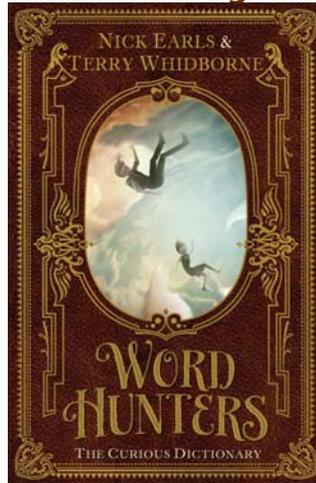


UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

WORD HUNTERS: THE CURIOUS DICTIONARY

Nick Earls & Terry Whidborne



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

ISBN: 978 0 7022 4945 7 / AUS \$14.95

Synopsis	2
Themes	2
Family	2
Etymology/Orgin of Words	2
History	2
Mystery and Adventure	2
Writing Style	3
Illustrating Style	3
Study Notes	3
Author Motivation	7
Illustrator Motivation	7
About the Author	7
About the Illustrator	8

These notes may be reproduced free of charge for use and study within schools
but they may not be reproduced (either in whole or in part) and offered for commercial sale.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

SYNOPSIS

When twelve-year-old twins Al and Lexi find an old book, *Walker & Fuller's Curious Dictionary*, they find themselves teleported into the distant past. They soon discover that they are hunting the story of words such as 'hello' and 'water'. In so doing, they visit Thomas Edison's lab, become crew members on an 19th century whaling ship, fight in the Battle of Hastings and are almost trapped in a fire in the ancient Library of Alexandria.

This is a mystery adventure story that takes the reader on a tumultuous time-travel journey into the past – not just to reveal the origins and evolution of the English language, but also to experience pivotal moments in the history of humankind.

THEMES

Family:

- Al and Lexi must work together to ensure their survival.
- The twins' grandfather disappeared years earlier.

Etymology/Origin of Words:

- Words in the English language have changed over time; some are at risk of disappearing from our language altogether whilst others have stood the test of time.
- The English language has been influenced by many other languages and cultures.
- The etymology of the English language is intertwined with historical events such as invasions and conquests by foreign powers.

History:

- Al and Lexi become part of various historical events.
- Al's general knowledge of the past helps him to safeguard his future and that of his sister.
- The twins' grandfather was a history teacher.

Mystery and Adventure:

- What happened to the twins' grandfather?
- How have words in the English language changed over time?
- Al and Lexi are thrust into many situations that require wit and intellect for survival.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

WRITING STYLE

Word Hunters: The Curious Dictionary is written in third person, past tense and is targeted at middle-grade readers – 10+ years. It blends the contemporary thoughts and dialogue of Al and Lexi with the language of various historical periods. The narrative is fast-paced and intelligently written. It provides the elements of mystery and adventure whilst also heightening the historical and linguistic curiosity of readers.

ILLUSTRATOR STYLE

Terry Whidborne has provided the following comments:

My illustration style varies slightly but always appears slightly mad. With *Word Hunters* I approached the style like the old Little Golden Books illustrations but with a twist. It needed to have a classic style due to the nature of the story, but I also added little extras. These little extras consisted of detailed borders and an overall steampunk vibe. I tend to apply texture wherever I can, either in the way I do the shading or how I apply patterns.

STUDY NOTES

- Al and Lexi – and therefore the readers – find themselves in 19th century America. What clues reveal that the twins are in a different historical period?
- Lexi’s modern problem-solving strategies, such as using her mobile phone, don’t seem to work in the 19th century. What other strategies does she use to help in this situation?
- Keep a record of Al’s and Lexi’s character traits as you read *Word Hunters: The Curious Dictionary*. How are these characters different and similar? How do their strengths and weaknesses contribute to the narrative?
- Discuss the use of portals and time-travel in *Word Hunters: The Curious Dictionary*. Brainstorm other portals that could be used in a time-travel narrative.
- Lexi wants to wake up in her school library with a copy of 19th century American literature such as *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *Little House on the Prairie*. Share extracts of these stories with students, encouraging them to read one of these classics.
- Re-read the description of Al’s sea sickness and the motion of the whaling ship starting on p28. Highlight the words and phrases that help

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

to bring this description to life. Discuss the importance of creating visual images for readers. Try this technique in your own writing. Use a range of photographs from the internet to act as visual stimulus for this writing task.

