



Tabitha Plimtock and the Edge of the World

ISBN 978-1-78849-249-2
eBook ISBN 978-1-78849-300-0

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Teaching Guide

By Nicola Heaney

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This guide has been designed to complement a class reading of the text in a way that brings the text alive whilst also enriching the students' critical abilities. The activities aim to inspire young readers by encouraging them to question the characters' motivations and the overall themes. The guide aims to develop empathy skills, stimulate discussion and encourage readers to dissect literary techniques in fresh and engaging ways. There are also activities included that are designed to hone communication, presentation and literacy skills. This novel deals with some very interesting ideas about climate change and its key themes include:

- Loyalty and Trust
- Courage
- Family
- Community
- Climate change and the environment

SUMMARY

Tabitha Plimtock is a young girl living at the edge of the world with her horrible family. Her days are filled with skivvying around after her three nasty cousins who treat her like some sort of slave. The edge of the world is a bleak, strange place and every day Tabitha must risk her life to climb up and down the cliff edge they live on to get supplies for her family. Her neighbours are an interesting bunch, but there's a real sense of community, which comes in useful when a strange and dangerous group of visitors threaten to bring the end of the world.

APPROACH

This is a very enjoyable and entertaining read. There are lots of interesting characters and a lot of drama and action to keep readers entertained. There are also many opportunities for discussion and learning about ecosystems and climate change. This guide has divided the story into three

sections and the activities offer suggestions on developing the themes and examining the writer's craft in building characters and plot.

Part One Welcome to the Edge of the World Pages 8–75.

SUMMARY

The novel opens at the edge of the world where we meet Tabitha Plimtock and the other members of the Plimtock family. There's the grandmother, Bertha, who must have a birthday every day. Then we meet Gower, a health fanatic, Gristle, who loves a mess, and Cousin Wilbur, who changes into an animal every time the wind blows in a particular way. Tabitha is the youngest, but no-one can remember how she arrived at the Plimtock door. However, she arrived, and her job is to wait on the other four members of the household, who treat her appallingly. One of her main duties is making the birthday cake for Bertha.

Life on the edge of the world isn't just the Plimtock house and we travel with Tabitha as she makes her way down the cliff to meet the other inhabitants of the neighbourhood. First off is Mr Offal, who provides the eggs. Tabitha discusses books and does some very impressive acrobatics to make sure she collects the eggs safely – despite the cliff edge!

Further down the cliff are the Wailing Twins who sell herbs and tell stories of doom, gloom and the world ending. Tabitha also visits bungee-jumping entrepreneurs Richard and Molly, who convince her that there might be some truth in the doom and gloom predicted by the Wailing Twins. Richard and Molly tell her of animals going missing and horrible creatures living underneath

the sunline. Tabitha is worried, especially for her friend Mr Cratchley who lives alone underneath the sunline. We're taken back in time to Tabitha's first meeting with Mr Cratchley when she ignored everyone's warnings and climbed under the sunline to explore the darkest reaches of the edge of the world.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read p. 9. What is a metaphor? In pairs or small groups, decide on examples of two metaphors to share with the class. Why are metaphors used? What's interesting about the metaphors you have chosen?
- Read p. 10. Does this description of the edge of the world as a "rocky, slightly dusty, place" fit with what you imagine the edge of the world might look like? Why do you think this? If it isn't, what do you think the edge of the world would look like?
- Read p. 11. What are our initial impressions of Bertha Plimtock? Why do you think this? What clues are we given in the text?
- Read p. 13. If you had to turn into an animal for a week, what animal would it be and why?
- Read p. 25. Even though she's had a terrible morning, Tabitha is still able to "take a moment to enjoy the warmth." What does this tell us about her personality? Do you think this is a good attitude to life?
- Read p. 31. What do you think of Mr Offal's attitude "I never look down. Never look up much neither. What's there to see?"
- Read pp. 36 – 44. What are your impressions of the Wailing Twins? Why do you think this? What do we learn about Tabitha from the way she interacts with them?
- Read p. 47. Are you surprised to read this about goats? Do you think it's true? What

kind of message is there here about not judging a book by its cover?

- Read p. 49. Richard says, “If I can’t say something nice, I suppose I’d better shut my trap” Is this good advice? Why do you think this?
- Read p. 60. Do you think Tabitha should go and check on her friend Mr Cratchley? Why do you think this?

ACTIVITIES

1. WHAT ARE THEY LIKE?

Look at the illustrations on page 8. Can you describe these people? What adjectives would you use to describe them? Can you write a descriptive paragraph about each? Read further into the book. Were your descriptions accurate? What can you improve about your descriptive writing skills?

