Every night a 12-fingered child called Jub empties a sack full of happy endings from her perch in a tree top, freeing them for the wind to distribute amongst all of the stories being told throughout the world. One night she is mugged by a bark-faced, green-gobbing witch who steals the happy endings, and soon the world is a-wail with the sobs of children distressed by stories whose terrors and sorrows are now incurable. Jub struggles to sleep against a backdrop of weeping, and dreams of a golden pen with which she can write on the sky a story that will change the one that she’s locked within.

The intensity of vision and conciseness of language that characterises Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry ensure that this short tale provides, haiku-like, a lingering experience. Its combination of wistfulness and horrible brutality recalls the grimmest of the Grimm tales, yet the artfully abrupt ending is subtle and intriguing. Jane Ray’s pictures similarly combine delicacy and ferocity. Full page tableaux confront 16 pages of embellished text, each of them combining the darkness of forest and nightmare with the richer colours of fire, fabrics and starlight. The witch is treated very luridly in words, deeds and pictures, but Jub is a sprite both warm and fey, and the image of her balancing amongst twigs as she inscribes the sky is spectacular.

This is a very powerful story about the power of story.

Themes from the book

Fear

The nature of fairy tales

Fear

Many books for children deal with fear: fear of monsters, fear of the dark, fear of getting lost or losing something precious.

Other books dealing with fear:

*Little Mouse’s Big Book of Fears* by Emily Gravett

This is an amusing book to use in KS2 especially. It tells the story of Little Mouse who is afraid of so many things. The children are introduced to all sorts of fears and the proper names for these fears, so extending their vocabulary. Children are invited to add their own comments and fears as they read, and they can see where Little Mouse has been chewing his way through the pages. It is a wonderful book to use for discussion and also supports a Philosophy for children (P4C) approach.

*The Monster who ate Darkness* by Joyce Dunbar

In this story the monster eats darkness and grows bigger as he does so. When he has eaten all the darkness, the nocturnal animals don’t know what to do. Jo Jo is upset so the monster comforts him and everything is restored.

*The Dark* by Lemony Snicket and Jon Klassen

Laszio is frightened of the dark in the house. One night when the light goes out the Dark calls Laszio to visit him in the basement. Simple, but scary illustrations would make this suitable for discussion with juniors as well as a starting point for talking about fear.

*All Kinds of Fears* by Emma Brownjohn
This lift-the-flap book looks at a variety of fears through a series of flaps and pop-ups. It is multi-cultural in nature showing how fear is something that everyone, everywhere can experience. From fear of the dark to fear of being bullied, the book explores the concerns that children and adults have about the world. Tickets at the end give some ideas to try and combat these fears.

*Silly Billy* by Anthony Browne

Billy is a worrier. He worries about everything until his Granny comes up with a solution to his fears. An amusing look at the nature of fear. Beautifully illustrated as one should expect from Anthony Browne.

**The Nature of Fairy Tales**

Before looking at retold fairy tales, children need to have some grounding in the genre, so a reading of several of the Grimm brothers’ tales and/ or those of Charles Perrault is recommended. In this way children build some understanding of the genre.

Several well-known books have obvious intertextual references that help children to become aware of the references and allusions to the original stories.

*The Jolly Postman* by Allan and Janet Ahlberg

Everyone will be familiar with this romp through fairyland told in rhyme. A modern classic story with letters, cards and other items delivered in pockets throughout the book. *Fairytail News* by Colin and Jacqui Hawkins

Complete with a newspaper with hilarious stories, this book enables slightly older readers to find the characters they are familiar with in the story and the illustrations.

*Into the Forest* by Anthony Browne

The illustrations in this book provide many links to other fairy stories. Challenge children, and adults, to find the links.

*Mixed-up Fairy Tales* by Hilary Robinson and Nick Sharratt

There is chaos in Fairyland when this spiral bound book is used to mix up the stories. Children can experiment and write their own stories based on using this split page book. Hours of amusement.

*Jeremiah in the Dark Woods* by Janet and Allan Alhberg

This is a slightly longer book but has many characters and situations based on fairy stories. Suitable for junior aged children it is a delight to read.

Other books turn fairy stories upside down or give them a different twist.

*The Wolf’s Story* by Toby Forward

This gives the wolf’s version of events. A story best read with an American accent to gain the best effect!

*The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* by Eugene Trivizas and Helen Oxenbury

The message behind this version is that there is good and bad in everyone. Illustrations by Helen Oxenbury bring life and humour to this tale.

*The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales, and The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka

Both these books provide weird and wonderful interpretations and alternative versions of familiar fairy stories. The varied print challenges the eye, and the author’s sense of humour is obvious in these books. Older primary children will be attracted to the often strange, but wonderful stories in both these titles.
Other Ideas

An obvious idea is to ask children to write their own mixed up tales or alternative fairy stories. However, investigating the nature of the characters in fairy stories provides a basis for other creative writing. Many of the people in these stories are stereotypes. The witch is evil, the wolf is wicked, as is the step-mother. Ask the children to make a list of people in one story and then write something about each character. For example, Red Riding Hood is sweet, innocent, caring, thoughtful etc. The wolf is wicked, evil, deceiving, violent. Then swap these around so that RRH has the qualities of the wolf and the wolf is the sweet and innocent character. Re-write the story and see what happens.

Make a story map of Fairyland. Devise a series of clues to guide people around the map. For example: turn right at the house that looks like a shoe and carry on to the deep, dark wood.

As a class project, make a newspaper like the one in Fairytale News. Examine local and national newspapers and make a list of what items should be included in a newspaper. Generate ideas as a class. Each child may then be given a task with editors to put it all together. This could be done on the computer. It encourages teamwork and allows each child to take part at a level where they are challenged but not to a point beyond their capabilities. Children working 3 in mixed ability pairs or as a group works best on this type of project. Set a time frame for completion of tasks to encourage speed and efficiency.

Ask children to rewrite the ending of The Lost Happy Endings. Ask “Would you burn the witch or have her repent? What alternatives can you think of?”

As mentioned above the book may also be used for P4C sessions and topics such as bullying and fears discussed.