



Things Are Looking Up, Jack

Dan Bar-el

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All around the kingdom, things are falling, Humpty Dumpty, London Bridge, the sky, even King Jack himself. What is he to do?

A Sample

"I don't understand it," Humpty Dumpty cried. "I was just sitting here on top of the wall as I usually do in the mornings, knitting egg cozies. The sun was shining. The birds were chirping and looking at me with their usual, curious expression. There wasn't any wind. The earth didn't shake. One second I'm up there and the next I'm down here. I don't understand how this happened. I've never fallen before."

"He was probably just following your example, Jack," said Jill with a smirk.

King Jack decided to ignore his sister. "This is quite a coincidence. I, myself, have also just fallen down for no apparent reason," said Jack.

The Story

All is not right in the land of Mother Goose. People and things keep falling down and it is not merely coincidental. There is trouble afoot. It is up to King Jack and his sister Princess Jill to get to the bottom of this mystery.

The Author

Dan Bar-el is funny; Dan Bar-el can write; and Dan Bar-el knows kids. One day he began to wonder why so many things and people fall to the ground in children's stories and nursery rhymes. In *Things Are Looking Up, Jack* he answers his own question and puts a stop to all that falling. When he encountered a grizzly bear atop a mountain in Jasper National Park, Dan entertained it with his harmonica and survived to tell the tale. He lives, writes and works as a school age childcare worker in Vancouver, British Columbia.

The Ideas

- Before reading the story, try to list all the nursery rhymes and tales that involve something falling. Try to list all the rhymes and tales that have a

Jack in them. Write the rhymes down and the main points of the tales. See how many of them are mentioned in the book, and how they are used.

- Go to the library and collect all the books of nursery rhymes you can find. Have a read aloud session where everyone takes turns reading aloud or reciting their favorite nursery rhymes. Create a wall mural on which everyone copies out and illustrates one rhyme.
- As you read the book, look for the nursery rhymes referred to in the story. If they are not already represented on your wall, add them.
- Ask yourself, what might Jack and Jill get up to next? Write an opening chapter of a sequel or write a whole short story about them, about another character from the story or about another nursery rhyme character who interests you.
- In Chapter Seven, Bo Peep says to King Jack, “names are useful, but they don’t tell you the whole story.” Can you think of a time where you felt unfairly judged, where you felt friends or family weren’t looking at the whole you before making their minds up about who you were? Discuss this in a group.
- In this story, Jack and Jill are brother and sister. At times, Jill thinks she is just as good as Jack or perhaps even better. But she feels she is getting short-changed because she is a year younger. Are you a younger sibling in your family? Do you feel that you don’t get the same treatment as your older brothers or sisters? Do you think it’s unfair? Why?
- At the end of the story, King Jack tells Evil Jack he can stay in the kingdom but he must change his name. What would be a good name for Evil Jack to change his to? What could he be known for that no other Mother Goose rhyme has had yet? Could you write a rhyme that would go with his new identity?
- Imagine the map that King Jack finds in Evil Jack’s boat. Could you draw what the map would look like from what you’ve read in the story? Could you add a few more things that weren’t included? Draw or paint little pictures on the map that represent key scenes in the story.

- There is only one nursery rhyme in the book that has actually been changed from the original. Can you remember which one?

It was in Chapter Two.

*Rock-a-bye baby, in the treetop,
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock,
When the bough breaks, the cradle will fly,
And up will go baby, into the sky.*

Can you take a nursery rhyme and change the second half of it? Try this one:

*Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any wool?
Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full
(finish the rest)*

Can you finish this rhyme?

*Humpty Dumpty sat on the floor
Humpty Dumpty rolled out the door
(finish the next two lines)*

- Write your own nursery rhyme.
- In Chapter One, Humpty Dumpty is described in the following way:

Poor Sir Dumpty was cracked. His thoughts were scrambled, his nerves were fried, and if there was a sunny side to his mood, it wasn't presently facing up.

Why is it funnier to describe him in this way rather than to just say he was injured, upset and angry?

Write a description of the following using the same method that Dan Bar-el did in the paragraph about Humpty Dumpty:

Mr. Potato Head in a car accident or a meteorologist (weather person) describing her family.