2. THE EARTH IS ROUND

Who discovered the Earth is round? In small groups, research what happened when this discovery was made— when was the roundness of the Earth discovered? By whom? What was the reaction to the discovery? Is there anything else you think is important? Present your results to the rest of the class as a news report. You will want to have interviews with people who disbelieve the science, people who are excited by the science and maybe an interview with the discoverer themselves.

3. BIRTHDAY CAKE

If you had to make the best birthday cake in the world, what would you put in it? Remind yourself of how to write to instruct – clear, step-by-step instructions. Write a recipe for the best birthday cake. Be as imaginative as you want (but remember, people will have to eat it!)

4. TABITHA ANALYSIS

What are your initial thoughts on Tabitha? Think about what she says and does and how she does these things. Choose four adjectives to describe her character and choose a quote from the book so far that proves she has these characteristics. Write four paragraphs, with each explaining a characteristic and explaining how the quote you’ve chosen proves your point.

6. WAILING TWINS SPEAK

When we meet Merry Lost she speaks in an old-fashioned way, using old-fashioned proverbs and turns of phrase. For example, instead of saying “make sure you don’t catch a cold”, she says “Beware the evil that lurks

in the changing of the winds.” Why do you think she speaks in this way?

In small groups, choose two or three everyday sayings and translate them into ‘Merry Lost’ speak.

7. CLIMATE CHANGE

Richard and Molly describe the world as “too hot in summer, too stormy in winter” on page 56. How does this relate to what we know about climate change? In small groups, prepare a short presentation on how the weather in the world has been changing in the last 50 years. What do scientists think is causing it? How bad could things get? What do we need to do to stop things from getting worse?

8. POSITIVE THINKING

On page 70, Tabitha describes a “spectacular feather from what must have been a gigantic bird. It was nearly a metre long and had shimmering eyes of blue and green all along the length of it.” Do you think this is a good description of a peacock feather? What would you do to make it better? Choose four items to describe and write a paragraph describing each to someone who has never seen what you’re describing. Think carefully about the language you use – can you use sensory detail? Don’t use the name of the thing you’re describing. Swap with a partner – can they guess your item correctly? If not, what do you need to do to improve your descriptive writing?

Part Two Something Strange is Stirring Pages 77–177

SUMMARY

Back in the present day, Tabitha arrives at the house for the horrors of Bertha’s laundry day. She also notices a growing number of strangely coloured newts in the garden. She brings up the subject of the ‘whatever-they-ares’ at dinner, but her family are not interested.

The next morning, Tabitha must go on an errand to the ‘Lonely Tavern’, one of the bleaker spots in the neighbourhood, where she gets some interesting information and hears about the existence of a mysterious doctor from the strange landlady and an even stranger customer. On her way home, Tabitha treats herself to a trip in the beautiful Rock Wood, where she realises she’s not alone. On the wall, the ‘whatever-they-ares’ have eaten some of Mr Offal’s prized birds. While she is comforting him, Tabitha

notices a book by a local doctor and begins to investigate, making enquiries of her other neighbours.

Errands done, Tabitha takes advantage of some free time and visits Mr Cratchley below the sunline. She’s relieved to find him alive and well, but anxious that he won’t consider moving up the wall to a safer spot. Her worry makes her investigate even further down the wall, even though she is terrified. Back home, her family are only interested in what she has brought them. Tabitha learns about Dr Sherback from an unexpected source. Despite her fear, she determines to travel to the Rock Wood to search for this mysterious elderly female doctor.

In the Rock Wood, Tabitha discovers a whole new world and is fascinated by tales and specimens of strange creatures living at the edge of the world. Things progress quickly and soon Tabitha finds herself in terrible danger – which is scary, but also thrilling.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read p. 79. Why is it important to eat a varied diet? What would you suggest Bertha eats instead of just birthday cake all day every day?
- Read p. 81. Which is the most unpleasant task – cleaning the beanbag or pulling splinters from Bertha’s bum? Why do you think this?
- Read p.87. What do you think of Cousin Wilbur’s statement that “That’s the wall’s problem”? Why do you think her family are uninterested in their neighbours? What does this tell us about them? What would you do?
- Read p. 94. Have you ever seen a Western? Do you know what is meant by a saloon with rolling tumbleweeds? Can you describe this scene?
- Read p. 108. When Tabitha sees Mr Cratchley, her first instinct is to run and hug him, but she doesn’t as she knows it makes him feel uncomfortable. What does this tell us about Tabitha? Why do you think it’s important to avoid making people feel uncomfortable?
- Read pp. 117-120. What do you think the writer is telling us about listening to warnings about climate change? Why do you think this?
- Read p. 133. Tabitha says that we should help people no matter what because “it’s the right thing to do.” Do you think she’s right? Why do you think this? Do you think we should always be kind to one another? How can we show kindness to people in everyday life? Do you think people are kind enough? Why do you

Part Three

The End of the World at the Edge of the World

Pages 178–270

SUMMARY

After her adventures at the base of the wall, Tabitha returns to her family. After the shortest of naps, she sets to work, determined to try and protect her friends from the danger they are facing. Some are more willing than others to take the risk, but Tabitha is determined to save everyone – and the goats. As she descends further down the wall, she realises she has an unexpected companion. A close call leaves her feeling shaken, but she soon finds herself in an even stickier situation.

