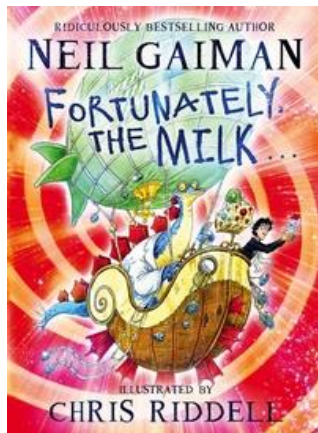


# B L O O M S B U R Y

## Teacher's Guide *Fortunately The Milk* by Neil Gaiman

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### SYNOPSIS

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A brilliantly bonkers illustrated adventure about what happens (or what Dad says happens) when Mum is away at a conference (presenting a paper on lizards) and Dad is left in charge.

Unfortunately, there's no milk for breakfast, so Dad goes to the corner shop to buy some while his children wait at home. When he eventually returns with the milk, after being away for 'ages and ages', he explains why it took him so long . . . On leaving the shop, Dad is sucked into a huge silver disc occupied by globby green aliens who want to take over Earth.

Inside the disc, he opens a door and lets in the space-time continuum, which causes him to fall into the eighteenth century, where he finds himself aboard a pirate ship. He turns down the Pirate Queen's invitation for him to join their piratical adventures, and instead walks the plank, because that's where people are usually rescued. Fortunately, this proves to be true when Professor Steg (a time-travelling Stegosaurus) rescues him in her hot-air balloon. After pressing a big, red button in the balloon, Dad and Professor Steg find themselves a thousand years back in time, in a jungle inhabited by volcano-god worshippers.

After escaping the wrath of Splod (the volcano god) and then losing and finding the all important milk, Dad and Professor Steg encounter some scary wumpires. To escape them, Dad presses the big, red button, which takes them back to the aliens.

To scare the aliens, Dad pulls two cartons of milk from Professor Steg's tiny space-time portal and threatens to touch them together, because if two things that are the same touch, the whole universe will end (either that, or three remarkable dwarfs will dance through the streets with flowerpots on their heads). At this point, the Galactic Police turn up and charge the aliens with the crime of 'breaking into people's planets and redecorating them'. Unfortunately, as Dad shakes the hand of one of the police officers (a Pteranodon), the two milk cartons touch. Fortunately, the dwarfs appear, the universe does not end and Dad returns home with the carton of milk and an extraordinary tale to tell.

## THEMES

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Framed by the very ordinary act of a dad reading his newspaper before and after a trip to the corner shop to buy milk, *Fortunately, the Milk* . . . is an exuberant, fantastical celebration of story-telling. It is a book about dads, making the ordinary extraordinary and finding the magical in the mundane. It is also a book about what manner of mayhem might be unleashed when the space-time continuum is let in . . .

## WRITING STYLE

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The novel opens in the stylistically matter-of-fact first person voice of a young boy narrator. The sentences are short, the language clear and simple. This contrasts with the vibrant descriptive language the dad uses to tell his adventure, which is richly onomatopoeic ('thumm-thumm' goes the huge silver disc; 'there was a zoom, a tworp, and a thang') and physical – voices boom, bellies wobble, the hot-air balloon rocks, lurches and zooms.

Throughout, humour is created through the juxtaposition of the absurd with the matter-of-fact. The outlandish content of the dad's tale, and the imagery rich language he uses to tell it, contrasts with his pragmatic, understated tone. Dialogue both deftly establishes characterisation, and speeds the action along.

## AUTHOR MOTIVATION

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Below is a transcription of a short film in which Neil Gaiman discusses what inspired *Fortunately, the Milk*. You can watch the film here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHjVB5SYSFw&feature=youtu.be>

'I think, and this is speaking as a dad, that dads do not get a fair crack of the whip, their fair acknowledgement in fiction. Normally we die before the story starts just to keep things interesting for our young heroes and heroines. So I decided that I was going to write a book in which dads get to do all of the really cool, important and exciting things that dads normally get to do on a daily basis, like get captured by pirates, rescued by a time-travelling Stegosaurus in a balloon, captured by people in a jungle who are going to sacrifice you to Splod, a volcano god . . . go into the future and meet magical ponies, get attacked by wumpires. There's spaceships involved. There's even a bucket of piranhas. And I thought I would put all of those in, and also have a book in which a dad got to do the important dangerous thing that dads get to do best of all, which is go down to the corner shop and come back with some milk.'

## AUTHOR / ILLUSTRATOR BACKGROUND

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Born in Hampshire, UK, Neil Gaiman has written numerous highly acclaimed books for both children and adults. The L.A. Times has described his multi-million-selling graphic novel series Sandman as 'the greatest epic in the history of comic books'. Many of his books, including Coraline and Stardust, have been made into films. In 2011 he wrote The Doctor's Wife episode of Doctor Who and appeared as himself in The Simpsons.



