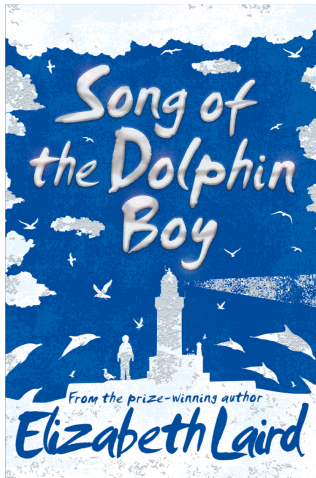


TEACHERS' NOTES FOR *SONG OF THE DOLPHIN BOY*

HOW I CAME TO WRITE THE BOOK



A few years ago, I met an adventurous undersea camera man called Simon Christopher. He lives in Borneo and shoots amazing pictures of the creatures in the tropical seas. He told me how distressed he is by the amount of rubbish he encounters in the sea, in areas which had been pristine a few years ago. I didn't know much about ocean pollution and this was shocking news to me, as David Attenborough's wonderful Blue Planet 2 films hadn't yet been screened on TV.

"You're a writer," Simon said. "Can't you write something? The world needs a wake-up call!"

I didn't sleep that night while stories raced through my head, and the next day the character of Finn was there. Now I needed a setting for him, where he could discover his magical self.

CROMARTY LIGHTHOUSE

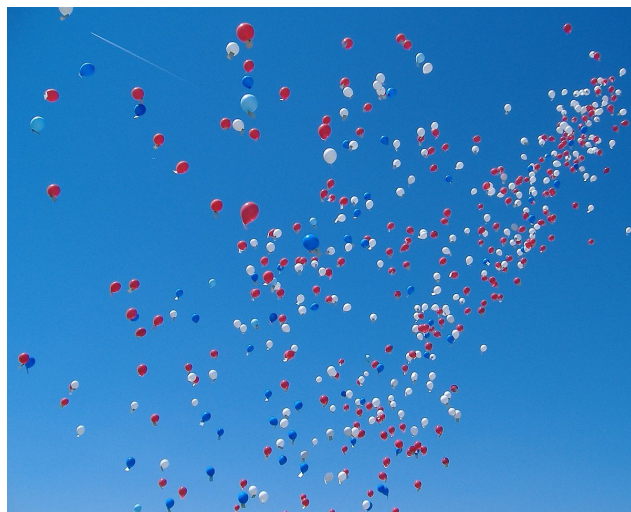
I got in touch with Professor Paul Thompson, the Director of Aberdeen University's Lighthouse Field Station in Cromarty, a centre for research into the conservation of marine systems. It's such a cool place! The lighthouse overlooks the beautiful Cromarty Firth, where a pod of dolphins live, hunting for fish and every now and then leaping out of the water in a spectacular show of acrobatics.

Professor Thompson is worried about plastic pollution. "Plastic bags and bottles aren't the only problem," he said. "People don't realise that balloons are deadly too. Dolphins and seabirds think the balloons are jelly fish, but when they eat them the balloons fill their stomachs and they can starve."

I had no idea that the fun of releasing balloons into the air and watching them float away could have such deadly consequences.



Professor Thompson at the Cromarty Lighthouse



A mass balloon release
Balloons are deadly to wildlife

THE MORAY FIRTH DOLPHIN STUDY

Barbara Cheney, the dolphin expert at the Lighthouse, is studying how the dolphins in the Moray Firth communicate with each other. She passed on some remarkable facts about them.

- Every dolphin has its own signature whistle and they can recognise and find each other through long distances of water.
- Dolphins also make clicks which they use to find fish. As they get closer, the clicks get faster, making a buzzing noise. Although they have ears, dolphins hear sounds underwater through the jelly-like material in their lower jaws.
- Dolphins show anger like other mammals do – through posturing, biting and chasing. But they can also slap their tails on the water, leap right out of the sea and “belly flop”, or even land on top of another dolphin.
- Dolphins are very sociable animals and love to touch and communicate with each other.
- They are very intelligent.



A dolphin calf with its mother



A dolphin too close to a balloon that's landed in the sea

THE SELKIE MYTH

One of Scotland's best known folk tales is the story of the seal woman, who falls in love with a fisherman. She comes out of the sea, sheds her skin and marries him. He hides her skin, but one day she finds it again. The call of the sea and her own people is too strong. She puts her skin on again, returns to the sea and is never seen again. I made the old legend the basis for my story, substituting a dolphin for the seal, and giving her son, "the magical boy", the ability to be like the dolphins. I wrote the poem at the start of the book in the traditional ballad style in the way that so many old Scottish stories have been told.

*A fisherman sat on the lonely shore,
Mending his nets and sighing.
Far out to sea, a dolphin heard
The love song he was singing...*

THE ILLUSTRATIONS

SONG OF THE DOLPHIN BOY is brought to life by Peter Bailey's wonderful illustrations. This image of the fictional village of Stromhead gives the reader an accurate map of where all the action takes place.



DISCUSSION NOTES

1. **[Finn] didn't quite fit in with anyone.** Examine the ways in which Finn could be described as an outsider. Do you think he's really as different as he feels?
2. **The swell washed round him softly as if it was welcoming him. It seemed almost to hold him in an embrace.** Discuss the language and imagery used by the author to describe the sea. Is it effective?
3. Why do you think the author chose to set her story in this fishing village?
4. Jas and Finn have both grown up without a mother — how do their experiences compare?
5. **Finn had brought himself up without much help from his dad.** Discuss Finn's relationship with his father. How does it change throughout the story?
6. Compare and contrast the friendships Finn makes throughout the story — with both the dolphins and the Lighthouse Crew.
7. **And then, with the greatest joy he had ever known, he stopped wondering about what was happening, and gave himself up to the sea. He felt as if he had come home.** Is there anything that makes you feel as happy as Finn does in the sea? Perhaps a hobby or sport?
8. **Then he saw that the balloon's string was caught in the dolphin's teeth. She was twisting herself round to get rid of it, but only succeeded in tangling it over one of her flippers.** Have the environmental elements of this story made you think about how we treat our planet? What do you think can we do to be greener?

You Can Help!

Rubbish, such as glass or plastic bottles, floats in almost every ocean and sea. This is very dangerous for marine animals who eat plastic bags confusing them with food and get tangled in the rubbish.

You Can Help!

You can answer the SOS! Here are some tips:

- Recycle plastic, glass and other materials. This prevents them getting into the sea, and saves natural resources taken from the sea
- Say no to using plastic straws, cups or cutlery when you can
- Remember to take your own bags to the shops instead of using plastic bags
- When you go for a picnic outside, remember to bring back all your rubbish with you or recycle/dispose in a bin
- If you see some rubbish on the beach pick it up and recycle or throw in a proper bin
- When you're on the coast or in the sea, avoid damaging rocks, seaweed, animals and corals
- Do not collect animals or plants. Leave them as part of the natural habitat
- Do not buy souvenirs of marine animals, such as starfish and seahorses