- Write another possible ending to the story that could explain why all the things in Mother Goose's kingdom are falling down? Could they be caused by another Evil Jack invention? Will some kind of natural cause be behind it all?

- Make a giant paper maché sculpture of Spike the nasty sheep. If you do, send Dan Bar-el a picture. He says that he would find that just a hoot.
- Take turns acting out the nursery rhyme of Jack and Jill and making up the conversation they would have as they went up the hill, fetched the water and then fell down. Each time you do it, give them different characteristics (ie. make Jack someone who keeps falling asleep, make Jill really itchy, make them both whiny, crybabies). How do these “choices” color the scene differently? Does it make it funnier? Slower?
- Look at the cover of the book. Didn't the illustrator, Kathy Boake, do an interesting job? Have the whole class make a large picture of all the characters in the book using collage and pastels. Just remember to send the author a photo of it if you do, please.
- Writing comedy requires a big perspective. What does this mean? Well, consider that you were looking at a painting with your face close enough that your nose was touching the canvas. All you would see is a blur of color. Our emotions can be like a blur of color. Now imagine slowly moving back and away from the painting until you can begin to make out shapes and forms and then eventually you can see the whole picture at once.
- Exercise: Write about something sad that happened to you and try to write about it in a funny way. Don't write about anyone else, because that would be unfair and hurtful to them. Don't write anything about yourself if the feelings are still too strong and it makes you feel really uncomfortable. Be respectful to yourself and others. Just imagine that the memory is a painting and you are moving far enough away from it that you can notice things without the emotions blurring it. Try to discover anything that might be seen as humorous.

A Few Words from the Author

Dear Readers,

There are some stories that I complete in my head before they come out on paper and then there are some stories where I'm just along for the ride.

Things Are Looking Up, Jack was one of latter. I had no idea where I was going when I began writing about Jack and Jill. I just kept thinking about all the other nursery rhymes and stories where things were falling, and as I included them in the story, the kingdom of Mother Goose grew clearer in my mind. It wasn't until I was halfway through the book that I finally figured out what was causing everything to fall.

Writing is like that sometimes. It's as if a hidden part of your brain is running up ahead, looking around, and telling you to turn your story in this or that direction. You may not see where it's leading you at first, but later you realize why you wrote the things you did. The trick is to really listen to yourself and to not say "no" before you've given your ideas a decent chance.

Now, I love comedy. I always have. When I was nine, I was already reading *Mad Magazine* and collecting pocketbooks of funny cartoon strips. I really liked when cartoon strips made fun of themselves. It was as if the cartoonist was letting me in on the joke. I just started reading some of the Lemony Snicket books a few months ago. I think he kind of writes like that too.

Mother Goose nursery rhymes are really weird when you think about them. We know very little about the characters in the rhymes except that they do these very strange things. They jump over candle sticks or stick their thumbs into pies to pull out plums. Why do they do these things? Why don't we mind that they do these things? Perhaps it's because we learned these rhymes when we were very little. When you're two or three years old, the whole world must seem bizarre. I don't think one giant egg sitting on a wall will make a big difference. But as we get older, I think it's fun to question the stuff that we usually take for granted. Writing comedy has a lot to do with looking at things we've seen all our lives but trying to see them as if it was for the first time.

My next book is called *Things Are Looking Grimm, Jill*. There will be few more Mother Goose characters added but mainly it will be having fun with the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales such as *Rapunzel* and *Snow White*. This book will focus more on Princess Jill as she tries to rescue the Land of Grimm from a horrible mind-controlling, money-stealing enemy, with the help of her brother, Jack, of course. Evil Jack is also in the story but I won't say anything more.

Sincerely,
Dan Bar-el

Bibliography

Babette Cole, *Prince Cinders* and *Princess Smartypants*

Rachel Vail, *Over the Moon*

Judy Sierra, *Monster Goose*

David T. Greenberg, *Whatever Happened to Humpty Dumpty?*

Jon Scieszka, *The Frog Prince*, *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*, *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* and *Squids Will Be Squids*

These are some of Dan's favorites. How many more books can you find that play with fairy tales and nursery rhymes?