Rescue comes in the unlikeliest of forms but in her quest to save her world, Tabitha is soon facing mortal danger.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read pp. 179. Do you think the newts are significant? Why do you think this? Why do you think the writer has included them? Can you guess what role they might play?
- Read p. 184. Why do you think Tabitha hasn't told the twins about the very real danger they were in? Do you think this was a good decision? What do you think their reaction might have been? If you were them, would you have preferred to know about the danger? Why?
- Read p. 187. Tabitha's answer to saving the world is to "start small". Do you think this is a good philosophy? Why do you think this? What other big problems could this be applied to?
- Read pp. 192–193. After a long conversation, both Tabitha and Mr Cratchley are feeling less anxious. Why do you think this is? Why do you think talking through something with someone else can help ease any worries?
- Read p. 203. Do you think there is anything Tabitha could say to make her cousin feel sympathy for anyone else in danger? Why do you think this? Why do you think some people can be like this?
- Read p. 211. Tabitha describes the newt's smell as "like green grass and fresh air and sunshine." What's the best smell you can think of? Can you describe it to a partner? Does it bring back any memories?
- Read p. 224. What does Dr Sherback mean by "a bit of pluck"? Do you think she's right? Why might this be important for scientists? What other characteristics

5. WHAT GOES BUMP IN THE NIGHT?

On page 126, Tabitha realises that the wood is filled with creatures at night. Work in small groups to come up with a list of animals we might find in our gardens at night. Create a short factsheet for each, including name, habitat, appearance, life span, feeding habits and anything else you think is interesting or important. Don't forget to find an image! For the next four weeks, remember to keep an eye out for your creatures at home. Keep a log of any sightings you make.

6. DR SHERBACK

Read pages 129–138. What are your first impressions of Dr Sherback? Imagine you have been asked to write a Wikipedia entry for her. What kind of categories would you include? Write a Wikipedia entry that focuses on her achievements and career.

7. CREATING CREATURES

Read pages 139–146. Dr Sherback introduces Tabitha to a whole range of weird and wonderful creatures. Can you create your own? Create two weird and wonderful creatures – one for each end of the food chain. What do they look like? Are they related to any animals alive on Planet Earth? Write a detailed description of each.

8. SURVIVAL

Tabitha finds herself alone at the bottom of the cliff on page 156. What would you advise her to do to survive? In pairs, create a short one-minute video clip advising Tabitha on the basics of survival. You may want to research advice from the likes of Bear Grylls and Ray Mears.

9. FOOD CHAIN

Read pages 173 – 177 where Dr Sherback is explaining the balance of the food chain to Tabitha. What has happened? In small groups, choose a food chain on Earth to investigate where one of the species are at risk of extinction. What will happen to the food chain if the species goes extinct? Create a short news report to highlight the dangers to the world. In your report, you should include interviews with experts and make sure that your audience are aware of the steps we can take to try and prevent extinction from happening.

think this? How can things change?

- Read p. 148. When Tabitha is shown the tooth from a fanged atrociterus, her first thought is "It's spectacular." Would that have been your first thought? What would yours have been? What does this tell us about Tabitha?
- Read p. 164. Tabitha's stomach "feels like a heavy bag of live worms." Do you think this is a good description? Why do you think this? Have you ever felt afraid like this? How would you describe the physical sensation – can you use an interesting simile?
- Read p. 175. Can you think of any parts of Earth that have been over-farmed? Why is this a danger? What could happen? How can we prevent this?

ACTIVITIES

1. SMELLY

Re-read the main paragraph on page 179. How does the writer build up a sense of the horror of Bertha's smell? What language does the writer use? Choose three or four descriptions and explain how they create a sense of the nastiness. Choose the most unpleasant smell you can think of and write a short paragraph or two describing the smell. Try and use similar phrases to the writer.

2. IF EARTH COULD SPEAK

On page 97, the landlady of the Lonely Tavern tells Tabitha that the mountains have been groaning and complaining. What do you think the earth around us is saying? In small groups, create a piece of drama where different parts of the planet are speaking to one another. What are they saying about humans?

