



Teacher's Guide

a novel

FOX Magic

BEVERLEY BRENNAN

A NOVEL

Fox Magic

“Beverley Brenna has done it again! *Fox Magic* draws the reader into the inner world of a child survivor of a suicide pact. The story speaks to the power of thinking about our actions and attitudes, and to the transformative power of intentionally creating caring communities around us. *Fox Magic* will help young readers see the light at the end of whatever dark tunnel they feel trapped by, and its story will remain with them long after they read it.”

—DEBORAH ELLIS, author of *The Breadwinner*

Chance Devlin’s two friends have committed suicide. As she struggles with the loss, she makes a connection to a mysterious red fox. This bond helps her come to terms with the past, and find hope and courage in the power of dreams.

A timely, engaging story that will help provide understanding, and open honest discussion, at home or in the classroom. Complete with an information package by Tim Claypool Ph.D., R.D. Psych.

Beverley Brenna is author of the award-winning Wild Orchid series who teaches at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. Spot illustrations are by Miriam Körner, author of Yellow Dog.



Red Deer Press

Fox Magic Teachers' Guide

Fox Magic is a middle-grade novel by Beverley Brenna, published by Red Deer Press in 2017.

This Teachers' Guide was written by Beverley Brenna. For more information about Beverley please visit her website at www.beverleybrenna.com or go to www.reddeerpress.com

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Overview

Chance's two best friends have taken their own lives as part of a suicide pact and Chance is struggling with loss and guilt. How can she go on without them? A connection to a mysterious red fox named Janet Johnson helps her come to terms with the future, illuminating the meaning of courage and the power of dreams. For ages 10+, with an Afterword by Registered Doctoral Psychologist and Teacher Dr. Tim Claypool, University of Saskatchewan.

Author Statement – Beverley Brenna

I live on Treaty 6 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis People, and I am responding to the TRC's calls to action as a teacher and author interested in classrooms that value the knowledge and culture of every student and where it is imperative that Canadian Indigenous perspectives are encouraged and honoured. My imagined community in *Fox Magic* is similar to communities where I have lived and worked, communities that include both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and I wanted to respect that diversity in creating what I hope is an authentic classroom of children. The chapter where these children work together to address their challenges specifically includes cultural teachings that the children have brought from home, and to me, this is the kind of classroom we must set our hearts on and work to achieve in schools. I hope that my fictional classroom here shines as a positive model for other classrooms, and I am grateful to the Indigenous people who mentored my work in this section of the book.

Summary

Chance's two best friends have taken their lives in a suicide pact that Chance has escaped. She is now dealing with grief, loss and guilt. What Chance learns in *Fox Magic* is that many people care about her, even though she feels alone. The more she shares her thoughts and experiences, the closer she comes to feeling better. Through the work of doctors, counselors, teachers, and her own family, as well as Chance's own efforts, she is able to take one step at a time toward healing. This is a message that benefits all of us—and reminds us that when we are hurting, it's important to tell someone.

Genre

The idea of a talking fox suggests the genre of animal fantasy. However the story does not really unfold as a fantasy would. While much of the book is realistic, however, there are places where readers might say, "Okay, that would never happen in real life!" Because of this blend of the real and the unreal, the genre "magic realism" is how the author describes this story. However, because the talking fox only speaks to Chance, and we see Chance herself described in similar terms to the fox, it's possible that the fox is actually just Chance, giving herself advice. As readers, we can decide for ourselves what we want to believe, but there is a delicate magic available in this story if we want to see it. Have a look at this book—what do you think?

Truth and Reconciliation Connections

In Saskatchewan schools, children of many cultures work and play together. Rather than treating the classroom in this story with a more general “multicultural” description, however, the author thought it was important to specifically include First Nations and Metis belief statements within the classroom scenes. Because Indigenous language and culture exist here in this province, and have been at risk of being lost, it is more important than ever to foster these understandings for all of our children.

