



The Strange Tale of Barnabus Kwerk

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Teaching Guide

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RATIONALE & THEMES

Barnabus Kwerk has an exceptional gift: he can smell gold. His aunt Jemima rescues him from the clutches of his wicked uncle Horace and takes him on an incredible journey to the Earth's core, where he helps to save the Clockwork, a mechanism that regulates life on the surface.

This story is a wonderful allegory for the effects of greed on our planet. Many exotic creatures populate Barnabus's adventure as he zips from the surface to the core on his mission to defend the Clockwork.

The themes include

- Friendship
- Greed
- Insecurity
- Relationships
- Criminality
- Isolation
- Effects of human action
- Personal freedom / choice

SUMMARY

Barnabus is forbidden from leaving the Big House, where he lives with wicked Uncle Horace and a staff of sullen servants.

When Great- (and very Fierce-) Aunt Claudia dies, Barnabus's Aunt Jemima, a stranger, appears and rescues him during the funeral. Together, they escape through an incredible 'squidgy' lawn into the bowels of the earth, where Barnabus's adventure begins.

He visits the golden Clockwork, a mechanism that regulates life on Earth, and finds out how the Kwerk family's greed for gold has put the whole world in danger.

He discovers an incredible and harmonious ecology at the centre of the Earth, operated by a team of exotic creatures.

Barnabus discovers that he can smell gold, a skill that everyone thought had disappeared from his family. Jemima reveals that once

many of the Kwerks had that skill, which they used to source the gold for the Clockwork ... until greed intervened.

Barnabus meets Jemima's colleagues Abigail and Brixton, and a tour of the Clockwork reveals its complexity and extent.

After falling from the rickety wooden path, Barnabus realises that he is hanging suspended and weightless in the Doom Room at the very centre of the Clockwork.

That night at Aunt Jemima's house, Barnabus hears the walls whispering to him, and after an incident with an irritable, one-armed cupboard, he retrieves a dusty box of books about gold-sniffing, one of which belonged to the mother he never knew.

Barnabus stays up late reading the books, eagerly learning about gold-sniffing and the need for a 'wrangler'.

An infestation of lace spores forces him and his aunt to return to the surface and the charming village of Widdlewell. Barnabus learns what happened to his mother.

He goes to the Drifting Woodlands and finds his wrangler, which he must keep a secret.

Abigail hears of a stolen gear for sale by the villain Richly Wormworth, Jemima's former partner, and she, Barnabus and Aunt Jemima set out for his palatial treehouse. He treats them royally, but it's a trap. He has alerted Uncle Horace, claiming the reward for Barnabus's recapture.

Barnabus uses his wrangler to escape to Plumbstone, a villainous den of pirates. Horace hires the residents of Plumbstone to steal all the gold from the Clockwork.

It's up to Barnabus to save the Clockwork and the world above, a task he completes with remarkable skill. His wicked uncle is left to float harmlessly and eternally in the Doom Room, while Barnabus gets to know the person in the cupboard; if only she can be coaxed to reveal herself.

APPROACH

This is a very entertaining read. The plot is comic and improbable, with many opportunities for imaginative writing and discussion on the themes of human impact on the planet, supporting the WAU (World Around Us) and SE (Social Environmental and Scientific Education) syllabi.

This guide is divided into four sections and the activities offer suggestions on developing the themes.

Section 1 The Scent of Gold pp9–82

SUMMARY

Barnabus is a Kwerk, and the Kwerks – headed by Uncle Horace – are the greediest family you could imagine. Barnabus, however, is not.

Horace has deprived him of any contact outside of the family and staff at the Big House, and he treats him very poorly.

When Great-Aunt Claudia dies, a stranger appears at the house. Barnabus overhears an argument between her and Horace that will change his life. He also notices an unusual rubber smell for the first time.

The stranger is his aunt Jemima, and they are arguing about the way the family treated Barnabus's mother Sylvia, who was kind, like him.

During Claudia's funeral, Jemima snatches Barnabus using a flying contraption, and when they land safely, she offers him a choice: return to the Kwerks' mansion or accompany her on a life of adventure. Barnabus chooses the adventure.

They join a tour at the Botanical Gardens but can hear the Kwerks' helicopter swarming up above, searching for Barnabus. Jemima leads

him onto a piece of lawn she calls a 'squidgy bit' and they start to bounce. Suddenly, the ground collapses and there is a mad helter-skelter ride to the bowels of the earth.

Jemima reveals to Barnabus the Clockwork, an incredible mechanism at the earth's core which regulates everything on the surface. She explains that human greed and a dwindling supply of gold to repair the cogs is degrading it.

