



Avis and the Promise of Dragons

Avis has a dream to work with animals, so when a scientist with a witchy-looking house offers her a job as a pet-sitter she jumps at the chance. But it turns out Avis is not looking after pets at all – the animals in Dr Malinda Childe’s backyard are as eccentric as she is and Avis has to promise to keep them a secret.

One promise and one secret leads to more promises and more secrets, and before long Avis finds herself overwhelmed by promises and secrets and responsibilities and one very BIG chocolatey dragonish problem.

About the author

Heather McQuillan used to be a teacher who wrote. Now she is a writer who teaches. The two roles keep getting twisted and tangled. This is her third novel for young people. She also writes short stories, flash fiction and poetry for all ages. If she is not writing in her room at the top of a spiral staircase, Heather can often be found at The School for Young Writers in Christchurch, where she is a tutor and director.

Preparation for reading the text with the class

Before introducing the class to *Avis and the Promise of Dragons* as a read-aloud or novel text, become familiar with the text yourself.

DISPLAY THE COVER AND TITLE

- What are your expectations?
- Will there be dragons or not?
- If the eye is the 'window to the soul' what does this eye say about this creature?

DISPLAY AND READ THE BLURB

Avis has a dream to work with animals, so when a scientist with a witchy-looking house offers her a job as a pet-sitter she jumps at the chance. But it turns out Avis is not looking after pets at all – the animals in Dr Malinda Childes' backyard are as eccentric as she is and Avis has to promise to keep them a secret.

But one promise and one secret leads to more promises and more secrets and before long Avis finds herself overwhelmed by promises and secrets and responsibilities and one very BIG chocolatey dragonish problem.

- Discuss secrets and promises.
- Do you have to keep a promise?
- When should you tell someone about a secret?
- Who do you trust with your secrets? *Note: ensure students know there is a safe person for them to speak to in private.*

DISPLAY AND READ THE QUOTE

This tear was a different sort. As it fell from scales to the air it hardened and gleamed clear as ice, and formed into a diamond. Humbert hummed again but not a sad hum. This was the hum of a dragon that had just received a promise as unbreakable as diamond.

Humbert's eye fixed on Avis, waiting for her to pick up the dragon's tear.

- Who do you think Humbert is?
- What do you think is going on here?
- Predict what might happen if Avis picks up the dragon's tear?

During and After Reading

MAKING CONNECTIONS

- Have you read gossip in magazines or online? How would it feel to be the one being gossiped about?
- What do you know about lizards? Can you tell the difference between a gecko and a skink?
- Have you heard about other habitats being destroyed by human actions? What effects does this have for the creatures living there?
- How would you define 'real'? How would you define 'imaginary'? Which parts of the text are 'real' and which 'imaginary'? Think about other texts you have read where real and imaginary exist side by side.
- Avis finds herself overwhelmed with a lot of responsibility throughout the book. Relate this to situations where you have felt overwhelmed? How did you manage? Did you find people to help or get through by yourself?
- Taste some dark cacao chocolate or chilli chocolate. Did you like it? Why do different tastes appeal to different people?
- There are a number of times throughout the books where Avis faces ethical decisions – she doesn't always get them right. What might you have chosen to do in these situations?

VISUALISING

- Pick a key moment and 'run the movie' in your head. Act this out. How is your 'movie' different to someone else's?
- Draw one of the dragons as described in the book.
- Draw a lizard in its natural habitat, or draw one of the lizards in Malinda's tunnel house.

QUESTIONING

- What questions do you have for Avis or one of the other characters about the choices they made?
- Hotseat a character together as a group. *Hotseating is a drama process convention in which class members question or interview someone who is in role to bring out additional information, ideas, and attitudes about the character.*
- List questions for the author, Heather McQuillan, about choices she made in telling the story.
- What questions do you have about the ethics of taking creatures out of their environment to save them? Can something be right and wrong at the same time?

PREDICTING

- At various points in the story predict the way things are going to turn out for Avis. Note how often your predictions correspond with where the story goes.
- Write a synopsis for a different choice that Avis could have made at any stage in the story and list the new set of consequences.
- Do you think the story ends here? Does the author give any indications of a sequel? Predict what might happen in a sequel?



SEQUENCING

- How did we get here? Select key points in the story and ask the children to determine how we got here. One moment is when Avis locks Drake in the garden as an offering to Humbert's appetite. This is a pretty extreme action, but what has led Avis to this point?

Summarising Post-Reading Activities

- Write a synopsis of *Avis and the Promise of Dragons* as if you were applying to make this book into a movie.
- Write an ad for *Avis and the Promise of Dragons*. How much of the plot can you give without spoiling the surprises for others?
- Make a 'mind map' of the characters in the story and show how they interact along the link lines. (This can also be done throughout the reading as a group / class activity)

Synthesizing Post-Reading Activities

Using information and understanding that has been gained from the book, create something new.

- If you could discover a mythical creature which one would it be and why? How would you care for it? Make a 'How to care for a ___' plan. Remember to add some warnings!
- Work with friends or family to create a lizard refuge in your garden or school grounds.
<https://www.doc.govt.nz/get-involved/conservation-activities/attract-lizards-to-your-garden>
- Locate and visit areas near you where lizards live and take a photo/photos. What's the best time of day? How will you need to behave in order to see and photograph a lizard? Can you identify the lizards you photograph?

Did you know New Zealand has its own mysterious lizards? Within Māori tradition there are references to several kinds of large reptiles that lived in the dense bush. Kumi and ngārara are believed to be mythical. The existence of kawekawau was reported from widespread localities in the northern half of the North Island. The most often repeated description was of a lizard about two feet long that lived in trees, but there also reports that it was able to fly and become invisible.

- Can you find out about any stories from your area?
- What if one of these creatures was found?
- How might you track down one of these creatures? What would you do if you found evidence of their existence? What if you found living ones? Write about it in any form.

Building Vocabulary Knowledge

- Make class lists of new or unusual vocabulary that the author uses.
- Check the meanings of these words that Avis had to look up: metabolism, cacao
- Did you pick anything interesting about the names of many of the characters in the book? Check out the meanings behind Avis, Bruno, Ralph, Malinda, Drake and Todd.



General Summative Discussion

- What was Avis's biggest problem? How did she manage it?
- What effect did Drake's behaviour have on Avis? Who could have helped her?
- What is believable? Where did you have to suspend disbelief?
- Can you find parallels with other well-known stories that involve mythical creatures?

Links with other learning

- Science: animals/endangered animals
- Health: bullying, family breakups, secrets and promises, friendship