

Teacher

Resources

That Thing

by Avital Balwit and Alexis Deacon



10 stories to make a difference

Dear Teachers,

We are delighted that you are interested in sharing ***That Thing*** with your class. ***That Thing*** is part of our **10 Stories to Make a Difference** collection, which has ten inspiring stories for young readers that celebrate difference and individuality.

Inside these pages you'll find activities and prompts for UKS2 and KS3 teachers creating lesson plans inspired by ***That Thing***, sharing ideas for making the most of the rich potential offered by this book.

A strong suggestion is to read the book aloud once for the story, then again to focus on particular aspects, passages or themes. The following activities are grouped by desired outcome and are for a range of abilities and additional needs of a class. Some extension activities are included, but all the materials can be adapted beyond the target audience according to the interest and abilities of your class.

The following activities would be suitable for the allocated age group:

- Reading independently or as group
 - Exploring through the creative learning activities in this pack
- 10+ years
10+ years /
UKS2 and
KS3

All the books in our **10 Stories to Make a Difference** collection are beautifully illustrated and perfect for children aged 5 and up. They reflect the need for greater inclusivity and more diversity in children's books with the stories including characters of colour, LGBTQ+ and disabled characters.

The **10 Stories to Make a Difference** collection is available to buy from www.pop-up.org.uk/shop. Teacher and Parent/Carer Resource packs are available to download from www.pop-up.org.uk/shop.

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Themes and ideas include

- Confronting prejudice and helping to create change
- The value of curiosity and kindness
- Seeking to understand 'the unknown, the strange or the different'
- The process and value of scientific research
- Knowing yourself and following your heart
- Understanding the world of work and planning for your future

Curriculum Links

Share and enjoy ***That Thing*** as part of **Literacy** and **English**, and use it to explore points of view (3.1, 5.1 and 5.3) or the key characters and their relationships (3.1). Build on your discussions with activities focusing on narrative fiction (5.1), writing to inform (5.2) and descriptive writing (5.3).

That Thing makes a great starting point for discussions in **PSHE** and **Circle Time**. Talk about prejudice (3.2) and the value of curiosity and empathy (3.3). Extend with writing activities about how other creatures view us (5.1 and 5.3).

Links to other areas of the curriculum include **Art and Design** (4.1, 4.2 and 4.3) and **Science** (3.3, 4.2 and 5.2).

The story also invites discussion about the world of work, and students' ambitions for the future.

2 About this book

"This story reminds us that things are not always what they seem, and if we take the time to look we may be surprised by what we find." Alexis Deacon

Understanding how other people think and feel can be a challenge. Skills like careful listening and empathy will help, but such things will only get you so far when your subject is an octopus.

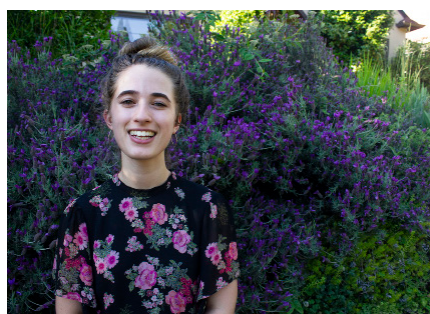
Jayla's a high school student who never expected to be doing an internship – they're for wealthy students with the right background, or so she thinks. But as a prizewinner in an academic competition, Jayla's spending her summer at an aquarium, and can't wait to research the behaviour of their resident giant octopus.

Frazier can change the colour of his skin and knows all sorts of other tricks. But is he intelligent? Jayla's co-intern, Gerald, thinks he knows the answer. *'That... thing'*, he says, is no more than a 'blobby, slimy, gross creature'. Could this be true? Jayla senses a connection with Frazier's alien mind, but perhaps he simply wants more food.

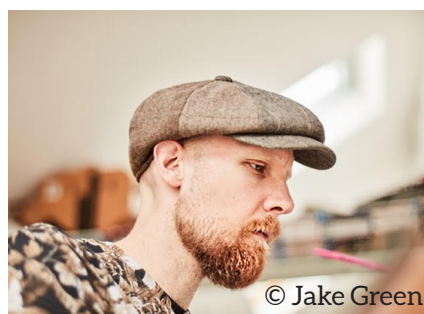
When the pair find themselves accidentally locked in Frazier's tank, Gerald expects the worst. But Frazier's response to the crisis is nothing short of astonishing, and suggests there's more to him than anyone suspects.

