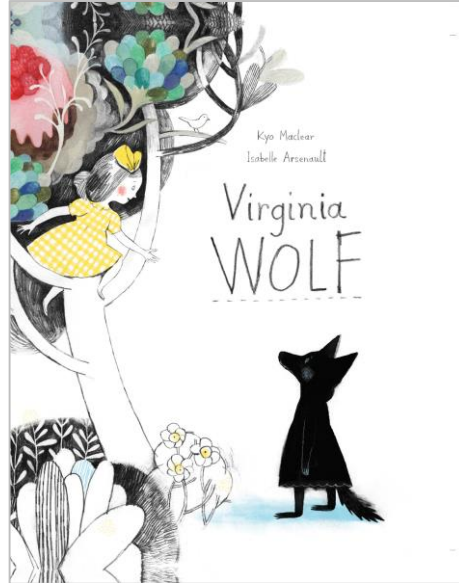




BOOK ISLAND



Teaching Notes

Virginia Wolf

by Kyo Maclear

illustrated by Isabelle Arsenault

Synopsis

Virginia Wolf explores themes of sisterly love, compassion, depression and joy. Virginia wakes up feeling very gloomy. Her mood disturbs the people and places around her, turning their world upside down, until her sister Vanessa uses her talent as a painter to bring joy back into Virginia's life.



Isabelle Arsenault's colour palettes and illustrations convey well Virginia's emotions and mood. Their gradual transformation into colour and life portray the character's awakening to happiness.

This book will appeal to 5–8 year-olds. The illustrative content has a strong feminine appeal and teacher mediation will be needed to relate the themes to the experiences of boys.

The names of the characters allude to the life stories of the writer, Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) and her sister, Vanessa Bell, the painter (1879–1961). Even their brother, Thoby, gets a mention in the text, as does the Bloomsbury Group of writers, artists and intellectuals with whom the sisters were associated. These references are unlikely to be meaningful to primary school students so we suggest that these associations be shared with adult readers.

The Author and Illustrator

Kyo Maclear was born in England in 1970 of English and Japanese parents and moved to Canada at the age of four. Kyo has written a number of successful picture books for children and she is an acclaimed novelist and essayist.

Isabelle Arsenault is an award-winning Canadian illustrator who lives in Montreal. Her work is internationally recognised and her picture books have twice been named as *New York Times* Best Illustrated Books of the Year.

Themes

Virginia Wolf is a story that introduces readers to the concepts of compassion and kindness. It acknowledges that bad or painful moods may descend on us and illustrates how other people's care and thoughtfulness can help us get through bad times.

Activities

Responding to the text

As an introductory activity, read the story aloud to the class or group, pausing to allow students time to "read" the illustrations carefully. Read the text without discussion, giving students the space to process the story in their own ways before inviting comments.



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Identifying feelings

Revisit the text

During a second reading, focus on the text. Read to the end of page 13 (“LEAVE ME ALONE.”) and have the students respond to Virginia’s mood.

Ask: How does Virginia feel? How do we know that’s how she feels?

List the emotions the students identify on a whiteboard or poster. When the list is complete, write a sentence starter on the whiteboard.

I know that Virginia feels ...

Have the students choose one feeling and complete the sentence by identifying where the feeling is shown in the story. They can do this in writing or orally.

I know that Virginia feels angry because she growled at Vanessa.

I know that Virginia feels really grumpy because she yelled at the bird.

Link to the students’ experiences

Have the students think, pair, share their understandings about their moods. They can do this in groups of two to four.

List these questions for discussion and allocate five minutes for the groups to discuss each question. The suggestions in square brackets may be used as prompts for those who are reticent.

- *What triggers a bad mood for you?* [Tiredness, hunger, not getting own way, being told off]
- *Do you know any ways you can get out of a bad mood?* [Taking time out, listening to music, going for a walk, reading a book]
- *Can you practise ways to stop feeling gloomy?* [Suggest they each commit to trying one of the ways a group member says works for them.]
- *How can we help our family members or friends to cheer up when they are feeling down?* [Being kind, giving a hug, sharing a treat, playing with them]

Play That Reminds Me



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Have the groups arrange themselves into circles to play a game of *That Reminds Me*. Model how the game is played by telling a brief story of an experience you have had. Start your

story with “That reminds me ...” and go on to tell a one-sentence story about when you were once in a blue mood.

That reminds me of when my brother threw my jandals into the pool and I yelled at him to go and find another family.

That reminds me of when Mum wouldn't let me stay over at Ben's so I didn't talk to her all afternoon.

Prompt each group member to share a story about a time when they had painful or sad feelings.

Enjoy the language

Kyo Maclear enjoys playing with words throughout this story.

Have the students discuss why Maclear has the gloomy Virginia feeling “wolfish”.

Ask: *What do you think “wolfish” means?*

Have them examine the text to locate words and phrases that support the notion of Virginia being wolfish.

[“she growled”, “she moaned”, “she wolfed them all down”, “she was too busy howling at the moon”.]

By the end of the story, Virginia is no longer “wolfish”. In fact on page 29, she is “looking at bit sheepish”.

Ask: *“Why might “sheepish” be the opposite of “wolfish”?*

Have the students locate other examples of the author's use of opposites to show the difference between happy and sad feelings.

[sank/lifted, up/down, bright/dim, glad/gloom]



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Responding to the illustrations

Reread the story aloud, pausing to discuss the illustrations on each double page. Prompt the students to discuss the mood invoked by the limited colour palette Arsenault uses on the first six spreads. In the opening illustration Virginia is introduced as a very black wolf

in a grey room. Have the students observe how the blackness of the wolf is accentuated by the white and pale blue hues on the bedding, just as the greyness of the room is accentuated by swatches of red, blue and white in the illustration. Students can also notice how the framed picture and stuffed toys, along with the broken clock and damaged plant, tell of the despair that Virginia is facing.

Discuss how the illustrator has rendered Virginia's expressions in large font and how this gives her words more power to hurt her sister and her friends.

The illustrations on pages 10–11 can be read as a depiction of gloom where the world of the characters is turned upside down. Contrast this with the illustration on pages 26–27. Notice how these illustrations are identical and the artist has cleverly flipped the image and changed the dour, grey background to a sunny yellow to indicate that the world had righted itself again.

Have the students observe how the grey background lightens and becomes white as Vanessa and Virginia talk, before blooming into the bright colours of joy.

Create a happy place

Have the students choose an area of the classroom or school where they can paint a happy place like that created by Vanessa and Virginia. This could be a time-out space, a cubicle created from a large cardboard container or even a corner of a cloakroom.

If they can paint directly on to the surface of the walls, divide the surface into a number of evenly-sized areas and allocate one area to each student. The edges of the areas can be wavy or jagged rather than straight. Alternatively cut A3-sized paper or card in two diagonally, creating wavy edges on the cut sides. Pair the students so that they can remember which



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two pieces of card match together when they attach them to the wall surfaces after completing their art work.

The students can paint happy images on their card, using water colours. They can find suggestions for images in the text of the story, for example, “a smudgy sailboat”, “a flying llama”, “a floating castle”. Restrict the colour palette of the water paints available to a limited range of bright pastels to ensure that the final art work has a cohesive effect.

When the art work is finished, the matched cards can be used to cover the walls of the chosen “happy place.” Cut the painted card to cover corners or awkward spaces.