I'm fifty three today and this is my sixteenth visit. .

...

'But my love for London is more than skin deep. Peter Ackroyd put his finger on it in *London: The Biography*, in which he talks about certain people having a connection with the ghosts of London. That's true for me and there are special spots that I'm particularly drawn to like the steps of St Martin-in-the-Field. Yes, my passion for London does relate to my books... An English sensibility runs through them and I resisted any sort of Americanisation. I even wanted 'the look' or design to be similar to the taste of a 1950's Puffin: a classic English feel. And I think of my sense of humour as being English.'

Hobbs describes the English cartoonist, Ronald Searle, as his biggest inspiration in becoming a writer and illustrator:

'I think he is one of the greatest graphic draughtsmen of the past hundred years: the master. I really appreciate his humour, which isn't crude; a lot of it came from his experience as a prisoner of war. I felt so influenced by him when I was in my twenties that I put all of his books away, out of sight. Fifteen years later I brought them out and got the same emotional response from the work. That's when we corresponded.... Another strong influence is Ludwig Bemelmans who did the *Madeline* books.'

AUTHOR BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Leigh Hobbs was born in Melbourne, grew up in Bairnsdale and has lived and worked in Sydney, Sale and London. He is an artist who works across a wide range of mediums, as

well as writing and illustrating his children's books. Many of his cartoons have appeared in the *Melbourne Age* newspaper.

He is best-known for his children's books featuring his characters Old Tom, Horrible Harriet, Fiona the Pig and Mr Chicken, as well as the Freaks and their teachers in *4F for Freaks* and *Freaks Ahoy*. Old Tom has been adapted into an extremely popular TV series screened in both Australia and Europe. Leigh has three times been shortlisted for the CBCA Picture Book of the Year Award (for *Mr Chicken Goes to Paris*, *Horrible Harriet* and *Old Tom's Holiday*) and his books have won every major children's choice award in Australia.

Further information can be found at the author's website: <http://www.leighhobbs.com.au/>

EDUCATIONAL APPLICABILITY

Mr Badger and the Big Surprise has relevance to English, SOSE/HSIE, Art/Design, as well as practical cooking/hospitality units. Key themes in the book include friendship, birthdays, family, secrets, humour and London.

Suggestions for classroom application and discussion:

1. Before reading the book, discuss what the class knows about London. Locate it on a map of the world. Use the internet or library to research landmarks, customs etc.
2. Read chapter 2, 'The Walk to Work'. Create a map tracing Mr Badger's route to work, showing all the places he passes.
3. Design a brochure to advertise the Boubles Grand Hotel. What services and facilities might it offer? Remember to include pictures.
4. Miss Sylvia Smothers-Carruthers displays very bad manners at her birthday party. What are some of the impolite things she does? Make a list of behaviours considered 'good manners' and 'bad manners' in our society today.
5. Numeracy activity: look at pages 20-21 then make a chart of all the food prepared for the party. Find out how many guests are attending (p21) then calculate how much food each guest will have to eat.
6. Write a story about the birthday party from the perspective of Miss Sylvia Smothers-Carruthers. How would her version of events differ from Mr Badger's?
7. Imagine you were a guest staying at the Boubles Grand Hotel in London. Write a letter describing your experiences at the Hotel. What London landmarks have you seen? Perhaps you attended Miss Sylvia Smothers-Carruthers party!
8. Mr Badger works in the same hotel that his father and grandfather did, and has many happy memories associated with it. What are some of the special things your own family shares? Interview a parent or relative then draw a family tree showing your ancestors.
9. What is 'the big surprise' alluded to in the title? What is Mr Badger's 'secret' and why do you think he chooses to keep it to himself?
10. Mr Badger manages special events at the hotel. Get an idea of what it is like to do his job by organising a party for your teacher, or perhaps another class! Design invitations, make decorations, arrange games/activities and decide upon a menu. You may need to create a special team to delegate tasks.