- On a timeline, track the places and events that Al and Lexi visit.
- The notion of being able to change history is raised in *Word Hunters: The Curious Dictionary*. Have a class discussion about this issue. If you could change any part of history, what would you choose to change and why? We learn from history's mistakes. How would changing events from the past affect the future? Would these changes necessarily be positive? Explain.
- Keep a journal of the aspects of daily life that Al and Lexi find different as they travel back in time. For example, Lexi comments that she hasn't washed her hair or bathed during her visit to the New Forest in England.
- Compare *Word Hunters: The Curious Dictionary* with Doctor Who as mentioned on p43. How are they similar and/or different?
- There are many anachronisms in *Word Hunters: The Curious Dictionary*. Record these as you read. Examples include a coin with Queen Elizabeth I on it being found in 1100; a ballpoint pen; a paperclip; a plastic button. Make predictions about these objects. How might they fit into the story in later scenes?
- Use images containing anachronisms to help students understand this concept. These are readily available on the internet.
- In light of the accidental killing of the king in the forest, research William II (William Rufus) and Walter Tyrell (Lord of Poix and Langham). Take notes on the king's death and the role of Walter Tyrell. How might the history of England be different had the truth about the king's death been exposed?
- The twins travel to Rouen in Normandy, France. Lexi comments that 'people in history totally freaked about about witches' (p61). Research the history of witches and the way witches were treated. Present an explanation on the way witches were brought to trial and tested.
- Al and Lexi find themselves part of the Battle of Hastings. Read about the invasion of the Normans in England. Draw conclusions about the

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

etymology of the English language and words that have had their origins in the French language.

- The Saxons and Angles also influenced the English language. Write an explanation to show how various conquests have contributed to linguistics.
- There are hints throughout *Word Hunters: The Curious Dictionary* of the twins' grandfather. Take note of these clues as you read. What do you think happened to their grandfather? Is he connected to the anachronistic objects and the initials engraved in trees and so forth?
- Lexi tries to take photos on her mobile phone in order to keep a record of the past. These photos don't save. Imagine that you are there with Lexi and Al, taking digital photos that do save. Using Photo Story, create a digital story of one of the historical events they visit.
- The twins visit Britain and Germania during the Dark Ages. This is following the fall of the Roman Empire. Research the Dark Ages. Why were they given this name?
- Al and Lexi also find themselves embroiled in the fall of the ancient Hittite city of Hattusa. Here, the Library of Alexandria is burnt down, along with all that had been recorded. What impact did the loss of these historical records have on our understanding of the past? Why is it important that history is recorded?
- *Word Hunters: The Curious Dictionary* also focuses on the origins of surnames. Discuss the meaning of English surnames such as Tucker, Hunter, Johnson, Weaver, Dyer, Walker and Fuller. Research the origins of the surnames in your family tree.
- Re-read p204 in which Caractacus explains that words might be lost 'if not pinned down by...pegs at each stage of their evolution'. In light of this comment, what do you see as the main theme in *Word Hunters: The Curious Dictionary*?
- Lexi comments that there was so much killing in the past (p157). Was there more killing in the past than there is today? How has conflict resolution changed throughout history? What role have organisations such as the United Nations played in keeping peace?

