

Teaching Notes



SYNOPSIS

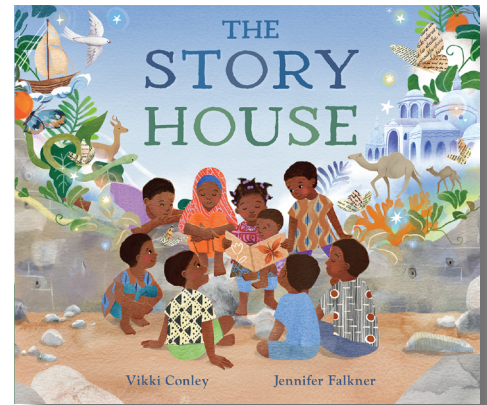
Lalee's world has no books, no teachers, no schools. But there are stories. The stories hush the rumbles that echo across the sand. The stories spark and shimmer, filling Lalee with possibility. And one story – hers – begins to unfold. A lyrical, heartfelt tribute to imagination, hope and the magic of books by multi-award-winning creators Vikki Conley and Jennifer Falkner.

THEMES

- Access and Inclusion – equitable access to stories, spaces, and opportunities for all children.
- Home and Place – the meaning of home, belonging, and connection to community and environment.
- Disaster, War, and Displacement – the impact of conflict and crisis on children and families.
- Imagination and Other Worlds – storytelling as a portal to hope, escape, and possibility.
- Diversity and Representation – valuing cultural, linguistic, and lived diversity.
- Family and Cross-Cultural Connections – relationships that bridge cultures and experiences.
- Growing Up and Resilience – emotional growth, empathy, and strength in challenging circumstances.
- Creativity and Play – the transformative power of creative expression in childhood.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vikki's multi-award-winning books whisk young readers away to other worlds through curiosity, playfulness and wonder. An intrepid traveller, nature lover and creative all-rounder, she has worked as a professional writer and photographer, with diverse communities in Africa, Asia and Australia for over 25 years. Vikki is the winner of the 2023 CBCA Book of the Year (*Where The Lyrebird Lives*) and has Honour and Notable books including *Amira's Suitcase*, *Where The River Runs Free* and *Little Puggle's Song*. Her title, *On The Way To School* was shortlisted for the 2023 Speech Pathology Australia Book of the Year. In search of incredible stories, Vikki has eaten goats' tongues with African chiefs, climbed inside Icelandic glaciers and entered war-torn countries. During her 10 years working for World Vision, she hand-delivered readers to children in Somalia who had never seen a book. Vikki's stories connect budding minds to the experiences of people around the globe, inviting them to discover the magic in both the extraordinary and the ordinary.



Written by
Vikki Conley

Illustrated by
Jennifer Falkner

Published by
New Frontier Publishing



ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Jennifer Falkner is a critically acclaimed illustrator and graphic designer based in Perth, Western Australia. Since graduating from Curtin University with a major in illustration. She has spent the last sixteen years of her career in art direction, textile design, brand development and illustration. Before returning to Perth in 2018, Jennifer lived and worked in Canberra, Bangkok, Jakarta and Singapore. Picture books she has illustrated include *Fairy Beach*, *The Cheeky Toddler Alphabet*, *Tardigrades: Nature's Toughest Survivor*, and *The Lucky Shack* which was a CBCA Notable Picture Book of the Year in 2023. Jennifer finds inspiration in the daily antics of her two boys, independent bookshops, her local museum, the cinema and the rich biodiversity of Australia's south west. Her favourite mediums are gouache, watercolour, ink, pencils and photoshop. She is represented by the Bright Agency.

EDUCATIONAL APPLICABILITY

The Story House is a lyrical, heartfelt tribute to imagination and hope in a war-torn country and celebrates a love for reading, books and libraries. *The Story House* is a springboard for exploring key concepts within the Australian Curriculum, particularly across English, HASS (Humanities and Social Sciences) and the General Capabilities of Intercultural Understanding and Ethical Understanding.

Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS)

- **Diverse Cultures and Lifestyles:** The story provides a relatable entry point for students to explore how people live in different places and how those environments influence daily life and culture.
- **Global Connections:** It facilitates discussions on the interconnectedness of people across the globe, focusing on shared human experiences despite geographical or circumstantial differences.
- **Displacement and Migration:** The narrative offers a gentle, age-appropriate way to examine the impact of conflict and crisis on families and the concept of 'home'.

