

Book corner

The Snail and the Whale

by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler

One tiny snail hitches a lift on the tail of a whale and sets off on a journey full of adventure.



The Storm Whale and The Storm Whale in Winter

by Benji Davies
Noi saves a baby whale, but in the follow-up story, it is whale who comes to the rescue.

The Whales' Song

by Dyan Sheldon and Gary Blythe
Lilly longs to see and hear 'the most wondrous creatures' from her grandmother's story.

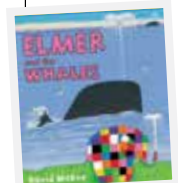


My Friend Whale

by Simon James
A sad tale of a friendship that ends with a whale's disappearance.

Rainbow Fish and the Big Blue Whale

by Marcus Pfister
Fish must make peace with Whale to save himself and his friends from disaster.

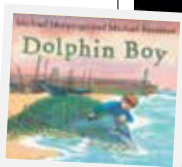


Elmer and the Whales

by David McKee
Elmer and his cousin get lost at sea.

Dolphin Boy

by Michael Morpurgo and Michael Foreman
A stranded dolphin is returned to the sea and, unwittingly, rewards the villagers for their kindness.



Walking with whales

The children at Greenfields Children's Centre in London have been immersed in the fascinating world of whales, reports *Rosie Potter*

This year, children at Greenfields Children's Centre in Southall, West London, turned their curious gaze towards the oceans. The largest habitat in the world and the last true wilderness, the oceans are home to an array of creatures, some of which, even today, are not fully catalogued by science.

The greatest leviathans of this wilderness, the sperm whale and the blue whale, were the two species that particularly engaged the children's interest, and in collaboration with fellow artist-in-residence Kirstie Reid – also from Wimbledon College of Art – we explored these gigantic beasts with the children in what has been designated The Year of the Whale.

Their interest in these creatures had been sparked by news images of whales stranded on our beaches and along the coasts of Germany in spring this year. The children found the images compelling and they returned to them again and again in their daily play and then verbally in philosophy group discussions:

'They come from the water'

'No, they come from the seaside'

'They've got big flippers behind them for swimming'

'Whales follow each other along the coast'

'When it's morning, when the fish get out of the water, they can't breathe'

'They breathe inside the water'

'Narwhals live in cold places and some ice is down in the water'

'Dead on the beach, now some people took the whale's teeth out to make a trophy'

The children were also concerned to know how we might have helped these enormous creatures return to the sea:

'We could roll them'

'Put a rope around their tail and pull them with a tractor'

We extended our exploration of whales, sharks and dolphins through diagrams, models, sculptures and drawings. Some of the drawings turned into costumes and led to imaginative role play and performing movements of a body in water. Rajveer said, 'I had a fin on my head and I was a shark.'

One of the children said, 'I was walking with a blue whale.'





FACTS AND FIGURES

The blue whale:

- is blue-grey in colour, with light grey or yellow-white undersides
- is 24-30m long and weighs up to 200 tonnes, making it bigger and heavier than 25 elephants and the largest animal ever known. Its heart is the size of a small car
- at birth is about 8m long and 4 tonnes in weight
- has a call louder than a jet engine. Its low-frequency sounds can travel in deep water over thousands of miles
- has no teeth and consumes about 40 million (3,600kg) krill a day
- travels mostly alone or in groups of two or three
- probably lives until at least 50
- can be found in all oceans except enclosed seas and the Arctic
- was almost hunted to extinction and, though numbers have risen since the global whaling ban, it remains endangered.

The sperm whale:

- is easily recognised by its massive head and rounded forehead
- is about 15-18m long and 35-45 tonnes in weight, so is about the size of a bus
- has the largest brain of any creature known to have existed
- is known to dive as deep as 1,000m, which requires it to hold its breath for up to 90 minutes
- has teeth and eats about 1 tonne (907kg) of fish and squid a day
- often lives in groups of 15-20
- can cruise at about 37km an hour
- is found in most of the world's oceans, except the high Arctic
- population is about 100,000

Reference books

- *Whales, Dolphins and Seals: A Field Guide to the Marine Mammals of the World* by Hadoram Shirihihi and Brett Jarrett
- *Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises* by Mark Carwardine
- *Whales and Dolphins of the World* by Mark Simmonds
- *About Marine Mammals: A Guide for Children* by Cathryn and John Sill
- *Whale: Discover the Amazing World of Marine Mammals – from Whales and Walruses to Seals, Dolphins and Dugongs* by Vassili Papastavrou, Scott Steedman and Frank Greenaway

The children at work creating their replica whale (above) before taking it to the beach (below left)

We set up a small cinema in the nursery and watched selected clips from the many different versions of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*

We rolled ourselves up in a rubbery material with only our heads and feet exposed to see how difficult it would be to manoeuvre our bodies across a beach and into the sea.

Then we listened to sound recordings of whales and sang our own whale song. The children interpreted the whale's song in different ways:

'It's talking – it feels like wailing'

'I think they're sad because their friends are on the beach and their mummy has gone away'

'They're saying goodbye'

MOBY-DICK

As the children's understanding and interest developed, we began to talk about other whale stories. As part of this, we set up a small cinema in the nursery and watched selected clips from the many different versions of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* – a novel about Captain Ahab's obsessive quest for the eponymous white whale, which had wrecked his former ship and severed his leg.

