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KUMIKO AND THE DRAGON

Briony Stewart



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising primary school teacher

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SYNOPSIS

Kumiko and the Dragon is a contemporary fantasy story for children told through the first person narration of Kumiko, a young Japanese girl. Kumiko has recently moved to an upstairs bedroom. She is fearful of the dark and of the dragon that sits outside her window each night.

Kumiko summons the courage to write a letter to the dragon, asking him to leave. She soon discovers though that Tomodo is her guardian dragon and that she and her family hold the magical bloodline that keeps the dragons alive. Tomodo takes Kumiko on a wonderful visit to the kingdom of dragons where she realizes that there is more to her family's ancestry than she ever realised.

THEMES**Family:**

- Kumiko's little sister has recently been born. This means Kumiko has had to move to the upstairs bedroom by herself. Families are required to adjust to the changes.
- Kumiko discovers she has a guardian dragon because her family holds the magical bloodline that keeps the dragons alive.
- Kumiko listens to stories told by her Obasaan (grandmother).
- Kumiko decides to return home from the kingdom of dragons as she knows how fearful her mother will be if she stays.

Courage:

- Although Kumiko feels frightened, she shows courage when she decides to write a letter to the dragon that sits outside her window.
- Kumiko shows the courage to trust Tomodo.

Culture:

- Aspects of Japanese culture feature in the story.

WRITING STYLE

Kumiko and the Dragon is told in first person and is written in the present tense. Kumiko's voice is beautifully honest and innocent. The text is very poetic – particularly with the use of similes – using rich, figurative language.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION written by Briony Stewart

Kumiko and the Dragon started as an activity. My uni tutor said, '*remember a time you were afraid when you were a child.*' Well, I didn't think of my own childhood, probably because it was a very safe and happy and normal one. When I got thinking, I started imagining my grandmother's life because she grew up in Japan during World War II. Her name was Kumiko and when she was ten years old she witnessed the atomic bomb go off in Hiroshima. She even played in the radioactive fallout that blew across her village. As much as

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this frightens me, her most frightening childhood moment actually happened shortly afterwards. One day, she came across an American Soldier, one of many now occupying her village. It was the first time she'd ever seen any kind of foreigner before. He turned to her and said, "I eat little girls for breakfast." Well, the tough guy was probably joking, but he frightened my grandmother all right. She ran home terrified of being eaten!

From this memory, I started forming a story about a little girl called Kumiko who is afraid of being eaten. Only in my story she is afraid of a dragon. As I wrote the story, it became really important to me that it sounded lyrical when read aloud. This was because my grandmother didn't get to complete much schooling and couldn't read very well. I wanted this story to be for her, for that little girl all those years ago who would have listened hungrily to this tale. She might have felt better after hearing it, because maybe then she would have discovered that like the Kumiko in my book, she was far braver than she ever knew.

This story was my chance to explore some of the things I love about my grandmother's culture, and to go on a grand and mysterious adventure like I always dreamed of doing when I was a kid.

STUDY NOTES

- Kumiko is afraid of her new bedroom because she can see a dragon outside her window each night.
 - Have you ever been afraid of something that you didn't want to tell anyone about?
 - How did you overcome your fear?
 - What is the difference between fear and awareness? (Discuss for instance, fire safety or stranger danger and the need to be aware and have a plan.)
- Kumiko's letter to Tomodo is described as 'firm but polite' (p10).
 - What does this mean?
 - Why does Kumiko need to be firm but polite in this letter?
 - Role play the following situations in which you might need to be 'firm but polite':
 - Dealing with a bossy or rude child in the playground.
 - Resisting peer pressure (with younger students, explain what peer pressure means.)
 - Speaking to someone pushing in.
- Write your own letter to Tomodo. How would you have written it if you were frightened of being eaten by a dragon?
- There are many references to Japanese culture in *Kumiko and the Dragon*.

