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The Important Thing Is...

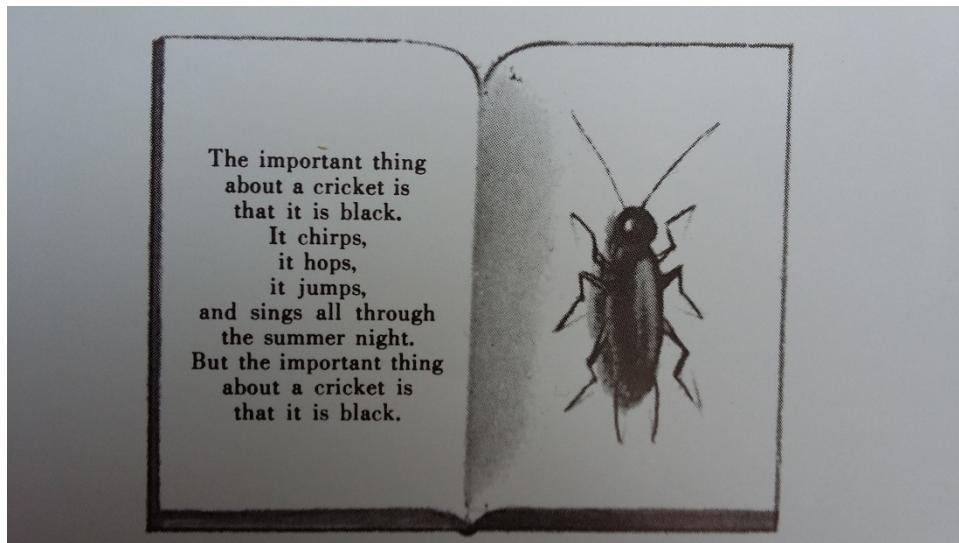
Using poetry to get to the heart of things in RE

Georgia Prescott

Recently, I was introduced to a wonderful children's poetry book ('if you liked this book, you might like this' online shop approach that I fall for more often than I should!). I was initially drawn to its interesting title, but as I looked inside, I was immediately struck by the simple format and structure of the poems, and by what a stimulating resource it might be for RE work.

The Important Book by Margaret Wise Brown, was initially published in 1949, and is still in publication today by HarperCollins Publishers in its original format with illustrations by Leonard Weisgard. Margaret Wise Brown (1910-1952) was a teacher and American author who wrote many children's books. In 2007 ***The Important Book*** was in the Teacher's Top 100 Books for Children published by the National Education Association in America, alongside other classic children's authors such as Dr Seuss, Roald Dahl and CS Lewis. (<http://www.nea.org/grants/teachers-top-100-books-for-children.html>)

In the book, each poem follows a simple structure. It takes one key feature of the poem's subject and uses this as the first and last line. Sandwiched in between these are several lines describing other features of the subject. Here is an example:



The important thing
about a cricket is
that it is black.
It chirps,
it hops,
it jumps,
and sings all through
the summer night.
But the important thing
about a cricket is
that it is black.

The important thing about a cricket is that it is black.

It chirps,

It hops,

It jumps,

And sings all through the summer night.

But the important thing about a cricket is that it is black.

As well as being a great resource for literacy work, I thought this book could be used effectively in RE. It struck me as a really interesting way to help children reflect on what key features of a religious phenomenon or concept are. This would be something they could do after some input from the teacher and use as a basis for further reflection and enquiry work. I have taken a couple of examples here to show how it might work in the classroom.

Exploring a Religious Phenomenon:

Shabbat

A Year 3-4 class at Goodly Dale Community Primary School in Windermere, were learning about Shabbat in Judaism through film, story, artefacts and tasting food. At the end of this work I introduced them to *The Important Book* and its poem structure and then they wrote their Shabbat poems in pairs. The poems seemed a good way to summarise their learning, but also to evaluate from this what they felt the most important thing about Shabbat might be to a Jewish person.

A few examples are shared here.

The important thing about Shabbat is that it is a rest day.

