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Readers' / Teachers' Notes

The Snow Angel

By Lauren St John, Illustrated by Catherine Hyde



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Fiction / Children's • £6.99

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Setting

The beginning:

Discuss and Research:

Where does the story begin?

Where is Nairobi? How far is it from Mount Kenya?

Which countries surround Kenya?

Makena takes a trip with her father and it is just as she imagined:

“Lilies, herbs and blue delphinium lined the path. Proteas with velvety yellow flowers brushed her hands. Birds sang and flitted. The alpine chats were so tame they barely moved out of her way. Jewelled sunbirds drank nectar from the gladioli. Red-winged starlings hunted through the lobelia for snails. It was every bit the mountain paradise Makena had imagined.” Page 56

Research and Discuss:

Can you find a picture of the Rutundu Lake in a book or online? Is it how you imagined it when you read the story?

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Discuss /Activity:

Lauren St John uses many Swahili and Shona words in the text. Why does she do this? Can you translate the following words from their context (the way in which they are used in the story)?

Shamwari (page 24)

Mawingu (page 25)

mzungu (page 53)

hakuna matata (page 55)

haraka (page 62)

nakupenda (page 69)

usitoke (page 117)

“The January sun was slow-cooking Kenyatta street market. Sweating customers haggled over cassava, tomatoes and barrels of smoking corn. Chickens protested from a basket on the back of a bicycle. A trader chased a goat intent on gobbling all his spinach.” Page 15

and

“Beneath a dizzying blue sky, roadside vendors beamed behind colourful pyramids of pineapples, tangerines and avocados.” Page 19

Think about the way Lauren St John uses specific foods and animals to show the reader where her book is set.

Activity:

Can you write a description of a marketplace in a particular country? Don't name the country but try to 'show' the reader where it is by the things you describe. Hint: use colour, animals, scents, behaviour. Now show a partner and see if they can guess where your scene is set.

“Whether you're on Everest or Mount Kenya, snow falls when ice crystals stick together in clouds and the temperature is lower than two degrees Celsius. There's not one temperature for snow in Nepal and another in Kenya.” Page 30

One of the ways in which St John plays with settings is by depicting temperatures. But despite what Makena's father says, even the same temperature can be different in certain settings. Look at the language used for the cold depending on Makena's emotions.

Sometimes snow has a 'rice crispy crunch' or a 'pearly sparkle'. But sometimes the cold bears a 'bitter wind', she is 'rubbed raw' with 'bloodless fingers'.

Activity:

Write a description in extreme heat or cold - and pick your language carefully to describe whether it is a good or bad experience.

The slums:

When Makena is orphaned, she spends some time living in the slums of Nairobi. Look at the language St John uses to describe her life here: 'flying toilets', 'third-hand toothbrushes'.

Activity:

Think about all the amenities you use - make a list of all the 'everyday' things you take for granted.

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St John makes a parallel between the book *Watership Down* (page 161) and the slums of Nairobi. Comparing one book to another in this way is called intertextuality. In *Watership Down* by Richard Adams, it says **“Rabbits live close to death and when death comes closer than usual, thinking about survival leaves little room for anything else.”**

Discuss:

How does this apply to the orphans living in slums? In what way do their struggles and search for home resemble the battles of the rabbits in Richard Adams’ famous book?

Re-read the chapter entitled: ‘Lords of Mathare’.

Activity:

Can you imagine living in a slum? Either write a diary entry of a day in the slum. What do you do? What do you eat? Whom do you talk to?

Or write a newspaper report describing the slums.

Cultural Heritage:

When Helen’s parents come to Africa they bring tartan cushions. But also **“They’d taken Africa back to Scotland too.” Page 203**

Activity:

Think about your own cultural heritage. Which object, plant or skill represents part of your culture? What could you bring from your own culture to teach others?

Draw a picture and an accompanying caption.

Create a classroom collage of your different cultural identities. How do others differ? And which are similar?