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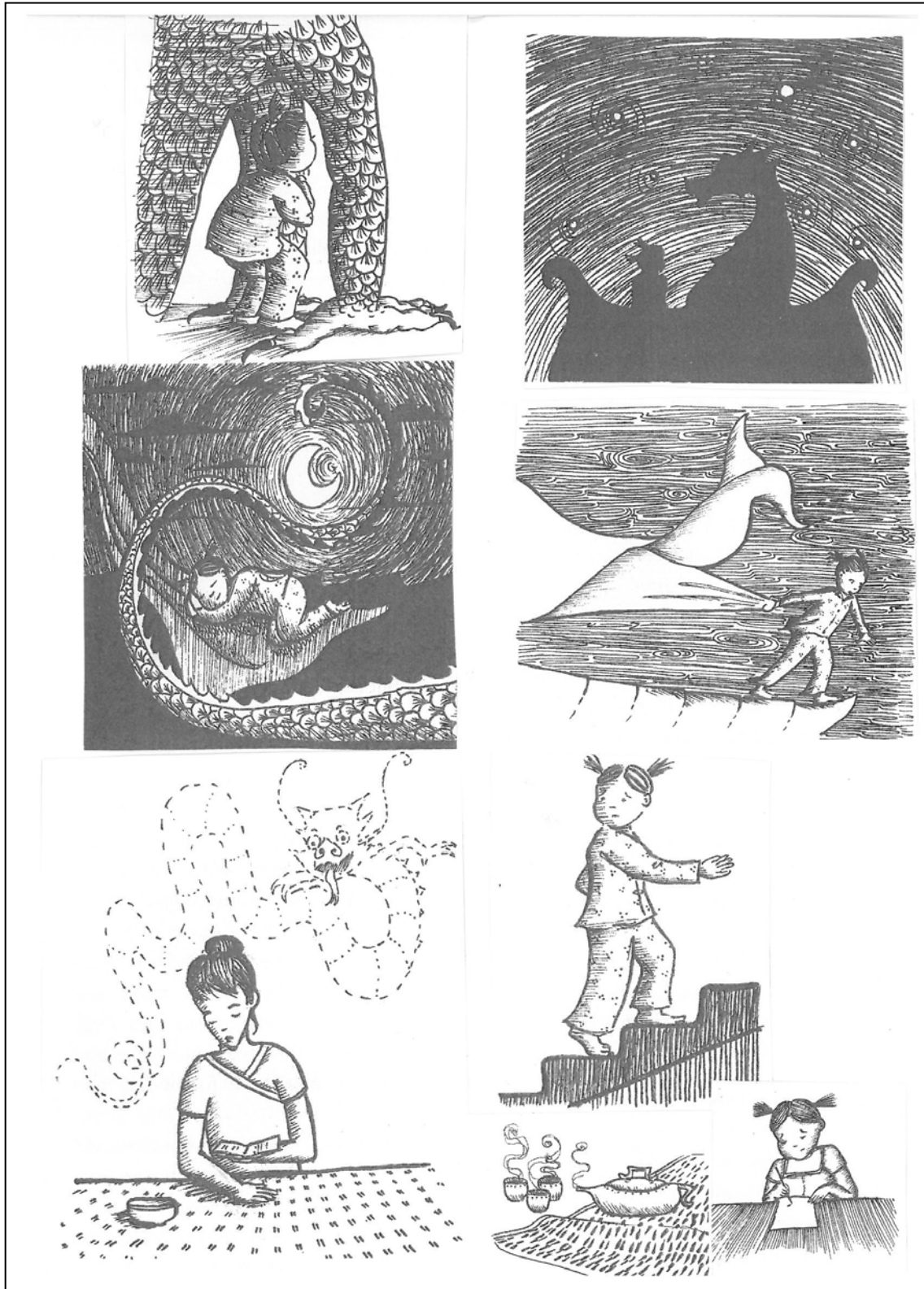
- Research and create a brochure about the following aspects of Japanese culture:
 - food
 - dress
 - festivals
 - language
 - music
 - rituals
- Examine the beautiful use of similes in the text, discussing how this contributes to a rich and enjoyable reading experience.
 - 'Lace about her window at night like a kite fluttering in the breeze.' (p1)
 - 'Terrible feeling in my stomach, like taiko drums beating a wild dance.' (p8)
 - 'Sky is turning the colour of melons in summer.' (p10)
 - 'The sky has been emptied of the sun and the moon is hanging feebly like a paper lantern in the dark.' (p11)
 - 'My heart is jumping about, like a fish that has just been caught.' (p16)
 - 'I am like a mouse among humans.' (p23)
 - 'Sad sigh like wind before rain.' (p33)
 - Choose one of the similes above to illustrate.
 - Alternatively, have students read a passage (such as the first paragraph of Chapter 4) and illustrate it.
 - Read passages of the text aloud. Discuss the language and writing style.
- Have students brainstorm and create their own similes. Then try writing a passage of prose incorporating some of these similes.
 - Topics could include:
 - drinking a hot chocolate on a cold day
 - waking up on Christmas day
 - riding for the first time on a Ferris wheel
 - eating fairy floss
 - swimming in an icy cold swimming pool.
- Reread the story of the Dragon King's two sons, Rycoo and Raman, starting on p30.
 - Rycoo knew what he wanted to be and what would make him happy, even though it meant becoming mortal.
 - What is happiness?
 - How do people find happiness?