English

- **Literary Devices and Tone:** Teachers can use the text to analyse how lyrical language and imagery are used to convey complex emotions like hope and resilience.
- **Responding to Literature:** Students can explore how the story uses the protagonist, Lalee, to evoke empathy and prompt reflections on the significance of literacy and access to education/books.

General Capabilities

- **Intercultural Understanding:** The book encourages students to value cultural diversity and understand the experiences of people around the globe.
- **Ethical Understanding:** The contrast between Lalee's lack of schools/books and the reader's own experience invites critical thinking about equitable access to stories and basic rights.
- **Personal and Social Capability:** The story's themes of growing up and resilience align with curriculum goals for developing empathy and emotional strength in challenging circumstances.

BOOK MOTIVATION by the author

During my 10 years working with the international aid agency World Vision, I met many children with extraordinary stories across Africa, Asia and remote Australia. In parts of Africa - that had endured decades of unrest – schools had been damaged by war and many teachers had not received training for years. In those war-scarred classrooms, parents taught children by sharing memories of their own school learnings. Hand-delivering readers to children who had never seen a book was the moment that inspired *The Story House*. I wrote *The Story House* to explore the many challenges our world presents for children. We all have different homes and places where we live, but for some children the basics are missing – a safe place to sleep, clean water and enough food to eat, teachers or even books. In countries like Australia, America, Canada, New Zealand and the UK, many of us are fortunate to have relatively safe communities, a roof over our heads and a school to attend. Yet in some low-resourced and unsettled regions of Africa and the Middle East, children may not even have a home or enough food to survive. One thing that connects us all, however, is the magic of storytelling. In Africa, one child told me, 'If I can get an education, I can become a leader and help bring peace to my country.' This story is for that child – and for all children without access to education – offering, in some small way, a voice for theirs.

WRITING STYLE by the author

The Story House is a lyrical, heartfelt narrative written in prose, with frequent use of figurative language and the 'show, don't tell' writing technique. When writing *The Story House*, I wanted the words to draw readers into Lalee's life so they could imagine her journey using all of their senses. To achieve this, I leaned heavily on 'show, don't tell', allowing readers to see, feel and sense the rumbles, dust and rubble of Lalee's broken, unsettled world. Carefully chosen adjectives such as wounded, scarred and thundering help create an evocative text that builds empathy and invites readers to pause and consider what each moment might feel like. I deliberately contrasted this language with joyful verbs such as pirouetted, leap and flutter, and used the symbolism of flight – butterflies and birds – to demonstrate the lift and magic Lalee experiences through stories. I also love using figurative language to further engage readers, helping children to truly 'see and feel' the story. Some sentences took time to refine, but I was delighted when they came together poetically – 'Colours flashed through the rubble that lay like a fallen mountain.' 'The words floated around her like a blanket of stars.' Inspired by real experiences and conversations, *The Story House* is a strong example of how writing from personal experience can lead to authentic and powerful storytelling. I always encourage students to draw on their own memories to inspire their writing. I aimed to craft an accessible text for children, parents and educators that would spark conversations about home, place, other worlds and diversity. The themes can be explored at many levels – from pre-school to middle primary and even secondary students. The language and imagery were carefully shaped to present the story sensitively, both for Lalee and for the reader.

ILLUSTRATION STYLE by the illustrator

Accepting the brief, I was conscious of having never lived in the region and it was important to me that Lalee and her community were represented respectfully. I conducted extensive research into the textiles, buildings, flora and fauna common to some of the countries where Vikki had worked alongside communities – Kenya, Ethiopia and Tanzania. Throughout this process, I was struck again and again by the beauty and diversity of East African textiles. Vikki did a wonderful job of writing in a 'show, don't tell' style, which left me with a great deal of creative freedom. During my research, I came across heartbreaking photographs from conflicts around the world – images of bullet-scarred classrooms, sparse refugee camps and scorched earth – which informed my depiction of Lalee's environment. Against this harsh backdrop, I used the bright colours of the characters' clothing to represent their creativity, spirit and resilience. These vibrant colours also created a strong contrast with the concrete rubble, the shifting sky and the red desert earth. I chose white for the story house to help distinguish it from the surrounding brick and mud buildings, and I gave it a symbolic green door inspired by reference photos. I used watercolour textures to deepen the emotional response of the reader, and lighting to express courage and hope. Local animals appear as quiet background actors, symbolising the steady continuity of life.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Comparison: How does Lalee's school day compare to yours? What things are the same, and what are different?
2. The Power of Story: Lalee's world has no books, but it has stories. Why do you think stories are so important to her?
3. Visual Literacy: Look at how the illustrator uses colour and light. How does the illustration change when Lalee is using her imagination? How does the language change too?