This thought-provoking story addresses important themes including prejudice and the value of curiosity and empathy. In defending Frazier, Jayla makes a powerful statement about respecting other differences, too. But Gerald's reaction is almost as surprising as Frazier's, and prompts Jayla to reconsider her own judgements. Trying to communicate clearly and honestly is never a waste of time, and few of us are entirely without prejudice.

About the author and illustrator



Avital Balwit was one of the winner's of Pop Up's Tenth Anniversary writing competition, and describes herself as 'writing to imagine better, brighter futures, and to delve into the mysteries of human and animal minds.'



Alexis Deacon is an award-winning illustrator, and octopuses were his favourite animals as a child. 'I was lucky enough to see one in an aquarium,' he says, 'and the experience really stuck with me. They are the most incredible creatures.'

His eyecatching illustrations for this book evoke the 'otherness' of Frazier's intelligence, and are printed on paper edged with an impressionistic pattern of watery bubbles that invites us into Frazier's world.

3

Discussion Activities

3.1 Talking about the characters and their relationships

There are three main characters in this book. Two of them are people, and one is an octopus.

Show children the illustration of Gerald and Jayla standing next to Frazier in his tank on pages 24-25.

Ask them to describe what they can see, paying special attention to body language and where the light is coming from. What are these characters looking at, and why? What are we looking at? Talk about the picture's composition and how this affects what we notice.

For example, Gerald's in the shadows where he's difficult to see. Jayla's silhouetted against the water, making her more visible.

Alexis Deacon directs our gaze to help us observe and ask questions. What do your children think he wants us to notice about these characters? What questions does this picture raise for them?

Ask children what the text tells us about these characters and the relationships between them. Does this information answer the questions raised by this picture, or is there more your children would like to know?

Taking a broader look

- Why do some people think they know everything, or take things for granted?
- How can we encourage curiosity and kindness, and help each other to be the best



Gerald and Jayla standing next to Frazier in his tank, p. 24-25

3.2 Talking about prejudice

“It’s always the same! People don’t give a damn about anything that doesn’t look like them. And they’re so cruel about anything that’s different! Why do you assume you know what is and isn’t special, what is and isn’t worthy of respect?” page 18

Read this quote to your children and ask them to respond to it. Why does Jayla say this? What is she referring to? Is this outburst solely about Frazier (***“Are you really this upset about an octopus?”*** page 18) or has Jayla experienced other forms of prejudice? How does Gerald react?

As a class, do you agree with these assertions? Develop evidence and arguments to back them up, then do the same to contradict them.

Work together to find and consider the judgemental comments made by Gerald in this book. Is he prejudiced, do you think? How and why does he reconsider these ideas?

Now find examples of Jayla’s “snap judgements”. *For example, she assumes Annie isn’t a scientist because she’s young and fashionably dressed.* Do they reflect her own prejudices? What changes her mind?

Taking a broader look

- Why do you think people form prejudiced opinions?
- Can we prevent prejudice, or lessen its impact? How?
- Are you prejudiced?
- Are animals prejudiced? How would we know?



© Alexis Deacon

Jayla, p. 19

3.3 Talking about the value of curiosity and empathy

“There are so many incredible things still to be discovered in our world if only we have the patience and vision to look for them.” Alexis Deacon

Share this quote with your children. What are the characters in this story trying to discover, and how are they going about it?

Talk about Jayla’s approach to her project and the aquarium’s research, and collect words to describe how she feels and behaves. *For example: curious, excited, observant*

Now consider Gerald’s approach and attitude to what’s going on, and collect words to describe his feelings and behaviour. *For example: uninterested, dismissive, bored*

Curiosity is an important theme in this book, and Jayla is especially curious about Frazier. Ask children what Jayla knows about Frazier, what she wants to know and how she tries to find out.

What does Frazier know about Jayla, and how does he feel? Work together to answer this by looking for clues in the text and pictures. *Use a ‘hot-seating’ activity to help children find out more.*

Trying to understand how others think and feel is also an important theme. Ask children what they know about empathy. Can they find examples of characters empathizing with each other in this story?

Why does Jayla try to see things from Frazier’s perspective? What benefits does her insight bring?

Does Jayla try to understand Gerald, too? Or does she just get cross with him? Could Gerald’s change of heart have happened sooner, if Jayla had communicated better?

Talk about the connection between curiosity and empathy. How does being curious help people empathise with, and understand, each other?