She introduces Barnabus to some of the people and creatures in the Clockwork, and he marvels at the delight of the Gleewatts, the large-bottomed creatures whose antics work the weights of the clock.

Back in Jemima's house, he meets the strange arm-from-the-cupboard and learns that the strange rubbery smell he detects is the smell of gold.

Jemima explains that in the past all the Kwerks had the ability to smell gold. However, once their greed consumed them, the skill deserted them. Barnabus is the last Kwerk with the gift.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read pp11 and 65: The Kwerks are very greedy. They spend all their time trying to increase their wealth. Is this a healthy way to live? How does our greed affect others? Why are people who have a lot of money so admired?
www.scoilnet.ie/search/?q=developed%20world
bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-46676268
- Read pp13–14: The point of school, declares Brunhilda, is 'to get a job and get rich'. Is she correct? What is school for, and why are we sent there?
- Read pp44 and 52: We are warned to be careful with strangers, yet the author allows Barnabus to go with one. Why did Barnabus accept the invitation? What would you have done?
safety4kids.com.au/safety-zone/stranger-danger

ACTIVITIES

1. Kindness (read pp23–24)

Barnabus experiences both kindness and meanness in his life. However, kindness has the more powerful effect on him.

Think about times when you were kind and times when you were mean. How did people react to you?

How did you feel when you experienced the kindness and meanness of others?

In groups, record what you discovered on a chart.

www.scoilnet.ie/search/?q=kind%20behaviour&fq=school_level%3A1

2. Mum (read p33)

When Barnabus finds out that he had a mother, he experiences a warm, tingling feeling.

Close your eyes and think of your mum (or another caregiver). How many of your senses react?

Write a description of what you feel.

3. Nonsense (read pp61–62)

Jemima explains that the Clockwork maintains the earth's rotation, producing day and night.

We know this isn't scientifically correct.

Provide Jemima with the correct, illustrated scientific explanation for day and night.

esa.int/kids/en/learn/Lessons/Day_night_and_the_seasons

4. Brixton's Cars (read pp72–73)

Brixton manages and maintains the Clockwork car fleet.

He has an illustrated leaflet for every new customer, explaining in glowing terms the environmental advantages of his cars and how to operate them.

Make a copy of the booklet Brixton gives to Barnabus.

Section 2 The Drifting Wood pp83–164

SUMMARY

Jemima reassures Barnabus that she rescued him from the Kwerks so he could lead a normal life, irrespective of his gold-sniffing skills. She wants to send him to school, but Barnabus has other ideas.

Barnabus witnesses an emergency operation to rescue Abigail, who is hanging from a gear, and they become immediate friends.

A tour of the Clockwork gives Barnabus a sense of its complexity and the army of skilled workers needed to keep it working. The flora and fauna there are equally exotic, and Barnabus is amazed at the harmony they all share.

He experiences weightlessness in the Doom Room, where the normal laws of gravity are suspended. We learn that the Doom

Room was once the bustling social hub of the Clockwork. However, with the depletion of staff numbers and the degradation of the gears, everything is now in a sorry state of decline.

That night, the house whispers to him as he tries to sleep, directing him downstairs where the arm-from-the-cupboard presents him with a set of dusty books.

These books provide useful information on gold-sniffing and how to find and use a wrangler.

Barnabus also finds a piece of wispy lace, which breaks in his hand. Ignoring the accident, he is chastened in the morning to discover that the lace was a fungus and has now infested the whole house.

Jemima tells him they will have to go back to the surface to be decontaminated.

Arriving at the village of Widdlewell, everyone greets them cordially. Barnabus is anxious to find a wrangler, but Jemima dismisses the idea. They discover a Drifting Woodland outside the village. Barnabus knows from his book that this is where he'll find a wrangler and he decides to go there, in spite of Jemima's warning to stay away.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read p83: Jemima tells Barnabus that she wants him to be happy. But what does that mean? How would you know if your life was happy? Is every happy life the same? How could you create such a life?
www.scoilnet.ie/search/?q=being%20happy
- Read pp114–115: The older residents of the Doom Room compliment Barnabus on his open mind. What is an open mind? How would you know if you had one? What sort of person has a closed mind, and what type of conversation might you have with them?
bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/grownups/help-your-child-try-new-things
- Read p163: Jemima distrusts books and says they're full of nonsense. Is she right? How much trust should we place in books and newspapers for our information? Why do we believe the things we read? How can you decide if something you read is balanced?

ACTIVITIES

1. Health and Safety (read pp85–89)

After Abigail has been rescued, Jemima reminds her that she will have to complete a health and safety report on the accident.

She'll need witness statements, diagrams and a clear description of what happened with recommendations for improvement.

Help her complete the report.

2. Gold (read p103)

The supply of gold is limited, and the Clockwork is degrading because there are only inferior metals available to repair it.