DISCUSSION TOPICS

Before, during and after reading the book.

1. Introduce *The Story House* to the children and ask them what they think the story might be about.
2. Why do you think there are no schools or teachers where Lalee lives?
3. Who is Hani? What does she do with Lalee and the other children?
4. How does Lalee feel when Hani tells stories?
5. What is Lalee's favourite story? Ask the children what their favourite story is and why.
6. How does Hani describe a book?
7. What does 'the stories stayed with Lalee' mean?
8. How do we know that a war is going on in the background? What descriptions or phrases suggest this?
9. What does Lalee start collecting? What does she create?
10. What is The Story House?
11. After reading the book, ask them what they thought of the story? Which was their favourite part and why?



BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

While this story is reflective of many places around the world, it is loosely set in an African country that has been in a state of major, sustained conflict and instability for over 30 years. The story has been inspired by the personal experience of the author (Vikki Conley) who hand-delivered readers to children who had never seen a book before.

AGE-APPROPRIATE CONTEXT FOR YEARS 2 - 4

- Some children's lives have been disrupted by war and conflict for many years.
- In some communities, schools have been damaged or don't have enough teachers or books.
- Children everywhere love to learn, play and imagine – just like students in Australia or in the UK, for example.



EDUCATION IN CONFLICT ZONES

- Some children learn in temporary or damaged classrooms or under trees.
- Books may be shared between many students or handmade by teachers and kids, often there are no books or school materials.
- Sometimes, universities may not have operated, and teachers have not had the opportunity to be trained for decades. Many parents try to remember what they learnt as a student to act as teachers in broken classrooms.
- Learning becomes an act of hope – a way of building a better future.
- Global organisations (e.g. UNICEF, Save the Children, World Vision) help provide supplies and safe learning spaces, sometimes help repair schools.

THE POWER OF STORIES

- With limited resources, imagination becomes even more powerful.
- Making their own books lets children express identity, record memories and share culture.
- Stories help communities heal from trauma and hold on to hope.



SENSITIVE HANDLING TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Focus on resilience, creativity, community and joy in learning.
- Ensure comparisons between schools are respectful, not pitying.
- Encourage students to see similarities first – the things all children care about.



ENGLISH - STORYTELLING & LITERACY ACTIVITIES

Make-Your-Own Book

Students create a tiny, folded book or a simple cardboard-covered booklet.

Purpose: Encourages writing, drawing, imagination and fine motor skills.

Resources / Ideas:

Cereal Box Accordion Book:

<https://www.kixcereal.com/kixcereal-recycled-craft-cereal-box-accordion-album/>

Easy binding ideas:

