

Free Fall

by David Wiesner

Classroom Favorites



Teacher's Guide by Jennifer Lee Richards

A Perma-Bound Production

Poem originally presented on the front flyleaf of the publisher's edition:

In the silence
of a dream
our adventures move
in seamless progression
as we conquer
our dragon,
explore
uncharted lands,
climb
to the highest pinnacle,
and float
free
descending
in a sudden
free fall
to the new day.

Synopsis

Free Fall takes the reader into the imagination of a young boy's dreams. Reality becomes make-believe as recognizable objects are incorporated in this fantastic tale.

A book of maps leads the boy's unconscious mind to uncharted lands where Renaissance rulers live within a chessboard-like kingdom. He meets a dragon, becomes a giant, travels through literature books, and "falls" back homeward to his brownstone in the city.

The reader can connect fantasy to reality by recognizing the objects or patterns which surround the boy within his bedroom which have become tangled in the illusions of his dream.

Biographical Sketch

David Wiesner was born and raised in Bridgewater, New Jersey. He graduated from Rhode Island School of Design with a BFA in Illustration. He and his wife Kim Kahng, a surgeon, live in Brooklyn, New York.

Wiesner and his wife collaborated on the retelling of a story. Their book is titled, *The Loathsome Dragon*. Wiesner's drawings have also appeared in several other children's books.

When Wiesner was in high school he was interested in visual storytelling. He used to make silent movies and draw wordless comic books.

Critic's Corner

Wiesner believes the idea for the book *Free Fall* developed out of a nine-foot long painting he had made while studying at Rhode Island School of Design.

He now recognizes that painting as "the genesis of *Free Fall*." In the painting "shapes evolved into new shapes and suggested a story that formed itself fully several years later."

"It was not until the illustrations for *Free Fall* were finished that (Wiesner) realized the story was more powerful without words to anchor it to reality."

Comprehension/Discussion Questions

1. What kind of art medium does Wiesner use? Notice Wiesner's attention to detail as he has added shadowing to his illustrations.
2. Discuss the poem written to accompany the book. What does the expression "seamless progression" mean? Why does Wiesner use the pronoun "we"? What could conquering "our dragon" mean to each of the students? What are obstacles they need to overcome? What is an "uncharted land"? Have the students ever awakened from a dream suddenly as if they had "fallen"?
3. Do not tell the students the book is wordless. Look at only the title page and the front and back covers. Try to predict what the story is about. Now tell them it is wordless. Are there any changes in students' predictions?
4. Read the dedication. Do the students think Kim is Wiesner's wife, Kim Kahng? Who are Matthew and Daniel?
5. Go through the book slowly with the students at first. Maybe find some music to play while showing it to them (maybe "Fantasia").
6. How old do the students think the boy is?
7. Discuss what the students think has happened to the boy. (*He is dreaming.*)
8. Discuss why the students think the interesting items they are asked to "notice" occur in the story:
 - A. Notice how the boy's pillow becomes the clouds and the bedspread becomes plots of land.
 - B. Notice the city scene at first is set in the nighttime and yet the dream starts out in the daylight.

- C. Notice the "chessboard likeness" of the kingdom the boy visits.
 - D. Notice the presence of a map floating away or some form of a map is included on most of the pages.
 - E. Notice the flag on page 4 has birds like those seen at the end of the book sitting on the boy's windowsill.
 - F. Notice the chess piece (a rook) that is transforming into a human man. Notice the one behind him that has not changed as much.
 - G. Notice the black chess piece (a bishop) that is stepping down from the pedestal he may have just been a part of.
 - H. Notice how the castle in the surrounding background has towering structures also resembling chess pieces.
9. Why has the boy come to this land?
 10. Why does the small black robed character (a pawn) seem to "join" the boy and his two companions? (The salt shaker and the beige pawn.) Is the black pawn a guide?
 11. Who or what are the three characters that stay close by the boy? One represents the salt shaker and the other two are opposing chess pieces. (pawns)
 12. Notice how the trees appear to be realistically portrayed in relation to the mountains in the background on pages 2-3. Notice how the trees are now tiny in relation to the boy's size on page 4 and are only a small scattering on page 5.
 13. Notice how the immediate group surrounding the boy on page 4 grows from eleven people to twenty-four people, that are able to be seen, on page 6. Who are these people? Do they all represent chess pieces also?
 14. Notice that the man riding the horse (a knight) on page 4 is missing from the rest of the book. Where did he go?
 15. Notice how the chess pieces are now taller than the characters and that the chess board no longer has any trees between the colored squares on pages 6-7.
 16. Notice the fish on the shield of the armor on page 7, what do they think it represents?
 17. Notice the large map curled up in the center of the castle on page 7.
 18. Notice the castle wall on page 8 melds into the dragon's tail on page 9.
 19. Notice the one castle tower that is half a tree on page 9. (It also resembles one of the pencils the boy had inside his nightstand.)
 20. Why is the armored knight empty? How did the boy knock it over?
 21. Notice the trees on page 10 begin to turn into books on page 11.
 22. Notice how on page 10 the boy is wearing a belt which resembles the one in his bedroom that holds his lamp to his bed. This is the only page he has on the belt, why?
 23. Notice the tail coming out of the book on page 14 and how the boy is now a giant in contrast to the other characters.
 24. Notice the monks sitting on the book on page 14. They resemble the carvings on the castle walls on page 8.
 25. What is being discussed on pages 14-15? Are the royal subjects trying to help the boy return to his home?
 26. Notice how the castle walls are melding into a desert-like land on page 15. Who or what is the statue to the right of the archway supposed to represent?
 27. Notice on page 16 how tired the boy is looking. Discuss how long the boy's journey has been.
 28. Notice how the boy has become "giant like" again on pages 18-19, towering over the city buildings. What is the man in the hat pointing out to the boy? Who is the person looking out the lighted window on page 19?
 29. Notice that the city is shown as being dark on pages 16-18 and yet on the following pages until at the end of the book it is day again.
 30. Notice the items "coming apart" on pages 20-21. Discuss if this could be because the boy's dream is ending and he is starting to wake up.
 31. Discuss why the students think the boy imagines himself flying or falling through the air on pages 20-23?
 32. Notice the characters and items of the boy's dream are beginning to reveal their true identities on pages 22-23.
 33. Notice how the dream floats away from the boy to his right side in the beginning of the book and then floats back to him from the left. Notice that the boy is always traveling toward the right side of the book pages.
 34. Notice the boy has on his pajamas during the entire dream. Would the students like to travel in their p.j.s?
 35. Notice that the light belted to the headboard is turned on on the first and the second to last pages, but not on the last page. (This reaffirms that the boy fell asleep while reading.)
 36. Vote, how many of the students would want to have dreamed this dream? How many would have wanted to live it? Why?