Where does gold come from, and how is it mined? How many uses are there for gold today? Why is a gold medal preferable to a silver one?

Create an information poster to explain why gold is so useful for us, and explore the human cost of mining it.

www.scoilnet.ie/search/?q=gold

bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-africa-34696669

geology.com/minerals/gold/uses-of-gold.shtml

3. Grateful (read pp107–108)

Barnabus believes he is about to die and is grateful for all the wonderful experiences he has had that day.

If you thought that today was your last day, what would you be grateful for?

List the three most important events or interactions you have had today, and explain why you are grateful to have experienced them.

4. Age & Experience (read p112)

The people Barnabus meets in the Doom Room complain that they are ignored because they are old.

Create a poster to help others to understand and appreciate the contribution older people can make.

ageism.org/what-you-should-teach-your-kids-about-ageism/

5. My House Talks (read pp125–126 and 129)

Barnabus wakens to the whispers of the house talking to him.

Sit quietly in your own bedroom and listen to the sounds that your house, or a particular piece of furniture, makes.

Use your imagination to create the story that your house is telling you.

Section 3 The Wrangler pp165–229

SUMMARY

Barnabus decides to visit the Drifting Woodlands to search for a wrangler. The wood is terrifying, but he remembers that it was in his mother's book that he first learned about it, and this thought strengthens him.

Calling out, he sees an amorphous blob of slime slither towards him and attach itself to his limbs. It controls him like a puppet and encourages him to concentrate solely on his sense of smell.

His mind expands and he realises that he is smelling gold from across the globe.

Barnabus is delighted, and the wrangler slips quietly into his bag as they return to the village with the dawn.

Aunt Jemima, Abigail and Barnabus set off on a trip to buy a piece of gold. That night, at their campsite, the two young people play hide and seek to amuse themselves. When Abigail falls into a deep hole, Barnabus's gold-sniffing skills help him to locate and rescue her, but Abigail finds out about his secret wrangler.

They are going to meet a thief, Richly Wormworth, Jemima's former partner, to trade for a clockwork gear that has been stolen.

Jemima and Richly greet each other with a tirade of insults, before he lowers a basket to admit them to his palatial treemansion.

Richly shows off his home and entertains them with a lavish banquet. He insists that they stay the night, and Jemima agrees.

However, it's a trick. Jemima and Abigail's room is a cell. He has betrayed them to the Kwerks to get a reward.

Barnabus tries to escape, however the Kwerks swarm in from all sides. Remembering the wrangler, Barnabus retrieves it from his bag and relaxes into his sense of smell, leaving the wrangler to do the rest.

Taking over Barnabus's body, the wrangler bounds him out of the treehouse and out of the Kwerk's clutches.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read pp187 and 196: Barnabus keeps his run-in with Greeg a secret, but he is unable to hide the wrangler from Abigail. Is keeping a secret ever a good idea? Are there safe secrets you can keep? How can you resist the urge to share your secrets?

- Read pp208–209: Richly shows off all the fine things that he has in his treemansion. However, he never uses them. What is the point of having things that you don't use? Do you have any things that cost a lot of money but that you don't use?
- Read p210: Jemima is annoyed because she has to trade to get the gear back. She believes that the Clockwork belongs to everyone because it serves everyone. Is she right? Should the important things we all need be in public ownership? What things should be publicly owned?
- Read p215: Richly keeps many valuable things as treasures. What does valuable mean? What makes something valuable? Which is more important, valuable or useful? What's the difference?

ACTIVITIES

1. Comforting (read pp169–170)

Barnabus is reassured when he thinks of his mother. We all have mental strategies we use to help us deal with anxiety.

Describe the details of the comforting thoughts you use when you are anxious.

www.scoilnet.ie/search/?q=stress&fq=school_level%3A1

2. What Did You Say? (read pp173 and 178)

The wrangler uses a range of sounds to communicate. Barnabus discovers a list of ten useful basic phrases translated into wrangler at the back of *Your Wrangler and You*.

Make a copy of the page and include guidance on how to pronounce the wrangler sounds. Try a basic conversation in wrangler with your partner.

3. Makes Sense (read p179)

Barnabus must concentrate only on his sense of smell.

We have five senses, and it is difficult to concentrate on using just the one.

Choose one sense (except sight), concentrate on what that sense is telling you, and describe your classroom in as much detail as you can.

How might the descriptions be different for different senses or different people?

4. Drifting Wood (read pp167–169 & 184)

If you search the internet for 'Drifting Wood', you will get a lot of information on 'Driftwood', which is a different thing.

In small groups, create a dictionary definition for 'Drifting Wood' to explain what they are, where they can be found and any dangers they present.