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- Did Rycoo make the right decision to sacrifice his immortality? Explain.
- If you could turn yourself into an animal like Rycoo and Raman could, what would you turn into and why?
- Reread the passage in which Kumiko flies for the first time on Tomodo's back (p27).
 - Create a class collage mural of this scene on a long piece of paper. Ask students what sorts of materials might best illustrate the passage. Allow each student to add their own interpretations of Kumiko and Tomodo to the mural.
- Select one of Briony Stewart's illustration from the text. Discuss the techniques used and why Briony might have done the drawings in this way. Learn the techniques and have students re-create their favourite drawing from the book.
- Kumiko is given a cape covered with emeralds (p53).
 - Make a class cape by sewing on green buttons or gluing sequins to a piece of fabric.
 - Make papier-mâché dragon masks.
 - Use these costumes in a play that recreates a scene from the text.
- Kumiko participates in a feast with the dragons. Reread the passage from p55 'There is a feast of glowing sparks ... there are bowls of rainwater flavoured with starlight, cups swirling with ocean spray.'
 - Plan and hold your own dragon's feast.
 - Decide what food and decorations to have (including Japanese food).
 - Create a menu, giving appropriate names for the food at the feast.
- As an extension activity, have some students write a script for the staging of *Kumiko and the Dragon* or of a particular scene
 - Perform a dramatised version of this story to a younger audience.
- Tomodo explains to Kumiko the saddest and happiest parts of the story about Rycoo and Raman (p58).
 - Explain in your own words the saddest and happiest parts of this story.
 - How can you use the message in this story to help you in your own daily life? What is the moral of this story?