Taking a broader look

- How do other creatures see the world? Does it matter how they think and feel?
- How should we go about discovering such things, and to what use should we put our knowledge?

4

Illustration Activities

4.1 Exploring water-based media

Every page in this book is edged with water-drenched designs – the result of inventive experimentation by Alexis Deacon, who enjoys matching his approach to the story he’s illustrating, and is always on the lookout for unexpected results.

Here, that meant finding a way to represent a meeting between two very separate worlds, and one that Alexis eventually symbolized by using a blend of oil and water – a technique that allowed for accidents and surprises to be incorporated into the images.

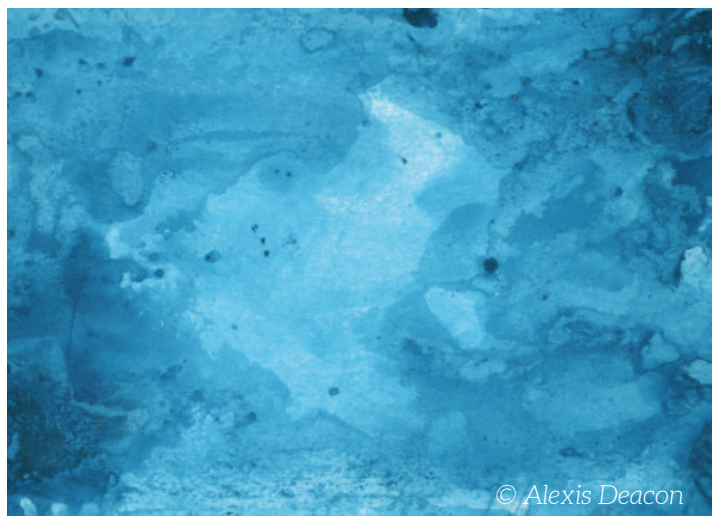
Provide watercolours and wax crayons in varying shades of blue or green, and ask children to explore the effects they can achieve by using them. *For example, try washing watercolour over marks made by wax crayon, candle stubs or oil pastels, and watch the oily media repel the water.* Work on dry, damp and wet paper, and note what happens. Invite children to share discoveries, and reinforce their learning around how these media behave, and why.

Tell children that illustrators often try new ideas and experiment to get the results they want, and explain why Alexis chose to use water-based and oil-based media to create the artwork for this book.

Show children the endpapers and page borders. What do they notice about the colours, patterns and textures? Has anyone created similar effects?

Ask children to build on their explorations, observations and discussions to create a whole-page ‘watery’ design that could be used as endpapers for a book.

Use your endpapers to cover a notebook, display them as artwork in their own right or use to frame your blot-creatures from activity 4.3



Endpaper

Extend by trying traditional marbling techniques, or create bubble-printed endpapers.

4.2 Drawing underwater life from observation

“Here, in the water with the other animals, was the magic...” page 10

Share this quote with your class and talk about Jayla’s interest in marine biology. Where and how did she first experience the ocean?

Look at the illustration on page 14. Talk about what it depicts, and how it’s drawn. Does it show a whole octopus? Compare it with those on the cover and on pages 3 and 23. What do these images tell us about octopuses? How do they make us feel?

Look at photographs of octopuses, or watch them moving on a video. Do Alexis’s illustrations look exactly like a real octopus? Ask children whether they think he could have created these illustrations without looking at a real octopus.

Accurate observation is a key skill for scientists, but it’s necessary for artists, too. Even if an illustration is going to be impressionistic in style, careful observation and/or drawing from life are usually involved.

Show children photos and videos of marine creatures, observing and discussing their forms, colours and movements. Ask them to make observational sketches, capturing what they see, rather than relying on what they expect to see, then work on their favourites to create finished drawings.

Extend by
visiting an aquarium
and making
observational sketches
while you’re there.

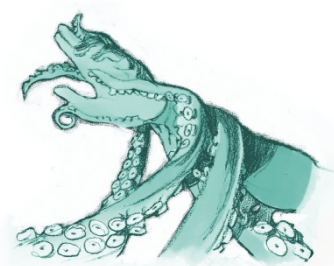


Front cover

Left to right: Octopus, p. 3, 23, 14



© Alexis Deacon



4.3 From blots to creatures

Show children the cover image of Frazier and discuss how it could have been created.

Activities 4.1 and 4.2 will give children insights about media and observational drawing

Talk about realism and impressionism, and explore Alexis's illustrations in this context. What does this particular image gain by being impressionistic? What feelings does it convey?