“The air was blue with smoking pans of biryani and chapatti; beef knotty with gristle, blackened cobs of *makai*. She ducked under clothes-rails, squeezed between green hills of pumpkin leaves and bowls of dewy mangoes.” Page 127

The settings in *The Snow Angel* are as important as the characters. Think about the different settings - from Africa to Scotland.

Discuss:

Look at the paragraph above, and then think about how the language of description changes through the arc of the novel, from the initial setting of the mountain, to Priscilla’s neighbourhood and to the slums. How does Lauren St John use animals and colours to depict friendly places?

How does Lauren St John draw contrasts or comparisons between the different settings?

Hint: compare the hills of rubbish in the slums to the mountains in nature? Compare the different temperatures of Africa and Scotland. Compare the mountains of Africa and Scotland.

Near the end of the book, St John describes Makena as being **“far from Kenya, in one of the coldest places on earth, but all of a sudden her heart felt warm.” Page 270**

Discuss:

Which setting does Makena consider to be home? How does St John show this?

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Writing Style

The Reader:

Look at the first line of the book:

“Makena took a deep breath and stepped off the edge of the crevasse.” Page 11

Discuss /Activity:

What has the author done here? Why has the author done this?

Can you use this first line as the opening line in your own story?

*Why do you think St John has titled her book *The Snow Angel*? Who is the Snow Angel in the story?*

What title would you have given the book?

Perspectives:

Look at the chapter entitled ‘Shimmer’. The author changes the perspective of the narrator.

Discuss /Activity:

Why has she done this in this part of the story? Does it work? Is it unusual to hear an adult point of view in a children’s book? Can you think of any other books you have read in which the author does this?

Can you write a perspective of the slums from Makena’s and then Helen’s points of view? What are the differences between your two pieces of writing?

This is a book in which a lot happens to Makena.

Discuss /Activity:

Can you make a storyboard showing her journey from the mountains of Africa to the mountains of Scotland?

What is memorable about the book? And who is your favourite character and why?

Family and friendship

Family:

At the beginning of the novel Makena has a very loving family unit, which is why it is particularly hard for her when she is orphaned. Look at the characters of her parents, and her relationship with them.

Makena’s father is a mountain guide. He gives Makena advice on climbing mountains, but the advice often relates to life in general too.

“Baba says the only thing that counts when he’s guiding clients up Mount Kenya is keeping his head when everyone else is losing theirs.” Page 14

Discuss:

What does this phrase mean? Does Makena keep her head? Who loses theirs?

Makena’s father explains the Rules of Mountaineering to Makena and she remembers them in the chapter of the same name:

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- **“Always triple-check the weather and ensure you have the correct equipment, clothing and supplies before heading out. Take a fully-charged phone**
- **Do all you can to minimise risk. Don’t be a hero**
- **Listen to your body and mind” Page 292**

Research and Activity:

Which other rules would you add to this? Make a poster with your rules.

Draw yourself and the equipment you need to climb a mountain, labelling each item. You might need to research this.

Makena often refers to Sherpa Tenzing. What can you find out about him?

Makena’s father gives out lots more advice: “Trust your intuition” page 56, “Climbing is like the journey of life...There is always a second chance. If you keep on walking and keep on trying, you’ll get there in the end.” Page 47 and “If you are brave for a noble cause, because you want to help others or fight for justice or save a life – perhaps even your own life – then being brave is the best thing of all.” Page 95

Activity:

Look at your poster with your rules of Mountaineering. Can any of these apply as rules of life as well? Can you write a letter to a younger child/sibling/cousin with some rules for life?

“They know the Swahili proverb: ‘A cowardly hyena lives for many years.’” Page 43

Discuss:

What is Makena’s father trying to tell her about bravery. What does being brave mean? Think about different ways in which you’ve been brave.

“Was entering a plague zone to save a life the right kind of bravery or the stupid kind?” page 96

Makena’s parents are brave and go to help others. But they sacrifice their lives in doing so.