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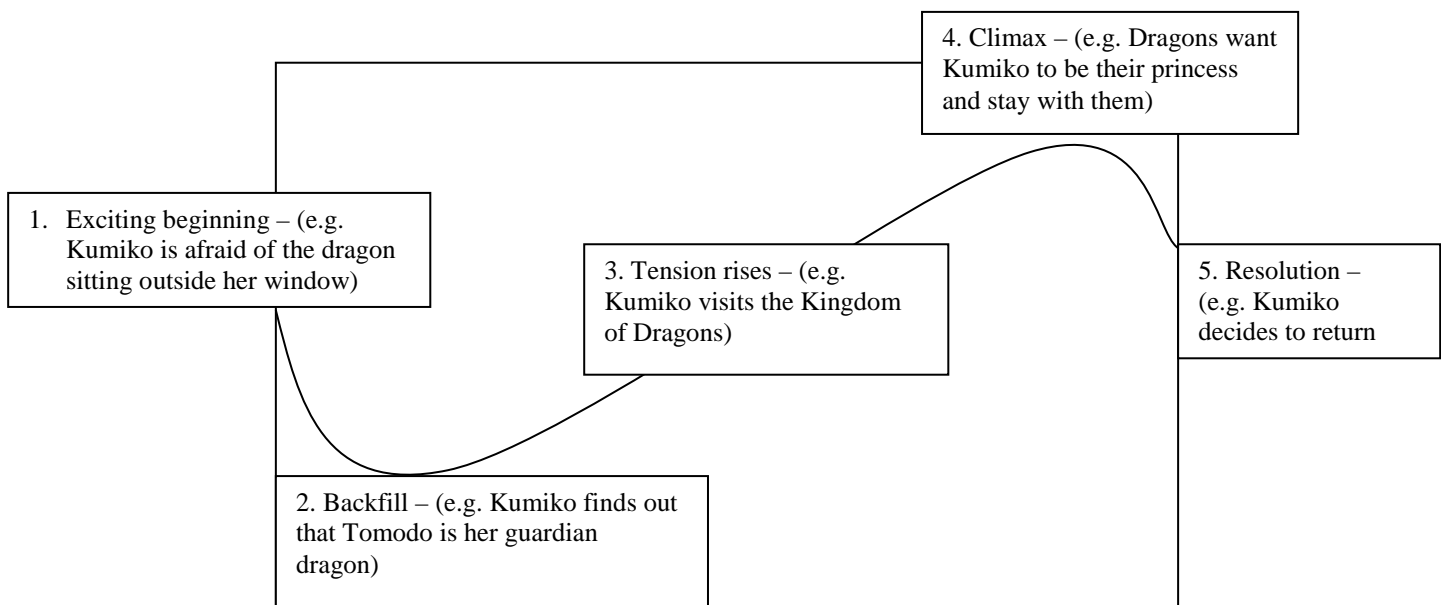
- Reorder the illustrations from *Kumiko and the Dragon* below into the correct sequence to show how the story flows.



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- The dragons in the story all have different gifts, just like people.
 - What are your gifts?
 - Give every class member a white paper plate. Using colourful felt pens, have everyone in the class rotate and write something positive about each person on their plate. These may be adjectives that describe that person's qualities e.g. kind, funny, clever, organised, thoughtful etc. Display the plates around the room.

- Explain the concept of Gardiner's Multiple Intelligences to help students identify their individual strengths.
 - Have students try a variety of activities using the Multiple Intelligences.
 - Afterwards, have students write a reflective journal about each activity. Which one/s did they find most enjoyable? Why? Which one/s were not as enjoyable? Why?
 - Possible tasks may include:
 - Verbal/Linguistic
 - Imagine you are Kumiko. Write a postcard from the dragon kingdom to Obasaan, explaining all that you have seen and heard since leaving your bedroom window.
 - Logical/Mathematical
 - Graph the events that take place in *Kumiko and the Dragon* using the following story graph as a guide.



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- Picture/Spatial
 - Design and draw your own guardian dragon. Give careful consideration to all features, including scales, special gifts, colour, size and general appearance.
- Body/Kinaesthetic
 - Make sock or shadow puppets and create your own 'puppet show' version of *Kumiko and the Dragon* (or a scene from the book).
- Music/Auditory
 - Listen to three different pieces of music (chosen by your teacher). Match each song with different parts of the book. Explain the reasons behind your choices.
- Interpersonal
 - In a group, brainstorm everything you know about dragons.
- Intrapersonal
 - If you met Kumiko, what five questions would you like to ask her?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Western Australia in 1984, Briony Stewart grew up in the inner city suburbs of Perth, peeping over alleyway fences in search of great mysteries and honing her excellent tree climbing abilities. Despite dabbling in entomology, crime solving and a desire to own a deli, Briony showed a talent for both art and writing during her school years. At fifteen, she decided she would not be happy unless she could become both an author and an artist. After receiving a scholarship from the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Briony went on to study a double degree in fine art and creative writing at Curtin University. Shortly after graduating, she published her first book, *Kumiko and the Dragon*, which won the Aurealis award for children's short fiction, and was a CBCA notable book of 2008. Briony currently lives in Perth with her husband Harry and their beloved pet rabbit Winston, writing and illustrating for children.

The sequel to *Kumiko and the Dragon*, *Kumiko and the Dragon's Secret* was published in 2010.