Show children the illustration of the octopus on page 3. Discuss what you can see and how it could have been created.

Provide watercolours or diluted drawing ink and ask children to create interestingly-shaped blots on damp or dry paper. Using photos and/or their observational sketches from activity 4.2 as a reference, challenge them to use their imaginations to transform these blots into impressionistic but convincing marine creatures.

If you'd like to build on this activity with creative writing, use it to introduce activity 5.3



© Alexis Deacon

Octopus, p. 3

5

Writing Activities

5.1 Help Frazier tell his own story

This activity invites children to put themselves in Frazier's position and imagine how he sees the world, and could build on Discussion Activity 3.1

Show children the picture of Jayla observing Frazier in the tank. Ask what Frazier can see, and what he thinks is going on.

Working as a class, re-read Jayla and Gerald's encounter with Frazier on pages 12 – 20.

Choose a specific moment in this episode to freeze-frame. Cast three volunteers in role as Frazier, Jayla and Gerald, and invite the rest of your class to summarise what they know about Jayla and Gerald's thoughts and emotions in this scene. Then ask the child playing Frazier to describe his take on the situation.

Broaden your discussion to consider how Frazier feels more generally about the events described in this story. Do your children think he understands them? What could have motivated him to act this way? Discuss as a class and make notes, then ask children to tell or write this story from Frazier's point of view.



Gerald and Jayla standing next to Frazier in his tank, p. 24-25

5.2 Finding out about marine life

“There was so much life in that blue water, just begging to be understood and appreciated” page 10

Re-read the section of the book describing Jayla’s first encounter with the ocean (pages 9-10) and ask children what creatures she observes. How does this experience make her feel? Why do your children think she wants to become a marine biologist?

As a class, discuss what this story tells us about working as a scientific researcher. What attracts Jayla to this type of work? How will this internship help her to achieve her goal?

Ask children to imagine they are marine biologists, and invite them to choose a sea creature to study. Can they undertake a research project by gathering information about their creature and presenting their findings as an illustrated factual report?



© Alexis Deacon

Octopus, p. 8

5.3 Imagining new creatures

■ This activity could build on the creatures your children pictured in activity 4.3

“He was bigger than a labrador and looked like a wizened old man. His dark eyes blinked out of a massive bulbous forehead...” page 3

Read this quote to your children and discuss its imagery, then work together to find further descriptions of Frazier. Ask children to pick out the words and phrases that really bring Frazier to life. Why do they think Avital chose these words and images?

Ask children to imagine they’ve discovered a new creature. What does it look like? How does it move? Can they describe it using evocative, attention-grabbing adjectives and imagery? To kickstart this activity and tune children into this ‘unexpected’ mode of description, share a collection of nouns and noun phrases, then ask children to create their own statements based on Avital’s quote.

For example:

- *It was bigger than a ... and looked like a*
- *It was longer than a ... and looked like a....*

Talk about curiosity and empathy, and the idea of ‘seeing the world through other eyes’. Encourage children to be curious about their creature (what questions could they ask?) and empathise with it (how might it feel, and what could it want?)

“His tentacles... were curious – it felt like he was seeing her, and in a way he was. She thought about the octopus brain, distributed throughout its body, not just in its head like ours. This meant that, in a beautifully odd way, it could almost see with its skin.”
page 13

Read and discuss this quote with your class. If an octopus can experience the world so differently, what about the creatures your children are imagining? What senses do they have, and how do they experience their world?

■ This could build on discussion activity 3.3

Ask children to use curiosity, empathy and evocative imagery to help them write a vivid description of their creature.

Extend by asking children to describe themselves from their creature’s point of view. What words and phrases will it choose, and why? What’s its frame of reference?

10 stories to make a difference

That Thing is part of a collection of ten inspiring stories for young readers that celebrate difference and individuality.

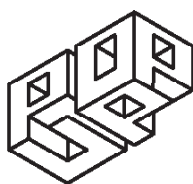
All the books in our **10 Stories to Make a Difference** collection are beautifully illustrated and perfect for children, aged 5 and up.



Each of the books is an exciting collaboration between well-known and emerging writers and illustrators, giving a platform to bold new voices.

We believe that all children should be able to find themselves, and discover others, through the stories they read. We therefore hope that these amazing stories will entertain and inspire the young readers in your lives.

Enjoy and feel free to get in touch with us at info@pop-up.org.uk.
We always love to hear from our readers!



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