<https://bookzoompa.wordpress.com/2017/06/13/journals-all-day-long/>

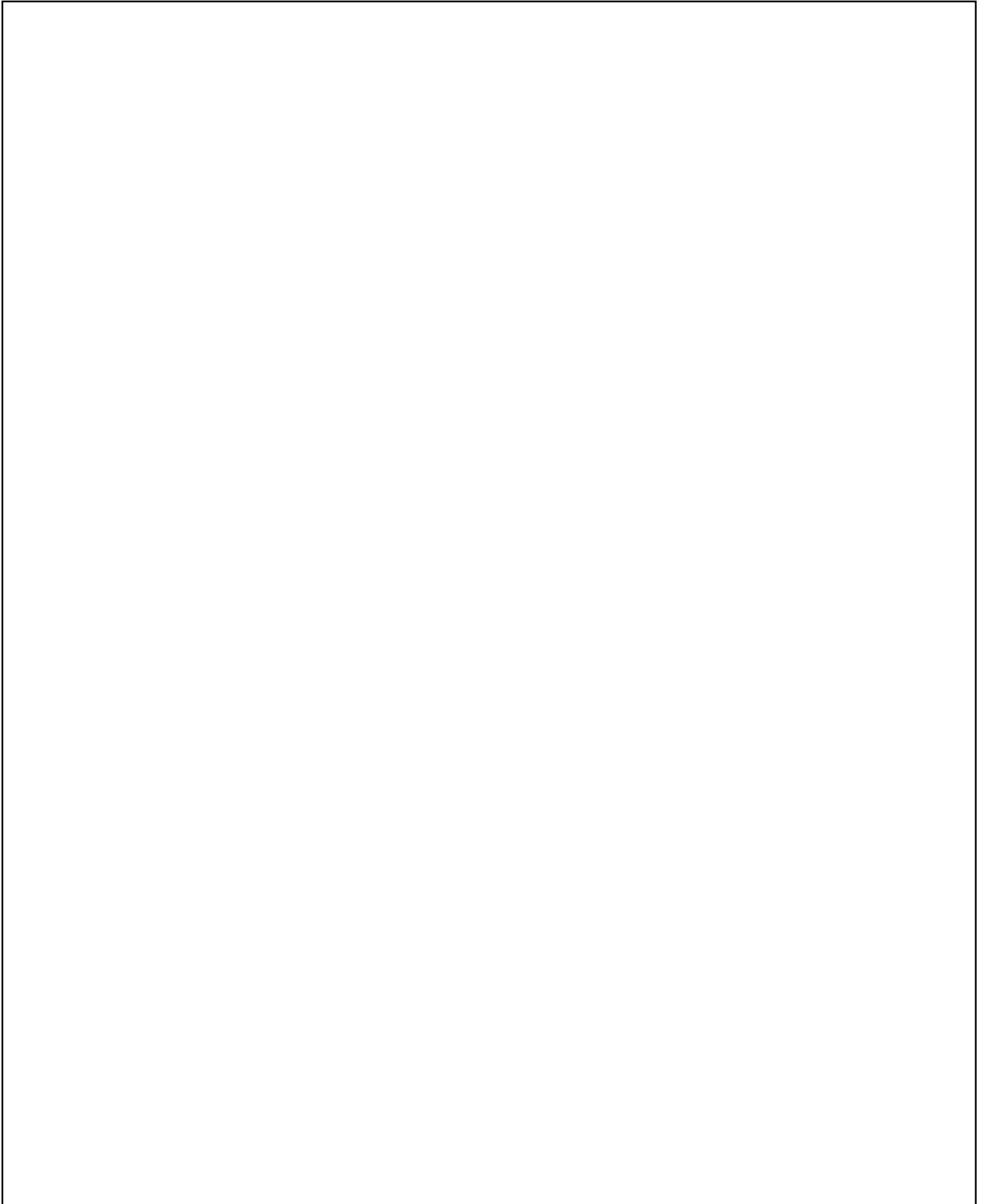
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owMsVUgwWAO>



REBUILD LALEE'S SCHOOL

Imagine rebuilding Lalee's school from scratch – can you draw it? Include:

- Important features
- Special rooms and playground areas
- The three books you would gift Lalee and her friends
- Speech bubbles – what are your characters saying?



SHARING YOUR STORIES

What stories would you share with Lalee and her friends?



Choose two stories from your family or library that would help describe your home, friends, culture and world.

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Choose two stories that your family retells again and again.

Story 1:

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Why did you choose it?

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What does it say about your life or community?

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Story 2:

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Why did you choose it?

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What does it say about your life or community?

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If you retold these stories to Lalee, what would you want her to understand about life in your country?

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STORY ACTIVITIES

Story Seeds

Give each student a word or object (e.g., dream, friend, sky, courage). Students grow a story from one tiny idea.

Ways to create the story

- A long-shared paper mural with drawings and speech bubbles
- Circle storytelling — each person adds one sentence
- Individual sentences on sticky notes, then piece the story together on the board
- Students contribute sentences or words on a whiteboard

Reflection: How did the tiny word/object spark something bigger?



Family Story Treasures - Stories We Carry

Learning Focus

- Understand personal and family storytelling traditions
- Exploring how stories connect people and memories

Discussion starters

- What stories are told again and again in your family?
- Why do people share stories from the past?

Student Task

Home story-collection:

- Students gather a special story from home (funny, meaningful, cultural or historic)
- Next day, they share:
 - What the story is about
 - Why it matters to their family



Optional Extension

- Create a classroom “Story Wall” that grows as students share family stories
- Ask students to draw the story or bring a copy of a photograph about the story.



WORKSHEET

Family Story Treasures (Younger Primary / Adaptable)

TASK

Ask someone at home to tell you a story about when they were a child - one you may not have heard before.

