

Just Imagine Book Guide

Greenling

Written & Illustrated by Levi Pinfold



Just Imagine...

About the Author



Levi Pinfold

Levi Pinfold studied illustration at the University College Falmouth where he developed his distinctive stylised realism. Since graduating in 2006 he has become well known for his detailed paintings and charming storytelling style. He likes to paint a lot of detail using watercolours, gouache and egg tempera.

Levi grew up on a diet of Roald Dahl and Maurice Sendak and he's influenced by a variety of artists ranging from Breugel and The Romantics to Alan Lee and Dave McKean. He loves clocks, writing stories and playing the banjo when no one else is looking.

About the Book

Mr Barleycorn picks a green baby growing in his garden, letting loose the incredible power of nature. When courgettes flower in the kitchen and carrots sprout out of their television, his wife tells Mr Barleycorn that the Greenling has to go. But the bounty and beauty of nature has a strange power – the power to bring a whole community together.

Levi Pinfold's stylised realistic and detailed paintings provide lots of opportunities for discussion. Set in Australia in the mid twentieth century, the atmosphere evokes the frontier stories of the American mid west. Like David Grant's iconic painting, *American Gothic*, Pinfold's characters, a farmer and his wife, (the Barleycorns) are depicted against the backdrop of their outback farmhouse, inviting connections with Grant's painting and the many meanings that have been attributed to it.

The illustrations are a mix of full colour paintings which bled to the edge of the page and double spreads, interspersed with vignettes which resemble religious polyptychs, like the one shown below. These smaller images flanking the main picture focus on emotions and details, drawing attention to hands and faces.





The story is pregnant with allusions to fertility myths. The name ‘Barleycorn’ references the old ballad, John Barleycorn, which tells the story of the sowing, cultivating and harvesting cycle of barley throughout the year. The ground is ploughed, seeds are sown, and the plant grows until ready for harvest. It is then cut with scythes, and tied into sheaves, which are flayed to remove the grain.

The cover image with the close-up of Greenling surrounded by an abundance of vegetation reminds us of the child Bacchus. This is reinforced by a carving of Bacchus adorned with grapes which hangs above the Barleycorns’ bed.

The horned helmet that Greenling wears is also reminiscent of images of The Green Man.

Greenling is a fable with a powerful environmental message. It invites the reader to ask, is ‘want’ the same as ‘need’? Where does happiness lie? On the surface the message is an obvious one, but look again and there is more to this story than meets the eye. Through dialogue and discussion, young readers can reflect on subtleties which underlie this enigmatic story.

The readers sympathies are aligned with Mr Barleycorn who adopts Greenling without question and responds to what the child needs. Mrs Barleycorn’s caution and mistrust seems to be unfeeling. But is she acting without reason?

And is Greenling entirely benign? Nature is amoral. It has neither good nor evil intent. The impact of nature on human beings is both negative and positive. ‘Barleycorn says, ‘He’s a Greenling. Who can say what they intend?’

Is it coincidence that he emerges from a lotus like flower. ‘What is this standing, where once stood a tree? The lotus emerges from murky water and Greenling’s plant is found in the outlet of a storm drain.

The lotus tree is mentioned in several mythologies. In Homer’s Odyssey the lotus tree bears a fruit which when eaten induces a pleasant drowsiness which makes the one who has eaten it forget about their friends and home (which the train passengers appear to do over the long summer). *‘They ate up the fruit of the Greenling, fruit much too good to be true.’*

The Lotus tree is given symbolic importance in some mythologies and is used to show the the divine overcoming the material world.

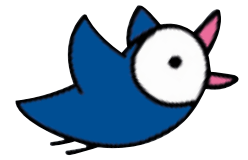
Other themes that emerge include:

- responding to outsiders
- nature and technology

Before Reading

Open the book at the title page. This shows a vast, largely unpopulated landscape. There’s a single farmhouse built next to a raised wooden railway. A two carriage train is travelling along the track towards the farmhouse. The land appears to be poorly tended. There isn’t much growing just stumpy grass. The land is poorly drained, and a road leading to the farmhouse is partially submerged, perhaps there has been a storm? The colours are in sepia tones and a watery unsaturated pink tint.

