



## **Teaching Notes**

### ***Azizi and the Little Blue Bird***

**by Laila Koubaa**

**illustrated by Mattias De Leeuw**

*translated by David Colmer*



## **Synopsis**

In this contemporary fairytale, a young boy and an escaped bird free their country from rule of tyrannical despots.

## **The Author**

Laila Koubaa is a Belgian author with Tunisian roots. As a child she spent her summer holidays with her father's family in Tunis. When the Jasmine Revolution (also called the Twitter Revolution) started in December 2010, she felt compelled to tell the story of young Azizi and the little blue bird. Teachers will be interested to know that the little blue bird is a symbol for Twitter. Ben Ali, the President of Tunisia, shut down the internet during the Jasmine Revolution to prevent the people communicating with each other on social media.

## **Themes**

This rendition of a traditional folk tale includes many of the conventions of the genre, the poor boy who becomes the hero, the despotic ruler, and the magical agent who, in the shape of an animal, empowers the good hero to overthrow evil.

The story explores ideas of freedom and justice. Although there are real parallels to this story across the world, most middle-school students will be more adept at discussing these issues on a personal rather than a political level. There may however be students in your class who are refugees from countries where people are at risk of their lives and who may have a deeper understanding of the political theme than others of their age.

## **Activities**

This book is appropriate for students in years 3, 4 and 5. While younger children will enjoy the story, these activities exploring the themes and ideas in the text have been developed for 7–10 year-olds.

### **Exploring the vocabulary**

Prior to reading the book to the class or group, make a small collection of artifacts that will make the story more accessible to those students whose experience of book language or of the tastes and smells referred to in the story may be limited. Your collection could include some sprigs of jasmine, a bowl of couscous, pine nuts, mint, almonds and dates.

After reading the first reading, focus on clarifying your students understanding of the more exotic vocabulary in the text. Encourage the students to smell the jasmine and prompt them to describe its cloying sweetness. Both couscous and mint tea can be made quickly and easily in the classroom. Have the students chop the mint with scissors and describe its pungent smell before adding some to the couscous and making mint tea with the rest. They can then smell and taste the food they have made.



Make a group list of some of the interesting products in Azizi's Land of the Crescent Moon.

*an orange tree, portraits, garlands, palm trees, the purest honey, dates, almonds, watermelons, pearls, coral, sapphires, silverware, yellow amber, crystals of garnet, bolts of silk, incense, liquors, the big salt lake, olive trees, dunes, minarets, and souks*

Have the students identify these items, using your collection and referring to the illustrations. When they get stuck with a definition, prompt them to refer to a dictionary.

### **Exploring similes**

The text includes lavish use of metaphor and similes and is an excellent resource for explaining how these figures of speech work and having students realise the richness their use brings to a text.

Explain that a simile is a way of describing one thing by comparing it to something that is quite different. Use some common examples, such as:

- *as soft as butter*
- *as free as the wind*
- *as cheeky as a monkey*
- *eats like a horse*

Make a class list of similes that the students have heard of:

- *as warm as toast*
- *as wise as an owl*

When they have completed this activity explain that we have many similes that we use in our everyday language and that writers often create similes to make their writing more vibrant and alive to their readers.

The students can then read through the text and list the similes the writer uses in this book.

- *bulging like hot air balloons*
- *as small as a pine nut in a glass of mint tea*
- *poppies glittering like red diamonds*
- *like a knight on horseback*
- *swift as an arrow*
- *like giant fireworks*
- *the people grew like lentils*
- *danced like palm trees*
- *curled like calligraphy*



After completing the list, have each student choose their favourite simile and draw or paint an image to portray it.

### **Exploring symbols**

Koubaa uses symbols throughout her story as ways of elaborating on her theme of freedom and injustice.

Discuss with the students how the blue birds are like the people in Azizi's country. Ask:

*What is the same about the people in the story and the blue birds in the cage? Have they got the same problem?*

*Do you think the people have lost their freedom just as the birds have lost theirs? What freedoms have the people lost?*

Discuss why Azizi saw the people shrink while Tih and Reni became swollen and huge.

*What is the writer telling us here? What do we mean when we say "I felt so small?"*

*What have Tih and Reni become symbols of? (Greed) What have the people become symbols of? (They have lost their mana.)*

Years 4 and 5 students could research some true stories of people, such as Joan of Arc, Mahatma Gandhi, Te Kuiti, the Suffragettes or Nelson Mandela, who helped to lead their people to freedom.

### **Experiencing injustice**

Have the class try out an experiment in injustice. Split the students into two groups by having them draw a piece of either red- or green-coloured paper out of a box. Those with the red paper are in one group and those with the green in a second group. Announce that those in one of these groups will have privileges for the day while those in the second group will have disadvantages only. Privileges might include sole access to class and sports equipment, popular activities or free-choice time. Disadvantages might include being unable to use any felt pens, clearing up after class activities, or going out for lunch after the privileged group.

End the experiment half an hour before the end of the school day. Pair each student with a member of the other group and prompt them to talk to each other about how they felt about their day.

The next day convene a class discussion about fairness and justice. Ask:

*How did it feel to always be last? Was it fair that the other group got to use all the balls and the hoops while you had none? How did you feel when you saw Josh clearing up your mess?*



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Broaden the discussion to talk about unfairness in society.

*Is it fair that some kids have better holidays or more delicious lunches than other kids?*

*Do all the best things cost money? What important people or things in your life are not connected with money?*

*Is the world fair? What are the privileges New Zealand children have that children in other parts of the world may not have? How could we make the world more fair for everybody?*

### **Adapting the story**

Have the students rewrite the story, setting it in New Zealand, with themselves as the main character taking the place of Azizi. Have them replace the greedy rulers, Tih and Reni, with Kiwi leaders and replace the precious products of the Land of the Crescent Moon with the sorts of things that our society considers to be precious.