Write the story in a few sentences:

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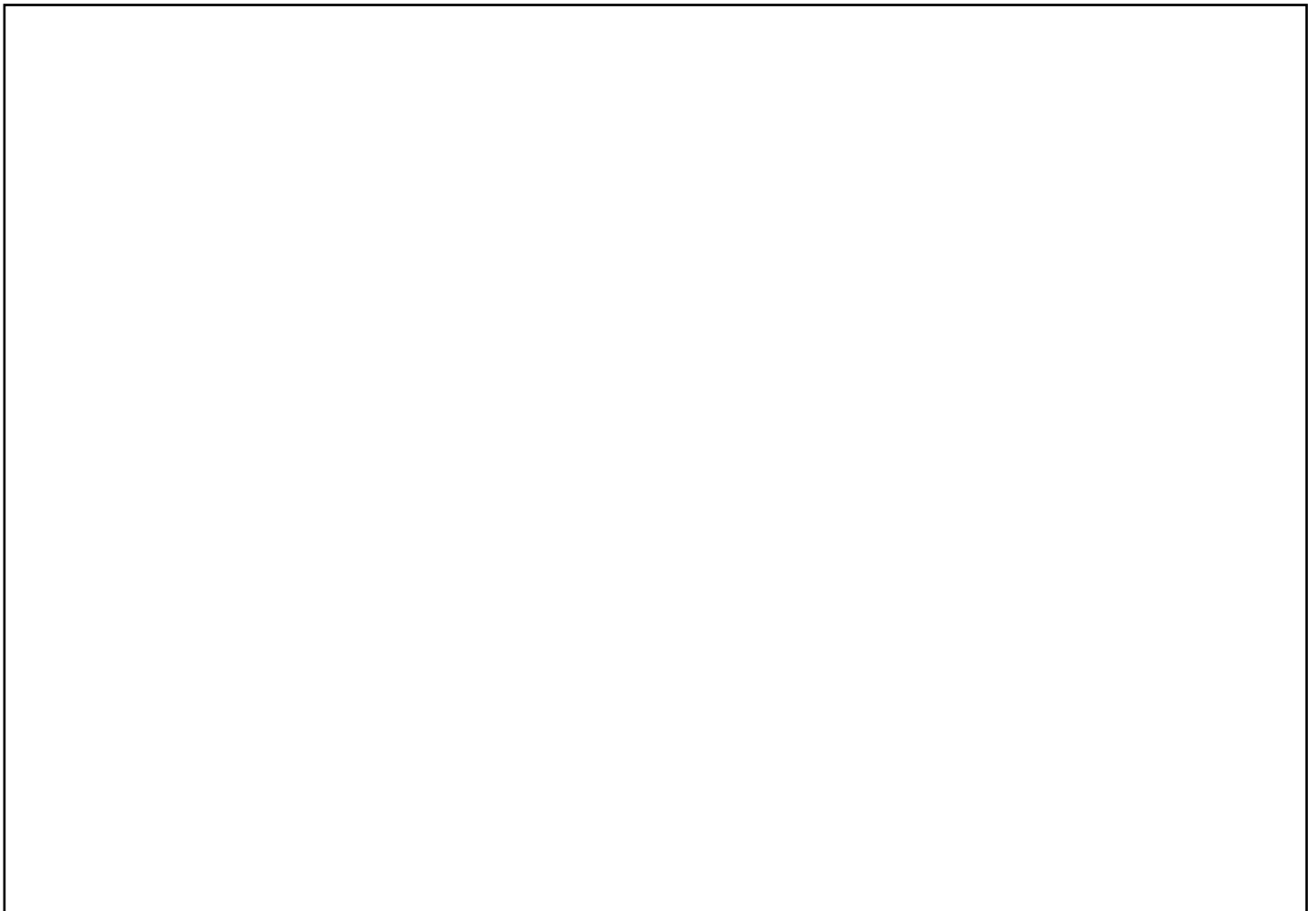
Why do you think this story matters – is it important or memorable to your family member? What does it say about them, their values, their home or place where they grew up?

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YEARS 3 - 6 ACTIVITY

First Nations Storylines - Learning from Country

Learning Focus

- Rich storytelling traditions of First Nations peoples
- Understanding stories as knowledge systems linked to Country, culture and seasons

Discussion starters

- How do First Nations stories teach us about Country, animals and place?
- Why is it important to learn stories from our local area?

Student task

Research one First Nations story from your local area, using culturally respectful and school-approved sources.
Students record:

1. Story name
2. Country/Language group
3. What the story teaches (lesson, seasonal knowledge, connection to place)

Task: Research one First Nations story from your local area.

(Use school-approved and culturally respectful sources.)

