

# Guided reading

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## Introducing Plop

On opening the cover of this book, the reader comes face to face with a pleading pair of black eyes, set on a tilted head which is perched on a fluffy, rotund little body which in turn is perched upon a six line description of the owlet himself. Before even starting to read the book the reader is drawn to the main character, who we are told is 'just perfect except for ONE thing...'. Ask the children what effect the capitals for the word 'ONE' have and why there an ellipsis. We are hooked! We want to read on!

## Dark is exciting

The first chapter introduces us to Plop, who he lives with and where he lives. Ask the children what we learn about Plop from the initial piece of dialogue between Plop and his mother. (Plop is resolute and determined but also obedient he does as his mother asks.) What can they tell you about Mrs Barn Owl? (She is caring and thoughtful and wants to help her son to help himself.) Ask the children to identify the words in italics. Who speaks them and why are they shown in italics? (Mrs Barn Owl uses them for emphasis – to make a point.)

Plop is reluctant to leave the nest. What is he nervous about? (He is not an accomplished lander.) In each chapter Plop leaves the landing branch in the same manner. Ask the children why it is funny. (You expect him to try to fly from the branch but he falls instead.) In each chapter Plop's fall to earth surprises his target, who, not expecting to encounter a barn owl, understandably mistakes him for something else. Plop meets a boy who describes fireworks to Plop. How would the children describe fireworks to someone who hadn't seen them before? Plop uses capital letters in some of his dialogue. Why is this? (To re-enforce the fact that he still does not like the dark.) Why do they think Plop agreed to watch the fireworks? (He had his parents on either side of him and he was inquisitive.)

## Dark is kind

The end of the fireworks signifies bedtime for the boy, but it is the time when Plop should be starting his 'day'. Plop is invited to go hunting with his father – an integral part of barn owl life – but he makes an excuse not to go. This occurs throughout the book until the end, when he surprises his father and changes his mind. Ask the children why Plop makes an excuse. How does his father react? Why do they think this is? (His father understands Plop's feelings and does not want to force him – he will wait for Plop until he is ready.)

Each night when Plop's father returns from hunting, there is humorous dialogue between Plop and his father. What do the children think it is about what is said that makes it funny? (Plop swallows his dinner and asks what it is *afterwards*. He speaks in short, direct sentences and innocently assumes that there is more to eat after eating a whole mouse!)

Ask the children to identify the behaviour patterns typical of nocturnal animals – they go to sleep when it gets light and are active all night. Plop, being a baby, had a midnight rest (as a child has an afternoon sleep).

In the section where Plop leaves the nest, ask the children to identify the sentence which appeared in Chapter 1. ('Actually, I'm a barn owl.') How does Plop land this time? Is he improving yet? The old lady tells Plop that dark hides things – why would the lady want to hide the fact that she is old? What does she do in the dark to make her feel better? This chapter contains humour but has sad, serious undertones. Can the children find the other adjectives the old lady uses to describe the dark? ('Quiet' and 'restful'.) Can the children find examples of humour (not a night bird, 'just an old bird') and contrast it with examples of sadness (it hides 'shabby furniture and the hole in the carpet' – we can assume that the elderly lady has little money to replace these things). What two lessons does she teach Plop about manners?

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## Dark is fun

Plop is again invited to go hunting and again he makes an excuse which his father patiently accepts. Plop's clumsiness and immaturity are reinforced by the descriptions of the adult barn owls in flight. What simile is used to describe Mr Barn Owl as he swoops off? ('Like a great, silent jet aeroplane'.) His mother also leaves to hunt, and her departure is also described using a simile – she floats off 'like a white feather'. When alone Plop repeats himself – why is this? (He is nervous and is trying to take his mind off the darkness.) Ask the children what they do if they are ever nervous. Plop is enticed to investigate the noises he hears. Is this a good idea – to go somewhere without your parents' knowledge?

Invite the children to locate the repeated line once again. How does Plop land this time? Why does the boy emphasise the word 'bonfire'? What is the difference between a bonfire and a campfire? Discuss the Scouts and Guides movement and whether any of the children have been camping. Why couldn't Plop be a Scout or a Cub? (He is too young and would look silly in a uniform. This seems ironic as barn owls don't actually talk let alone wear clothes – this is an example of the author setting her own boundaries between the fictional world and the real world.) What does Plop do that shows he is learning to be responsible? Plop's supper ends the chapter on a humorous note as his father's generous offering once again fails to satiate Plop's voracious appetite.

## Dark is necessary

Half way through the story, Plop is slowly showing signs of becoming a night bird – he sleeps until well into the afternoon and his landing ability is improving slightly. We find further evidence of Plop's mischievous and humorous nature as he teases the squirrels that live in his tree. Why does his mother send him off to find out more about the dark? (She wants

some peace and quiet and knows it is pointless trying to get him to sleep.) His encounter with the young girl is slightly confrontational – both characters become defensive as the other asks probing questions. Can the children relate their understanding of Christmas to the class, imagining they were telling a child who had not heard of it? Through the course of their encounter girl and owl build up respect for each other and their discussion ends with an act of kindness. What is this and how do they both make up for their earlier insults?

## Dark is fascinating

Plop's parents are both evidently very tired from their hunting expeditions and wish to get a good day's sleep. Which of his parents is the most understanding? How does his mother deal with his inability to sleep during the day? (She sends him off to find more information about the dark.) Plop's departure from the nest is different this time – how is it changing? Plop learns about bats and hedgehogs in this chapter. What facts does he learn? Plop feels very pleased with himself when he returns from meeting the Father Christmas lady and is full of confidence and extremely hungry! Why do the children think this is? (She drew a complimentary drawing of him and loved his screech – it boosted his self-image.)

## Dark is wonderful

In 'Dark is wonderful', we are treated to a wonderful description of Plop's parents as they leave to hunt. The image created impresses upon the reader how majestic and ghostly these beautiful birds are. Plop has not attained this status yet but his landing is improving – he now lands with a soft bump as opposed to a thud! In this encounter, Plop learns about the star constellations and more humour is woven into the narrative as we are invited to picture Plop scuttling along the telescope as he listens to

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and questions his teacher. On returning home, having politely excused himself, Plop is obviously intrigued with his new-found knowledge – he is too busy relating the facts to eat, despite his hunger. The chapter also sees a further change in Plop – he spends the night describing the star constellations to his parents, who dutifully listen. Plop is growing accustomed to the dark without realising! Like a real night owl, he sleeps all through the daylight hours for the first time.

## Dark is beautiful

In the final chapter Plop's encounter is somewhat different. How is this so? (He meets another animal rather than a human.) Although he falls off his branch he lands softly, providing further evidence of his development.

The animals develop an immediate bond – Plop is full of respect for the cat and the cat respects Plop's naivety. Before leaving to explore the night, Plop responsibly tells his mother

where he is going. This action maintains the consistency of character development. Orion shows Plop the wonders of the night and describes all the different nights in an enchanting, enticing way. Plop is finally convinced.

The story is beautifully concluded by Plop summing up everything he has learned from all the characters and then providing his own opinion. This is followed humorously by the 'feeding' dialogue between Plop and his father, but instead of making an excuse as in all the previous chapters, Plop agrees to go hunting with his father. The emphasis on 'long' demonstrates that although Plop is now a fully fledged night bird, he is still young because his appreciation of time is different to that of an adult's. Draw the children's attention to the last 'sentence'. Why is it not actually a sentence? (It does not have a verb.) It is a statement of fact – short and very effective. The illustration of the owls silhouetted against the moon complements the ending perfectly.

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