Activity:

Draw up a list of pros and cons about going to save people in a plague zone. Think about the real doctors and nurses who do this.

Now look at Makena’s actions: “Fighting back tears, she walked the length of the slum handing it out to every hungry child she could find. Which was most of them. Next morning, she’d woken up hungry herself.” page 160

She copies a lesson from her parents. Was she right to do this?

Makena’s parents are often laughing in the initial part of the story: “that picture of her parents laughing on their wedding day was worth more to her than all the gold in Africa” page 122

Discuss:

Think about Makena’s family. She makes a new family with those who aren’t related to her. Look at what Makena’s parents provided for her, then think about her time with her friends in the slum, and then Helen. Contrast this with her time at Priscilla’s house. What are the ingredients for a happy family?

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Activity:

Write a cake recipe for a 'happy family'. What would go in the mix?

Friendship:

Before she is taken in by Helen, Makena makes a wonderful friend in Snow. At the end Snow writes her a letter describing how she too has been adopted and saved from the slums. (page 317).

Activity:

Can you pretend you are Makena and write a letter back to Snow describing your Christmas with Helen and her father? What would you mention?

Hope

Possessions:

"Remember – however long the night, the dawn will break." Page 114

Although there are some terrible things highlighted in *The Snow Angel*, above all else, the book is about hope. Look at Makena's treasured possessions: a jar of snow, a posy of pressed wildflowers, an eggcup filled with volcanic ash and driftwood in the shape of a pouncing leopard.

Discuss /Activity:

What do these possessions have in common? How do they represent hope?

Write a list of your treasured possessions. Are they very different from Makena's? How?

Hint: Are they remembrances of past experiences or memories of people? Do they represent your interests and your hopes for your own future? Or are they about the present/the here and now?

In Roald Dahl's *The BFG*, the giant stores people's night-time dreams in jars. After Makena loses her home, her hopeful daytime dream is of seeing snow again in her empty jar.

Activity:

Have a go at making your own jar of hopes or dreams.

Hint: Take a clean empty jam jar and put something in it that's representative of your future hopes. Make a display with your friends/class of your jam jars. You could write a label attached to the rim, or attach a sticky label on the front to explain your treasured possession.

Have a look at the Roald Dahl BFG Dream Jar Trail from 2016 online for inspiration.

Hurry:

Makena's mother is keen to press upon Makena that life should not be hurried.

"If all you do is run, run, run, you can miss what is right in front of you." Page 26

"Hurry, hurry has no blessings." Page 62

Discuss /Activity:

What does she mean by these two phrases?

Take a (slow, aimless) walk in your neighbourhood. Look around you. Sketch some of the things you see. Can you notice anything that you wouldn't normally see when you are going about your daily life? Does slowing down make you notice things more?

"And those who believed the saying *Msafiri mbali, hupita jabali*: one who travels widely will pass the mountain...The rays of light and love that shone through the darkness of Mathare were a

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source of daily wonder to her. Hope was everywhere. It found its way up through the dirt and desperation like a wildflower struggling through a crack in an inner-city pavement.” Page 174

Discuss and activity:

Why do the women in the slum laugh more although their days are harder? Look at the simile of the wildflower that St John uses. Can you see how nature represents hope in the book? Can you think of your own nature similes?

Magic Moments:

Snow teaches Makena two important qualities to find hope in every day, no matter how glum the circumstances. The first is looking for ‘magic moments’:

“That’s why there are always at least three magic moments every day, to make up for it.” Page 148

Discuss/Activity:

What does Snow mean by this? Why does she come up with the idea of magic moments? Can you make your own list of magic moments today? Can you keep a diary of magic moments for a week? Compare them with a partner. Are any of them the same?

Having a Mission:

Snow’s second message is that **“Everyone has to have a mission. Without that, why would they get up in the morning – except to see the sunrise?” page 154.**

Makena’s mission is to find more snow for her jar.

Activity:

Do you have a mission? What is it?