- Story name:
- Country/language group:
- What the story teaches (lesson, connection to place, animals, seasons):
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Reflection

Why are stories important for communities and cultures?

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YEARS 5 - 6 ACTIVITY

If the Books Vanished - Stories as Knowledge Keepers

Learning Focus

- Historical moments when stories or information were controlled or lost
- The importance of protecting knowledge and diverse voices

Discussion starters

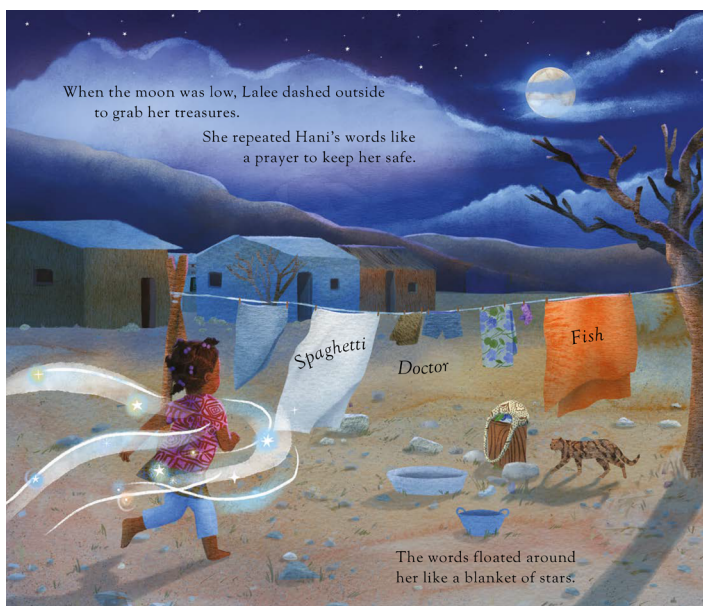
- Why might books be removed during certain times in history?
- What happens when stories disappear from a community?
- Why do we need many different kinds of stories?

Student task

Imagine you wake up and every book has disappeared — and you are the only one who remembers them.

Students:

1. Choose two books they would save by retelling.
2. Identify the key ideas of each.
3. Explain why these stories matter to keep alive.
4. Retell one story to a partner or small group.



WORKSHEET

Student Worksheet: Stories, Memory & Culture

1. When Books Disappear (Years 5-6)

Imagine you wake up and every book has disappeared - and you are the only one who remembers them.

Task:

1. The two books I would save by retelling are:

- Book 1:
- Book 2:



2. What is the main message or idea of each book?

- Book 1 message:
- Book 2 message:

3. Why are these books important for people to remember?

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4. Choose one book and write a short retelling (5-6 sentences):

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Lalee rushed down the dusty track. 'We see Hani!' sang Awa. 'Spaghetti for you and me!' Awa and the bag flapped like giant wings.

When the ground was finally still, Lalee's job was to collect the water. But all Lalee wanted to do was visit the story house. Would she have time to visit? Would Hani even be there?



But when they arrived, the story house was quiet. There were no songs. There were no tapping feet. There were no words to be heard.

WORDSEARCH

Find all the words below in *The Story House* wordsearch.

Name:

Class:

Date:

word search

THE STORY HOUSE



N A B U T T E R F L Y
O E A O R S E R O I E
I I D H O D U O S B D
T Y H H T K H P T R W
A P R N S C A I O A U
N W M E S G N C R R M
I R A E H I I T Y Y I
G B A E S C E U O O O
A I T L I E A R C N C
M T R A F R I E N D S
I H E L N N F S T A E



AWA
BOOK
BUTTERFLY
FISH
FRIENDS

HANI
IMAGINATION
LALEE
LIBRARY
PICTURES

SCHOOL
SPAGHETTI
STORY
TEACHER
WAR



Answer Sheet

word search

THE STORY HOUSE

N A B U T T E R F L Y
O E A O R S E R O I E
I I D H O D U O S B D
T Y H H T K H P T R W
A P R N S C A I O A U
N W M E S G N C R R M
I R A E H I I T Y Y I
G B A E S C E U O O O
A I T L I E A R C N C
M T R A F R I E N D S
I H E L N N F S T A E



AWA
BOOK
BUTTERFLY
FISH
FRIENDS

HANI
IMAGINATION
LALEE
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PICTURES

SCHOOL
SPAGHETTI
STORY
TEACHER
WAR



DRAWING ACTIVITY

Have a go at drawing your idea of A STORY HOUSE. Who and what will you put inside it?