3. MR CRATCHLEY

Read Chapter Eleven. What sort of man is Mr Cratchley? Think about what he says and does and how he interacts with Tabitha. Choose four adjectives that best describe his character and find examples in the text that match these adjectives. Write four short paragraphs describing his character, using your adjectives and explaining why the quotes you've chosen prove your point.

4. LOOK INTO THE FUTURE

Look at the illustration on page 118. What is being shown here? Draw a similar image of what the world could look like if we don't take care of it. Write a description of what the world could look like in 100 years if we don't try to stop climate change.

do you think a good scientist should have? Why do you think this?

- Read p. 230. Why do you think they still won't listen to Dr Sherback? Do you think you could be as patient as Dr Sherback? What would you say to them?
- Read pp. 235-238. What do you think of Tabitha's plan? Is there anything you'd have done differently? Why?
- Read pp. 241-244. What is so impressive about the newts? Do you think they would have been able to achieve so much in small numbers? What can we learn from their behaviour?
- Read p. 259. After all the danger and horror, Tabitha is shocked when Dr Sherback refers to the atrociteruses as "poor dears". Why do you think she does this? Is Tabitha right to be shocked? Who is right in this situation? Why do you think this?
- Read p. 268. What does Tabitha mean when she says "It's much more than that" about the contents of Mr Cratchley's jar of fireflies/lost loves?

ACTIVITIES

1. TABITHA'S STORY

Read pages 185–186. Tabitha tells Richard and Molly about what she's seen at the base of the wall. How do you think she tells the story? Either write a diary entry or create a comic strip re-telling her adventures, starting with meeting Dr Sherback. How will you build the drama and tension? Can you use a range of interesting verbs and adjectives to bring the story alive?

2. FACING DOWN DANGER DEBATE

When Tabitha tells Molly and Richard about the danger and her plan for survival, Richard's reaction is that it might all be a bit

too dangerous. As a class, discuss whether they should follow Tabitha's plan and trust Dr Sherback or whether they should take the safer option and just do nothing. Create your arguments using persuasive techniques such as facts and statistics and rhetorical questions.

3. FREEZE FRAME

Re-read pages 194 – 199. Choose four or five moments in this section to dramatize in small groups. For each scene, create a freeze frame. Pay close attention to facial expressions – how can you best express what the character is feeling? How are you going to show Mr Cratchley's bravery? How are you going to show Tabitha's fear?

4. INSULT GENERATOR

Re-read page 215. Dr Sherback and Bertha throw insults at each other – but what's similar about the insults they use? Think about the sounds of the words. In pairs, go through the novel so far and write a list of all the insults used by the Plimtocks. Do they all follow the same pattern? Can you create an insult generator for someone to create their own insults? Use the words already used and try and create some more of your own.

5. PROFILE DR SHERBACK

Despite their nastiness, Dr Sherback still tries to help Tabitha's relatives on page 230. What does this tell us about her? Choose four or five adjectives to describe Dr Sherback. Can you find examples from the text that show she has these characteristics? Write four or five short paragraphs describing her personality, explaining how the quotes from the text illustrate your points.

6. ACTION STATION

Re-read pages 249–257. Things become incredibly tense at this point and it looks like

Tabitha is in real trouble. In small groups can you retell this section of the story? You can choose to create a dramatic representation with freeze frames, a news report, a piece of drama or a strip from a graphic novel. Whichever you choose, be prepared to explain which parts you think are the most exciting and how the writer has used language and sentence structure to build a sense of tension.

7. TIME FOR CHANGE

Imagine you are Tabitha. How will you persuade your relatives that they have to change their ways? Think about the sorts of things they view as important. Research the sorts of actions they will need to do to improve the standard of the earth at the edge of the world. Create a persuasive speech to deliver to the other Plimtocks to convince them that they need to change their ways if the world is to be saved. Remember to address their individual needs and to use persuasive devices to make your speech more effective.

8. FUTURE

Imagine it's ten years in the future. Tabitha's relatives come back to the edge of the world. What do they think about how their former home has changed? Are they as unpleasant as ever? Create three or four short freeze frames.

9. LOOKING BACK

Imagine you are Tabitha, off to see the world. How would you describe your world to people who've never visited? Think about all the strange creatures that live at the edge of the world, the unfamiliar sounds and smells. Write a descriptive piece that brings your home alive for someone who has never visited. Try and use descriptive language and sensory detail.

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Erika McGann is the author of a number of children's books from picture books (*Where Are You, Puffling?*, *Puffling and the Egg*, *Wee Donkey's Treasure Hunt* and *The Night-time Cat and the Plump, Grey Mouse*) to novels (*The Demon Notebook* series about five friends drawn into a magical world, and 'Cass and the Bubble Street Gang' series). Erika grew up in Drogheda, County Louth, and now lives in Dublin.

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