Over time, groups of people have come up with the idea of a mission statement. This is not just a personal goal but a collective statement of the group’s missions and aims.

Brainstorm collectively and write a mission statement for your class.

Inspirational People:

Snow also refers to an inspirational person who gives her hope. Her person is Michaela DePrince.

Research:

Can you research who Michaela DePrince is and why she might be inspirational for Snow?

*Think about who might be your inspirational person. Consider Snow’s statement **“Some are famous but those aren’t always the best. No one ever thinks about the nameless ones because they don’t sell expensive tickets, but a lot of them have done things that are far more important.” Page 184.***

Discuss:

Do you agree? Can you think of any people who aren’t famous but have done important things?

Snow quotes Michaela: **“Michaela says: “The corps is the backdrop to the story, a forest, a snowstorm, a flock of birds or a field of flowers. One red poppy in a field of yellow daffodils draws the audience’s eyes to the one poppy. However, I don’t think the answer is to cull the poppy. I think it’s to scatter more poppies about the field of daffodils.”” Page 186.**

Look at the illustration of the poppy on the accompanying page.

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Discuss: Why do you think the publisher has chosen to have an illustration here? What does it mean 'to scatter more poppies' here? Do you agree with Snow that this is the answer?

"They'd start their own Kenyan orphanage and give hope to children." Page 202 And "love was in the detail. It was in Cook Joyce's nutritious meals; in the tiny but well-stocked library; in the polished wood floors and the plum-hued bougainvillea spilling in at the windows." Page 203

Discuss:

How does Helen give hope to Makena? And does Makena give hope to Helen? How?

Lauren St John ends her book with this quote: **"Between every two pine trees there is a doorway to a new life." John Muir. Page 329**

Research and Discuss:

Who was John Muir? Why do you think St John uses his quote? What do you think it means?

Magic/Folklore/Superstition

Miracles

The Snow Angel gives differing views on magic, superstition and the unexplained. Makena's mother in particular offers contradictory views that confuse Makena:

"I thought you didn't believe in luck? It isn't scientific."

Her mother laughed. "That's true. I don't. But I do believe in miracles." Page 29

and

"It was Einstein's belief that there are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." Page 309

Discuss:

Can you believe in science and magic at the same time? What is the difference between luck and miracles? Can you think of any miracles in everyday life?

The Fox

The fox is a sign of magic in *The Snow Angel* - saving Makena's life more than once. See the chapter entitled 'Shimmer', page 198.

The shining fox (page 60) "Seeing is believing"

"Sparks spat behind it, like the tail of a shooting star." Page 231

"It had an unusually bushy tail with a starlight shimmer." Page 258

Discuss /Activity:

Why has the author chosen a fox? Why does she describe its tail as being like a shooting star? Look at the fox in folklore. Although in Western imagery the fox is usually portrayed as a trickster, and 'to fox' means to trick or deceive, have a closer look at fox folklore from around the world. The Achomawi Indians believed that a silver fox assisted the coyote in preparing the world for people, in Finland, the Northern Lights are known as 'fox fires'. Why? Shintoism believes in the kitsune, which is a spirit fox. What does this mean?

Create a poster about the 'fox'. Which type of fox do you think Makena encountered in Africa? How

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does it differ from Scottish foxes? See if you can identify the different species. You might want to create a sidebar on foxes in stories in different cultures.

At the end of the book Makena tries to figure out the appearances of the fox:

“What do you think it was, then, the fox on the mountain?” persisted Makena. ‘An escaped Arctic fox that’s super-smart and likes saving humans who like saving animals? Or was it a ghost? Or maybe an angel?’” page 324

Discuss:

What do you think it was?

Mythology

Think about the African mythology mentioned by Lauren St John. She talks about the Tokoloshe on pages 21.

Research and Discuss:

The mountain is also referred to as being a religious place, a spiritual home. The Kikuyu call Mount Kenya, Kiri Nyaga, God’s Resting Place. (page 34)

Why do you think the author mentions this?