The children loved this story and wanted to know why, in the past, men hunted whales. They learnt about the parts of the whale that were valuable to society of that time and listed them – 'skin', 'teeth', 'blubber', 'whale oil for lamp light', 'candles'. This exploration prompted questions and comments:

'But how did the oil get in there?'

'They didn't have light then so they had to get it from the whales'

'Now we're in the new days'

'They throw their harpoons into the whale'

'It feels bad when the men hurt the whales'

The children then took on the roles of different colourful characters from the novel, including Ahab, chief mate Starbuck and harpooner Queequeg. This stretched the children's imagination and their own abilities for open-ended storytelling and performance. In one instance, Xavier spontaneously used a piece of wallpaper to illustrate Ahab's false leg made from whalebone.

The children were by now aware that *Moby-Dick* was a sperm whale and had discovered that sperm whales had teeth only in their lower jaw. So, with this knowledge, we created a large-scale model of the lower jawbone of *Moby-Dick* – which was exhibited at Littlehampton Museum for a week in July.

The children had also acquired various facts about the animals, such as: the blue whale has its blowhole in the middle of its head, while the sperm whale's blowhole is to the left; a whale's tail fin is called a fluke; and, as one child noted, '*Moby-Dick* ➤

whale likes to eat giant squid.' They also learnt that the collective noun for whales is a pod – a term they brightly transformed into their own more memorable 'tea-pod' of whales.

The children were excited by the currency that the new knowledge afforded them and were eager to share their findings with parents and families when they returned home. One parent thanked us for making his son (two and a half) 'so literate'.

LIFE-SIZE SCULPTURE

As in our previous projects at Greenfields, we invited families to work with their children over half term to create a model of a sea creature, and received a collection of truly original specimens. This collaborative process unleashes creativity and expertise across the community, with fathers this year playing a particularly active part.

We then began the main task of creating a large collaborative sculpture. As a symbolic gesture, the children wanted to return a life-size whale to the sea on our annual trip to the coastal town of Littlehampton. The chosen species was the sperm whale. But what materials would we use? And how would we:

- make something to this scale?
- carry it in the hold of two coaches?
- inflate and float it?

All these things we asked the children to consider.

In terms of fabrication we were lucky. British company Zotefoams, which makes sheeting closely resembling the properties and appearance of whale skin, heard of our project and agreed to donate as much of the material as we required to form the outer body of the whale.

The children stored and sorted the 'whale skins' in their golf clubhouse, then laid them out on the grass to outline the initial shape and size of our sperm whale, referring to diagrams, photographs and anatomically correct models to establish the overall proportions of the body and fluke as well as the position of the eyes and flippers. One child observed, 'They are like an oval shape and their tail is straight.'

Sections of 'skin' were cut and stuck together to form the outer case. To create volume, the body was filled with inflatables of all shapes and sizes, including lilos, rubber rings, balls and water wings. Also included were some shapes that we made ourselves with



INFORMATION

- www.panda.org/what_we_do/endangered_species/cetaceans/about/blue_whale/index.cfm
- animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/sperm-whale
- uk.whales.org/species-guide/sperm-whale
- whaleheritagesites.org/2016-the-year-of-the-whale-in-the-pacific-islands

the children by heat-sealing large pillows of plastic sheeting with an iron and making a simple valve through which to inflate them with battery-operated and manual foot pumps.

Taking the inflatables down into the body of the whale was in itself an adventure. The interior was huge and for the children it was like entering one of the great caverns that might be found in the Peak District in Derbyshire; children could literally get lost between head and fluke, so this was a thrilling and euphoric experience.

All processes involved in the making of the whale introduced children to elements of basic physics – heating a material until it melts, inflation and deflation of an object via a valve and pump, elements of volume and scale in relation to weight and weightlessness. Children were also encouraged to select and thoroughly explore the nature of a wide range of materials.

OFF TO FLOAT OUR WHALE

On the day of our beach trip we called in at the Littlehampton Museum, where curator Kathleen Lawther placed the whale's jawbone at the entrance to the main exhibition.

The label read, 'The Lower Jawbone of Moby-Dick. Created by Greenfields Children, in dialogue with the Littlehampton Museum.'

Materials: newspaper, masking tape, glue, expanded polystyrene, zote-foam, plastic drainpipe, paint.'

Visitors were then encouraged to 'Look out for some real sperm whale teeth in Littlehampton Museum's Cabinet of Curiosities.'

We then headed down to the beach for the major installation of the entire whale. Building it from 'flat-pack', parents, teachers, artists and children took great delight in laying out the skin and blowing up the inflatables, and children eagerly carried them down into the belly of the whale just as they had rehearsed at the nursery. As it gained volume and form, some local residents came to inspect the whale close up because from a distance they were convinced that it was the real thing.

The final work was an impressive achievement and a multi-layered, ambitious voyage of discovery for pre-school children. Looking across the whale and out to sea, one child said, 'He does belong to the water because the ocean is his home.' The children's initial empathy for the stranded whales played out alongside the enthralling narrative of their 'Moby-Dick', initiating a vibrant hub for learning that connected distant elements and generated sensations, questions and insights.

Once an interest is sparked, children's imaginative explorations into ways of understanding their world become as boundless as the sea itself. ■

Rosie Potter is artist-in-residence and co-opted governor at Greenfields Children's Centre, Southall, and senior lecturer at Wimbledon College of Art