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released its 94 Calls to Action, Sections 62 to 65 connect to education, and education for reconciliation. These Calls to Action made the author wonder what Indigenous knowledge and perspectives would be helpful to children in this story. As she states in the Question section at the back of the book, “Reconciliation is a responsibility shared among all Canadians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.” She tried to create the classroom setting in *Fox Magic* as a microcosm of what we should strive for in Canadian schools and communities: understanding, empathy, and mutual respect, along with a particular inclusion of Indigenous ideas as reflective of the First Peoples of Canada.

What does Reconciliation mean to you?

Bullying

The author’s statement in the back of *Fox Magic* indicates how “adults as well as children sometimes choose bullying when they feel powerless. Through bullying, people can feel empowered, even though it’s a shadow of the kind of power that good leadership brings. In

simple terms, by putting someone else down, we somehow make ourselves feel better. But it's a mean kind of better, and it destroys our own chances for happy, healthy relationships and joyful lives." Have you ever been bullied? Have you ever felt like bullying someone else? Have you ever witnessed someone being bullied? Why do you think bullies do what they do?

As the author says, "Our choices in behavior are limited by the strategies we know. If kids learn options for how they can act, they can replace negative behaviors with positive behaviors. I remember hearing about a research study where children who were encouraged in creativity demonstrated less playground problems because they could think of alternatives to hitting a person who made them angry. If adults merely punish kids, without any other kind of behavioural instruction, then we are simply teaching kids to punish others, which can feed the bullying cycle." What might we try in our community to reduce bullying?

The Power of Writing

Chance keeps a journal tracing her feelings through the days she is dealing with her feelings of grieving and guilt. How important do you think it is for young people facing such issues to write down their stories?

As the author states, "There can be great relief in sharing a heavy story, allowing the weight of it to shift from our shoulders during the telling. Writing is one way of releasing such a burden. In Chance's case, writing helped. It might not help everyone who shares the kind of emotional pain Chance feels, but it's one strategy that is worth a try." Have you ever tried writing your thoughts as a way to promote feeling better? How did it work for you?

Activity Web (format adapted from Charlotte Huck)

<p>Art Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Experiment with various media to produce a scene from the novel including the following: crayon relief; ink; pencil sketches; watercolour. ➤ Examine Miriam Körner’s illustrations for the novel—why do you think she chose this media and style? What do you like about them? What might you have done differently, if anything? ➤ Create your own mending wall. 	<p>Considering Alternatives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What if Chance could go back in time, and support her friends differently; what might she do? ➤ What other animal might have come to Chance’s rescue? How could this have changed the story? ➤ If you were writing this story, what might you have done differently in terms of the book’s plot, if anything? ➤ What other family activities might Chance’s father have introduced?
<p>Creative Writing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Write a poem from Chance’s point of view. ➤ Write a letter that Chance’s father might write to his parents in Arizona. ➤ Write a new entry in Chance’s journal. ➤ Create a backstory for Chance’s father—what is his life story until now? ➤ Create your own mending wall (see above, with art included). ➤ Write the classroom scene as a short play. ➤ Write a letter to Chance that gives her your best advice for the situation she is in. ➤ Create a poster on mental health. 	<p>Drama</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Create an interview between a journalist and Janet Johnson. ➤ Re-create 3 conversations that Chance’s parents have about her when they think she isn’t able to hear them (at the book’s beginning/middle/end). ➤ Develop a dialogue amongst 3 or 4 kids in the classroom, as a hallway or playground conversation, revealing their thoughts about the evolution of their class’s Mending Wall. ➤ Tableau a dramatic scene. ➤ Hot-seat the Ford Mustang in a creative Question Period. ➤ Develop a commercial for healthy living, and share.

Interdisciplinary Research Ideas

- Health & Wellness: identify how responses to mental illness have evolved over the years; what does the word “stigma” mean? How have people with mental illnesses been stigmatized in the past? What is our current language around mental health doing for people’s health and wellness in this area?
- Research animal tracks that might be seen in your area; give your classmates a short lesson in animal identification from tracks we might see.
- What different languages and cultures appear in the story? If you could add something to the classroom scene from the perspective of a different language/culture, what would you add?
- Create positive affirmations to share with your group, as the students do in the story.
- Dominoes is a game played by the kids in the story. Where was it invented? How do you play?
- Auntie Verdine has diabetes. Find facts on this condition and write the advice her doctor might give her.