The Power of Nature

Everything about Lauren St John’s book is tied up with nature. So much so that Makena regards the mountains as her friends. **“The mountains were her friends.” Page 17**

Discuss:

Think about her story. Are the mountains always her friends?

On page 11, Mount Everest’s Khumbu Icefall is described as a **“beautiful nightmare”**.

Discuss:

Can something be a beautiful nightmare? Can it have both good and bad qualities? Can you think of other natural places that might be described as beautiful nightmares? Why?

“Fixed it myself with mountain honey and aloe vera. Best burn treatment in the world.” Page 33

Makena and her parents are very aware of the healing power of nature. In this way, they are not dissimilar from scientists and botanists who have long known that plants have medicinal properties.

Activity:

Can you think of any ‘natural’ cures? Do some research in the library and online to find out some plant medicines. Can you draw up a prescription for a friend? Describe the problem and then offer the cure.

Many of the similes and metaphors used in the book evoke animals. The details of a dream are as **“slippery as a mamba” page 40**, the nightmare clung to Makena **“like a snakeskin” page 50**.

In the slums, she has a **“leopard’s claw” page 131** in her side from a stitch. Makena is called a rat on page 137. Snow is **“watchful as a wolf” page 156** and the men **“buzzing like hornets” page 157**. And yet, **“watching the black eagle calmed Makena.” page 52**

Activity:

Take one chapter of the book and list all the references to animals. Are they portrayed as being dangerous and frightening, or comforting and kind? Compare with a partner who has tackled a

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different chapter. Where does St John use frightening imagery and where comforting imagery of animals?

More often than not, it is the natural scents of nature that make Makena think of happy days - time with her parents for example.

“Makena went from rose to rose, pressing her nose to their silky petals. Scents of jasmine, freshly-picked apples, raspberry, vanilla and old-fashioned sweets filled her nostrils. Her heart pinged like an elastic band. Happy, happy, happy.” Page 219

Activity:

Can you think of a memory that makes your heart ping happy? Can you remember the scents or colours that surrounded you? Draw a picture of the memory or write about it.

“the smell of wood and pine needles transported her straight to Mount Kenya.” Page 244

Activity:

Here, it is the smell of Christmas that makes Makena think of the mountain. Do your family celebrate a special day? What are the scents of that day? Can you describe them?

Difficult Issues

The story contains many ‘difficult’ issues that you may have heard about on the news, such as Ebola, famine, malaria orphans, child soldiers.

“You should see the child soldiers...She opened a can and took a long swallow. ‘Famine, war, snakebite and malaria orphans, we’ve got them all. Then there are the Ebola orphans from Sierra Leone.” Page 148

Discuss, research, activity: Do you think difficult issues should be tackled in children’s fiction?

What is Ebola? How does it spread? Use this link to help you.

<http://kidshealth.org/en/kids/ebola.html>

Think about why Edwin lies to his wife about how Makena’s parents died? Discuss why it is important for people to be educated about dangerous illnesses.

What are child soldiers? Use this link to help you.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/find_out/guides/world/child_soldiers/newsid_3757000/3757419.stm

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child aims to protect children from being soldiers. Write your own convention on the Rights of the Child. What rights and protections would you include?

Further Reading:

Running on the Roof of the World by Jess Butterworth

National Geographic, Danger on the Mountain: True Stories of Extreme Adventures by Gregg Treinish and Kitson Jazyuka

A Jigsaw of Fire and Stars by Yaba Badoe

Tiger of the Snows: Tenzing Norgay: The Boy Whose Dream was Everest by Robert Burleigh

The Boy Who Conquered Everest: The Jordan Romero Story by Katherine Blanc

The Garbage King by Elizabeth Laird

Butterfly Lion by Michael Morpurgo

Dear Olly by Michael Morpurgo

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Ballerina Dreams by Michael DePrince
A Long Walk to Water by Linda Sue Park

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