It is relaxing,

It is peaceful,

A day to be happy,

A day for sharing,

A day that represents G_d,

A day for spending time with your family

But the important thing about Shabbat is that it is a rest day.

Poppy and Ethan

The important thing about Shabbat is spending time with your family.

It is meeting, eating, sharing, playing, resting and being peaceful.

But the important thing about Shabbat is spending time with your family.

Cameron and Kyle

The important thing about Shabbat is family.

There is bread, wine, candles and food and grape juice for the children.

But the most important thing is family.

Thomas and Zara

What is interesting about this is that children picked out different ideas as to what they felt the important thing about Shabbat was, although all picked up on key aspects of it. Poppy and Ethan had identified the spiritual aspect of Shabbat as a day dedicated to God, as well as the more tangible aspects such as family and resting. A useful next step, therefore might be to come back together and share and compare ideas about this. Certainly, with an older class, this would be a useful exercise to create some critical thinking and evaluation. It also helps the teacher identify if the children have identified the key aspects of a religious phenomenon. We might use this to recognise that if we asked a group of Jews to identify the important thing about Shabbat, they might come up with a variety of responses, but also share some key themes. As children progress in RE, this would help them begin to recognise diversity as well as commonality within religion. So, although this could be a good way to round off some RE work, it could also be used for further, more in-depth reflection and enquiry afterwards.

Exploring a Religious Concept:

Faith

The Year 5-6 class at Goodly Dale Community Primary School were exploring the concept of faith. They had previously done some work about faith, including a logo-visual thinking activity exploring what the features of faith were. They had also looked at some artworks based on faith in Spirited Arts 2015 gallery on the theme ***Faith (or Doubt?)*** (<http://www.natre.org.uk/about-natre/projects/spirited-arts/spirited-arts-gallery/2015/?ThemeID=63>).

After being introduced to *The Important Book*, the children wrote poems about faith. Below are some examples of these:

Faith

The important thing about faith is that you can decide about it yourself.

It is being God's friend,

It is there when you need it,

It is being you,

It is trusting other people and believing in things,

It is caring for people and helping them when they are in need.

But the important thing about faith is that you can decide about it yourself.

Eleanor, Mason and Jake.

Faith

The important thing about faith is that it's inside you.

It is all around you,

It's having faith in people,

It's about having faith in you.

But the important thing about faith is that it's inside you

Damien

The important thing about faith is to trust and believe in someone.

It is to trust and care about people,

You can choose your religion,

You can choose to believe in God, or something else,

No-one can force you to do what they do,

You don't pray if you don't want to.

You can choose to follow the religion of your parents or believe in something else.

The important thing about faith is to trust and believe in someone.

Freya and Emma

Faith is a very abstract concept and we can see the children here thinking about their own experiences and understanding of the concept in a religious and /or secular way, and bringing this into their poems. Again, these poems could be the start of further enquiry into the concept of religious faith and the different ways in which we use the term faith in everyday secular language. They could follow this up by talking to a range of religious people about what faith is to them. This was very challenging for Year 5-6, but they enjoyed thinking about it.

So - what next?

For me, this book could have its uses in the different ways exemplified above. As in the Shabbat example, children could explore the important things about religious observable phenomena such as festivals, different types of worship and rituals. What this does is help children to apply what they have learnt to try to understand why religious people do the things they do and help them to get to the heart of religious behaviour.

As in the Faith examples above, children could use the *Important* poem structure to begin to explore universal concepts such as *forgiveness*, universal religious concepts such as *worship* or *pilgrimage*, or specific religious concepts such as *Sewa* in Sikhism. [concept categories from Erricker, C. Lowndes, J. & Bellchambers, E. (2011)]

I would love to hear from people who do and feel inspired to try some of these themselves, and follow them up in different ways. My examples are primary based, but I think this could be applied at KS3 or 4 as well.

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References:

Erricker, C. Lowndes, J. & Bellchambers, E. (2011): '***Primary Religious Education – A New Approach: Conceptual Enquiry in Primary RE.***' Abingdon: Routledge)