Literary Awareness

- This story is written in third-person present tense. Try re-writing a short section in first-person present or in past-tense and compare. Why do you think the author chose the tense she did?
- Consider the length of the book—do you think it’s a good length for telling this story? Why/why not?
- Consider the length of chapters in this book: do the chapter lengths work for this story? Why/not?
- What effect do the illustrations have on each chapter? Are there other scenes that you think would make good illustrations? Why?
- Consider the idea of a literary motif and talk about how the wildcat and fox images supported the story.
- The teacher encouraged a personal interpretation of Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Wall”. What do you think about this?
- What authors and poetry or prose would you bring into this grade seven classroom if you were the teacher?
- What is magic realism? Try writing something in this genre.

Personal Response

- Have you ever experienced losing a loved one? What stages of grief did you feel? What helped you through this process?
- If you could choose an animal to represent yourself, as the fox may have represented Chance, what animal would you choose? Why?
- Does the classroom in the story remind you in any way of your classroom?
- There are a number of new television shows that deal with suicide; how might these shows make people feel? What can you do if you are watching something on television or online that makes you feel scared or depressed?
- The afterward in the novel, by Dr. Tim Claypool, talks about how mental hygiene is similar to dental hygiene. How do you take care of your teeth? How can we take care of our mental health?

Related Literature

- Compare this story to other middle-grade books that deal with bullying, such as *A Boy Named Queen* by Sara Cassidy; *The Tiger Rising* by Kate DiCamillo; and *Egghead* by Caroline Pignat.
- A high-interest low-vocab title on bullying is Liz Brown's *The Bully*.
- Consider messages about death in the following books and compare to the *Fox Magic* storyline: *Annie and the Old One* by Miska Miles and Joseph Bruchac's *Fox Song*.
- Check out Danielle Daniel's *Sometimes I Feel Like a Fox* for information about totem animals.
- *Métis Legacy: Michif Culture, Heritage and Folkways* (Volumes I and II) edited by Lawrence Barkwell, Leah Dorion, and Darren Prefontaine, is a collection of historical photos, paintings, drawings, maps, stories and songs for all ages, sharing culture and history of the Métis people.
- A title emphasizing our reliance on the natural world around us is Dale Auger's *Mwâkwa Talks to the Loon: A Cree Story for Children*.
- *When the Trees Crackle with Cold:*

A Cree Calendar:

PISIMWASINAHIKAN by Bernice Johnson-Laxdal & Miriam Körner, presents a traditional Cree moon calendar, including activities that would traditionally occur during each month.

- Raymond Taniton & Mindy Willett's *At the Heart of it= Dene dzó t'áré. (The Land is our Storybook)* offers information about Taniton's family and way of life, summarizing tenets integral to Dene culture.
- Two books for young people that talk about anxiety are: *When My Worries Get Too Big! A Relaxation Book for Children Who Live with Anxiety*, by Kari Dun Buron; and, *Anxiety: Deal with It Before It Ties You Up In Knots*, by Joey Mandel.

For Adults

1. *Bullying in Schools and What to Do About It* by Ken Rigby is a resource for anti-bullying programming.
2. Deborah Ellis's title *We Want You to Know: Kids Talk About Bullying* can be used with children or as a resource guide for adults.

Values Clarification	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Was Chance right in keeping the secret, as she'd promised her friends?➤ What is your responsibility if you hear a friend talking about self-harm?➤ Was the teacher right in allowing Monica to leave the room and miss an important discussion?➤ Why is taking care of our living earth important? How does nature help Chance in this story? How might nature help others who are grieving?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ What music do you think Chance would like? Find or write a song that you think represents her.➤ Compose a group letter to the author and connect by email through her author's website.➤ If you or your class has another idea that will help support wellness and positive living, consider sending it to the author for inclusion in this teachers' guide.