

Tidy

Emily Gravett

Tidy by Emily Gravett, Published by Too Hoots Books, 978-1447273981, 40pp, Hardcover, for Under 5s Pre-School/Nursery/Infant, RRP £12.99.

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A rhyming text and witty illustrations introduce us to badger, Pete, whose penchant for keeping the forest and his various animal friends spick and span appears, to begin with, largely laudable. However, the wicked looking stainless steel secateurs with which he is cutting off flowers whose colours 'didn't quite match', should warn us that this is an animal whose scouring and scrubbing may lead to a drastic minimalist solution to nature's inherent untidiness. Autumn is the catalyst and, faced with all those falling leaves, Badger gets to work. We see the result in a shocking double page spread: a mountain of black bin bags dwarves the starkly naked trees. But Badger doesn't stop there. The trees look 'bare and scrappy', so he digs them up. A flood follows: cue for double page spread with what looks very convincingly like a lot of real mud in which Pete wallows with his red bucket and mop. What Pete does next is very drastic indeed and, although he initially declares it 'practically perfect', it causes him, thankfully, to rethink his whole approach to his surroundings. This humorous ecological fable features a typical Gravett touch as slip cover, book cover and endpaper are cut through to show badger putting leaves in a waste basket as if in a slightly distant woodland glade. But, otherwise, she relies on the use of colour and page design to put the story across in a series of striking images in which colour is gradually banished from the forest only to return when Pete realises the error of his ways. Whether or not Pete is a totally reformed character remains open to question, however, as, in another typical Gravett touch, he is found Hoovering up the British Library catalogue record information on the back page.

Themes

Tidy tackles the theme of caring for the environment from the unusual viewpoint of being overzealous and taking tidying too far. He is a badger but does not have the characteristics normally attributed to fictional badgers. These ideas connect the themes of:

- Eco friendly stories.
- Badger characters in children's literature.

Eco friendly stories

***In The Forest*, Anouck Boisrobert and Louis Rigaud. Tate Publishing. 2012.**

This picture book uses the technique of pop up to enhance the effect of the story of deforestation. As each page is turned the progress of a mechanical saw and four diggers reduces the greenness of the forest floor, while people and animals are running for their lives. The contrasting use of white instead of green emphasises the destruction of the machines and everything seems lost until a man comes along who starts to plant new seeds. Deforestation, development of towns, endangered animals and climate change are a few of the themes this book introduces for discussion or exploration. The clever use of colour and pop up devices are engaging and all the more terrible, when the scene of devastation is

shown as white, blank and lifeless. However there is a message of hope in the final page where regeneration of growth has begun and the digger is enveloped by the greenery.

***Dinosaurs and all the Rubbish*, Michael Foreman. Hamish Hamilton.1972.**

This is a tale of dinosaurs using their strength and power to break up concrete roads and clear up piles of old cars and other man made rubbish. As earth is reclaimed by nature, the message of our responsibility to all living things is reinforced. A man travelling from a distant star comes to earth and sees its natural beauty now restored. He is allowed to have a small part of it back with the proviso that it is shared, and we all take care of it.

***Window* Jeannie Baker. Julie MacRae Books.1991.**

This book is also about the impact humans have on the world. It has no words and uses beautifully created collage to show the progress of a scene from a window showing creeping urbanisation, over a period of possibly twenty years. The attention to detail is fascinating and the message, like the other books, is about our own part in the impact on the environment and the changes we might need to make.

Badger Characters in children's literature.

In *Tidy*, the badger, Pete initially seems to be helpfully keeping things neat and tidy in the forest. However this soon becomes obsessive behaviour that results in ecological disaster. Pete is not the reliable source of wisdom and good sense that have been attributed to badgers in other stories. It might be interesting to compare different badger characters and look at some non-fiction about the wild animals to see if there is a realistic basis for representing badgers with these characteristics. Badgers feature in *Wind in the Willows* – Kenneth Graham, *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* – Roald Dahl, *Badger's Parting Gift* – Susan Varley and *Mr. Badger and the Big Surprise* – Leigh Hobbs. None of the badgers in these books appear as active or irresponsible as Pete in *Tidy*, although wild badgers do go to some trouble to keep their sett clean and remove stale bedding away from any openings. It would be interesting to find out if any other behaviour traits found in the wild animals are also found in the fictional badgers.

Technique in creating illustrations in picture books.

Emily Gravett uses ICT technology to add to her illustrations, particularly a programme called Drop Box. This enables her to photograph objects, change their size and move them around the page until she is happy with the result. A study of the double page spread showing Pete's home trapped under a platform of concrete is a great example of this. It is actually possible to identify the cleaning products from the shapes of the containers. I particularly liked the glow worm lights.

Children might like to try use the Drop Box programme to try and make their own illustrations more detailed and entertaining.

The authors of *In The Forest* use the pop-up elements to emphasise what has vanished and what is left. It might be possible to make individual cards with pop-up effects or a large scale one as a class. This does not use any kind of ICT technology but is amazingly effective.

The Window is a stunning example of collage work which may inspire creativity in illustrations of children.

Examination of any of these techniques could lead into the discussion of how much more effectively the message of the story is conveyed. Pete hoovering up the catalogue reference on the final page of *Tidy* suggests that he hasn't reformed entirely and is always going to be tempted to interfere with things that should be left alone. Is this a reflection on his human counterparts?

by Liz Robertson

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