Neil is the first author to have won both the Carnegie and Newbery Medals for the same work – The Graveyard Book. This novel was also the recipient of the UK's Booktrust Prize for Teenage Fiction, the Locus Young Adult Award and the Hugo Best Novel Prize, and it was also shortlisted for the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal for illustration (the first time in thirty years that a book has made both Medal shortlists). His ground-breaking picture books include The Wolves in the Walls and The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish, both illustrated by Dave McKean.

Born in South Africa and now living in Brighton, Chris Riddell is a much loved illustrator and acclaimed political cartoonist. Co-creator of the hugely successful New York Times bestseller The Edge Chronicles, he has won many awards for his work, including the Nestlé Smarties Gold Award, the Blue Peter Book Award and the Red House Children's Book Award. He has the rare honour of winning two Kate Greenaway Medals, and was also shortlisted for this award for his illustrations for Bloomsbury's children's edition of The Graveyard Book.

## STUDY NOTES

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**1)** Why do you think the mum is surprised when the dad is able to tell her all the 'important things that had to happen while she was away' (page 5)?

**2)** The narrator and his sister question some parts of their dad's story e.g. the narrator wonders how piranhas, freshwater fish, could have been circling the pirate ship (page 35), and how a Stegosaurus could 'nip up a rope ladder' (page 58). What do these questions tell us about the narrator's character? Do you think the dad's answers are satisfactory? Would you have asked for further explanation?

**3)** Professor Steg uses interesting descriptive names for objects e.g. she calls coconuts 'hard-hairy-wet-white-crunchers' and she calls her hot-air balloon a 'Floaty-Ball-Person-Carrier'. What names would Professor Steg give the following? Think about what they do, and what they look and feel like. Think about how they smell or taste (if they're edible!): tractor; hairdryer; pineapple juice; cucumber; bobble hat; snake; lemon; watering can; bubblegum; book

You could even turn this into a wacky word game to play with friends or the whole class. Write different words on pieces of card, shuffle the cards, pick one out, set a timer for one minute and describe what's written on it, Professor Steg style. Your friends/classmates have until the minute is up to guess what's being described.

- 4)** What did you think when the brightly coloured ponies appeared in Dad's story (pages 70-73)?
- 5)** Were you surprised to learn that Professor Steg is female? If so, why?
- 6)** Which character was your favourite? Why? Would you have liked to read more about any of the characters?
- 7)** 'You know, we don't believe any of this,' said my sister.

'We don't,' I told him. 'Not any of it.' (page 141)

Do you believe the dad's story? If you think he made it all up, what do you think inspired his story? (Clue: think about the things in the kitchen, and look closely at the illustrations of the children)

If you don't believe him, why do you think he made it up? Why do you think people enjoy telling and writing stories? Why do you think people enjoy listening to and reading stories?

- 8)** The dad says he can prove things happened because he has the milk (e.g. page 27, page 142). Does this prove anything?

- 9)** Which of the following words do you think describe the dad?

Clever Funny Silly Daring Scared Lazy Excitable Shy Inventive

Imaginative Intrepid Resourceful Barmy Optimistic Boring

Think of five other words to describe him, including one phrase in the style of Professor Steg.

- 10)** How does the author create the character of Professor Steg? Think about things like physical descriptions, the way Professor Steg talks (the dialogue) and the way she behaves.

- 11)** Did you think this was a funny book? Which parts did you think were the funniest? How does the author make things funny?

- 12)** Find three examples of how the illustrations add to the story. Draw your own illustrations for the same parts of the story, taking inspiration from those in the book, but also adding your own original elements.

- 13)** The author could have chosen any reason to send the dad to the shop. The family could have run out of anything. Why do you think you think he chose to make it milk?

- 14)** Imagine the dad and Professor Steg press the button one more time and find themselves in a different time and place (e.g. an underwater world millions of years ago, Stone Age Britain, Ancient Egypt, or another planet – it could be anywhere you like, at any time in history!). Who do they meet? What do the inhabitants look like? How do they behave and talk? What does their world look like? Write a paragraph about what happens to Dad and Professor Steg when they find themselves in this other time and place. You could also illustrate it.

**15)** A man appears on page 62 and pages 90-91 and takes the milk. Who do you think this man might be? What role does he play in the dad's story?

Does the story have a hero? Who, or what, saves the day?

**16)** Design your own time-travelling machine. What special features does it have? How does it work?

**17)** Ask your teacher to explain the space-time continuum . . . Describe the look on your teacher's face in the style of the book.