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- As Al and Lexi travel home for the last time, 'pictures of future history rushed by' (p240). Sketch what you think what may happen in future history.
- In each historical setting, the twins' costumes change. Using the illustrations as a basis, research fashion trends during the various settings. Reflect on the way in which fashion mirrors society and plays an important role in social history.
- Choose one of the historical settings in the novel on which to write an information report. Include a historical narrative of this period, along with a discussion of the importance of this event to the history of humankind.
- Why do you think that the historical contexts of the words being hunted are visited in reverse chronological order?
- Choose a simple word from the English language not already hunted in *Word Hunters: The Curious Dictionary*. Conduct your own research into the origins of the word, including the changes of that word over time. Write your own chapter based on the history of that word which would be suitable for inclusion in *Word Hunters: The Curious Dictionary*.
- Discuss the idea that writing and reading are crucial if the English language is to be preserved.
- Brainstorm a list of words that would not have appeared in a dictionary 20 years ago (eg internet, twitter, facebook, texting, search engine etc). Why is language ever-changing?
- Old English is very different from modern-day English. Try deciphering some Old English such as that found in Old English poetry.
- Some words have been shortened over time, for instance, 'movies' is a shortened version of 'moving pictures'. What other examples can you find of words like this? (For example, 'telephone' has been shortened to 'phone'.)
- Using a good quality dictionary, choose a word to investigate every day. Look at its derivations. Research the origins of the word and how it has changed over time.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

For years I've loved the stories behind the origins of words and phrases, but never thought it was something I'd write about. Three things in particular stuck with me – the almost-certain origin (and complicated life) of 'okay'; the possible origin of 'hello' that came up when I joined a few dots; and the almost-lost letter 'thorn', which persists only in the 'th' sound that we mispronounce as 'y' when we see 'ye olde'. I came up with the beginnings of an idea for series of stories that might weave this material in. Yet again I didn't expect to write it, and told no one about it.

I'd got to know Terry through an advertising campaign for Brisbane Marketing, and was frankly amazed at his talent as an artist. And he wanted to illustrate books for children. I was convinced Terry could be the next Shaun Tan, and still am. I wanted to work with Terry and wondered if my germ of a series idea could be the right project. We pitched an early version to a few people, and signed up with UQP. After one meeting with them, the whole thing immediately became way bigger and way better. We had a big bold story to tell, I was truly excited about it and off we went looking for all its parts. I loved that search and still can't believe some of the huge and tiny things we've found that have made their way into the books.

ILLUSTRATOR MOTIVATION

I have always loved time-travel films. Being a visual person, I am in awe of Jules Verne and his many adventures into strange lands and time. From *The Journey to the Centre of the Earth* and *Time Machine* the designs and imagination that generated those worlds were brilliant. His work also spawned the genre 'Steampunk' in later years. The gadgets and machines were amazing. I met Nick during an ad campaign I was working on and we have kept in touch ever since. I remember having dinner and saying 'Where does "okay" come from?' and with that Nick launched into the history of the word 'okay'.

A few years later he approached me about a project and what he mentioned got me excited. It included time-travel and gadgets. Between Nick's award-winning writing talents and his expansive brain for detailed facts, how could I not do it? Over a few weeks we talked about the story and I did some illustrations and pitched it to UQP. They instantly embraced the idea and moved it up a couple of notches to make the project amazing. I have learnt a lot from the research which had to be done for the illustrations and was also surprised at what Nick had found to spin his story around.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Earls is the author of 15 books, including five novels with teenage central characters. *48 Shades of Brown* was a CBCA Book of the Year, and his other

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

four young adult novels were Notable Books. *After January* was also shortlisted for the National Children's Literature Award, won a 3M Talking Book of the Year Award and was shortlisted in the Fairlight Talking Book Awards. The International Youth Library, Munich, included it in its White Ravens selection of international notable new books. It was the first of five of Nick Earls's novels to become plays. Two have also been adapted into feature films.

www.nickearls.com

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Terry Whidborne has worked in the advertising industry for many years, and is now recognised as one of Brisbane's most award-winning senior Art Directors. But as Terry's family grew, so did his interest in illustration. He began developing his style for clients such as *Vogue*, Virgin Blue and many of London's top ad agencies, before deciding that what he really wanted to do was concentrate on books, film and animation. He lives in Brisbane with his wife and two kids.

www.the7thworld.com