5. Pure Corn (read pp187 and 192)

Abigail has exhausted her supply of corny jokes.

Create a reserve list of your favourite five corny jokes to keep her supplied. You can illustrate them.

6. The Wrangler (read p196)

Barnabus reveals the wrangler to Abigail, and together they decide to ask it ten questions.

Barnabus can only understand 'yes' or 'no' in wrangler, so their questions will need to have yes or no answers.

In groups, compile ten questions they can ask to discover information about the wrangler. Now work in pairs to ask and answer each other's questions and write a description of the wrangler from the information you have gathered.

Section 4 'Night, Mum! pp230–332

SUMMARY

Barnabus has escaped the Kwerks only to find himself in Plumbstone, a wicked little town where the sun refuses to shine.

Pursued by Greeg and a troop of whirls, he disappears into the maze of vents that riddle the town.

He witnesses the Kwerk cavalcade arrive, with Jemima and Abigail bound and gagged in the back of one of their cars.

Uncle Horace addresses the townspeople, proposing that they help him plunder all the gold from the Clockwork. They agree enthusiastically.

We learn that as a child, Uncle Horace was ridiculed by Great-Aunt Claudia because he couldn't sniff gold. While his twin sisters Jemima and Sylvia (Barnabus's mum) played, he grew more and more resentful.

Now his plan is to possess all the gold in the world. He doesn't care about the damage it will cause. When he learns about Barnabus's gift, he plans to exploit him as well.

When Barnabus's hiding place is discovered, he races for a squidgy bit and plunges underground.

He makes it to Jemima's house, where the cupboard shows him the emergency alarm.

The residents of the Clockwork meet and Barnabus explains Uncle Horace's dastardly plan. They are totally unprepared to deal with the situation, so Barnabus gathers his courage and takes charge himself.

Together, they make a plan to defeat Uncle Horace and his minions one step at a time, using their skills and knowledge of the Clockwork.

Their plan goes well, but Uncle Horace kidnaps Barnabus, threatening to take him back to the surface to spend his life chasing gold for the Kwerks. Horace taunts him with the news that his mother is still alive somewhere in the Clockwork.

Barnabus pulls them both off the path and into the void, leaving Horace drifting forever in the Doom Room.

He learns from Jemima that his mother retreated long ago into the cupboard and refuses to come out.

Work begins to restore the Clockwork, while Barnabus and Jemima both spend lots of time with the cupboard.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read pp242–243: Horace persuades the townspeople to help him plunder the Clockwork. Why do they agree? Where does our desire to own things come from? Is it an advantage or a curse?
- Read pp245–249: Young Horace wants praise from Claudia, but it never comes. How are we shaped by the praise we get or don't get? How important is feeling valued for our own development?
- Read p250: Horace wants to own all the gold and will have died before the disastrous effects of his actions are felt. What we do today will have effects for others tomorrow. Why should we be concerned if we will not be here to endure them?
- Read pp293–297: The people of the Clockwork treat Barnabus as their captain and are prepared to do as he asks. What does it take to become a leader and motivate people? How do you encourage people to overcome their reluctance and follow you?

ACTIVITIES

1. Parent's Guide (read pp245–249)

Horace receives lots of criticism as a child and this shapes his character.

How should children be treated to ensure they become happy and helpful adults?

In groups, create two lists, one for things that children should experience and one for things they should not.

Individually, rank your top three in each group and explain your selection to create an illustrated parent's guide.

bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/zd7pm39/articles/z2hcvwx

bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zy4rn9q

2. Global Choices (read pp249–250)

Horace is about to make some terrible choices. They will have a devastating effect on everyone in the world.

What decisions can you make about your behaviour to ensure a safe future for others?

Create an illustrated PLEDGE poster, explaining the top three behaviours that you promise to observe to protect the future.

www.scoilnet.ie/search/?q=protect%20the%20environment&fq=school_level%3A1

bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zxdsn9q

3. 101 Household Uses (read p272)

Think of three household uses for Slurping Slug Slime and create an illustration for each.

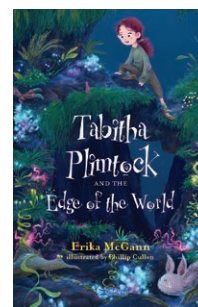
4. What's Happening? (read pp313–314)

Thanks to the bravery of Barnabus and the other residents of the Clockwork, harmony is restored.

The world's newspapers and media catch wind of the story.

In groups, make a copy of a newspaper report with interviews and analysis to explain what happened and its significance.

If you enjoyed *The Strange Tale of Barnabus Kwerk*, you will love *Tabitha Plimtock and the Edge of the World*, the story of a brave young girl who sees beauty in the darkness.



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