- Which do you think came first, the house or the railway? Why?
- Where do you think the train has come from? Where do you imagine it is going?
- What words can you use to describe how you feel when you look at this image?
- Who do you think lives in the house?



During reading

When Mrs Barleycorn asks where Greenling comes from, her husband answers, '*Where the wildflowers grow.*' She replies, '*It belongs to the wild then, and back to the land it should go.*'

Vocabulary enrichment: semantic mapping. 'Wild' is a word that has many different meanings which can affect how we interpret the responses of the characters and find meaning in the text.

- Working independently, set the children a timed challenge to write down as many words associated with the word 'wild' as they can.
- Gather the class and generate a list of words from their suggestions. If all the ideas are very similar add your own examples to prompt them to think more widely.
- Review the list and ask if any of the words go together. If necessary give an example e.g. savage, untamed, beast. Use dialogue to encourage the children to explain their reasons for grouping words together. After modelling some examples, have the children complete semantic maps in small groups.
- When they have completed the task the children can compare their maps with an automatically generated one using lexipedia.com. (Avoid taking a shortcut to Lexipedia as it is the process of creating the maps that deepens vocabulary knowledge).

When you have explored the different meanings of the word 'wild'. Ask the children which meanings seem to fit the story best. Does it change as you read on?

Wild and Tame: Greenling, wild animals and the Barleycorn's dog

- What animals can you find in the book? (As Greenling takes over, Australian wildlife takes up residence. the children may recognise some animals such as the possum, wombat, aardvark and kookabura

Look at the illustrations where the Barleycorn's dog is present.

- How does the dog react to Greenling?
- Does the dog react as you expect or does its reaction surprise you? Why?

The Language of Colour





- How do the colours in these two pictures make you feel?
- Use thought cloud sticky notes to write what you think Mrs Barleycorn is thinking. Share and explain why you think that.

Responding to outsiders

Discuss the response of the train passengers to Greenling, when they are unable to complete their journeys.

After reading

Language study

Find words that are used to describe Greenling e.g. baby, goblin, cuckoo, vegetable, Greenling.

- How do each of words reflect the attitude of the speaker?

What do these metaphors mean in the context of the story?

- *'taken to seed'*
- *'when summer has grown a beard'*

Bees

Bees are essential for growing crops and in part this fable is a hymn to the bee. There are several references to bees in both the text and illustrations. Ask the children if they can identify any language that might usually be used to describe bees:

- *We're already swimming in honey*
- *'What are you? A bee?! You're beginning to buzz like a drone.'*
- *The humming upon the lines*
- *A swarm of passengers bound for work*
- *The large close up of Greenling shows bees collecting pollen from his sprouting branches and also sitting on his hand*

Do we need technology?

Find the references to technology in the book. How do Mr and Mrs Barleycorn respond to the way Greenling overpowers technology?

- Cooking: *'How will we cook breakfast today?'* He says, *'Them melons look ripe'*
- Television: *'How will we watch telly tonight?'* He says, *'Just look at him grow.'*
- Transport *'Well there goes the shopping!'* He says, *'Depends what you need...'*
- Telephone: *'I'm calling for help to fix up your brain.'*

How would you feel if you couldn't use the technology in your house? Would you cope as well as Mr Barleycorn with the changes?

Prepare a set of 'yes' and 'no' cards. On a given signal have the pupils turn their cards. Discuss the reasons the children made their choices. encourage them to probe each other's responses. At the end of the session replay the 'yes' 'no' game. Has anyone changed their mind?



Does the story suggest that technology is a problem? Can it also be a solution? Notice the final spread, how has the landscape changed? (wind turbines, grain storage, the land seems to be less desolate, there's a single bird)

Making connections with other texts

- Shel Silverstein *The Giving Tree*
- John Marsden, Shaun Tan *The Rabbits*
- Nadia Wheatley, Donna Rawlins, *My Place*
- Jeannie Baker *Belonging*
- Emily Hughes *Wild*
- Armin Greder *The Island*