Student Activities

1. Read other books written and/or illustrated by Wiesner. Examine other wordless picture books and compare them to *Free Fall*.
2. Read the poem listed in the guide. Discuss how it affects the story.
3. Create text for the book.
4. Brainstorm a list of adjectives, nouns, and verbs that describe the actions and scenery in the book.
5. Research dreams and dreaming.
6. Have a pajama party. Or just have an hour of silent sustained reading where the students are to wear their p.j.s and lounge about on sleeping bags, pillow, and blankets.
7. Have students share about different dreams they have had. Write these down and illustrate them. Have students sleep with paper and pencil beside their beds so they can write down their dreams as soon as they awaken.
8. Learn how to incorporate shadows into drawings.
9. Notice the pigeons, or doves throughout the book (starting on the title page). Research pigeons and doves. If someone has access to some carrier pigeons or doves have some brought in to see.
10. Using brown paper bags or construction paper, have students make decorative book covers like those the boy has on his shelf or those seen on pages 12-13. Use gold and silver paint pens for a special effect.
11. Look at aerial pictures of plots of farm land or of a city. Compare them to Wiesner's drawings.
12. Learn how to use an atlas properly. Look at maps of your city, state and the continents. Learn the directions north, south, east, and west and how they are used. Learn how to use a hand compass.
13. Research mountain and plain areas.
14. Learn the names of the various chess pieces. Learn how to play chess. Send away for the booklet, *Ten Tips to Winning Chess*, or the pamphlet, *Be a Winner*. Write: Barbara A. DeMaro, U.S. Chess Federation, 186 Route 9W, New Windsor, NY 12550. Enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope.
15. Look at the different flags shown on pages 4-5. Make your own flag with symbols to represent your own "kingdom."
16. Research the Renaissance period. The dress of the times, the food, the music, the entertainment, etc. Try on some Renaissance costumes. Attend or hold a Renaissance Fair.
17. Based on their attire, try to identify the courtly positions and jobs of the characters shown in the book.
18. Research castles. Notice the architectural features of the inside of the castle (ie: the columns and the arched doorways). Read David McCall's book *Castles*.
19. Study the pages 6-7 and, based on research done and creativity, name the different buildings and rooms shown in the kingdom. (dungeon, queen's bedroom, servant's quarters, etc.)
20. Notice the gondola in the moat. Research about gondolas and Venice, Italy, where this type of boat is popular and necessary.
21. Research the type of sailboat seen in the moat. Research moats. Build a model of a castle, real or make-believe. Invent your own kingdom and share its features with the class.
22. Research armor. How and when was it used? How is it made? Visit a museum that has knight's armor the students can see.
23. Learn about swords and fencing. Fencing is now an Olympic sport. Send for a brochure that explains how to be a spectator at a duel. Write: U.S.F.A., Promotional Department, 1750 E. Boulder Street, Colorado Springs, CO, 80909. Enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope. (For \$.50 you can also get a vinyl decal of the U.S. Fencing Association.)
24. Research dragons. Give the dragon in this book a name and features. Tell what he/she has done to the kingdom. Is he/she a nice or nasty dragon? Read other fictional books with dragons in the story.
25. Read the chapter book, *The Castle in the Attic* by Elizabeth Winthrop.
26. Notice the carvings on the castle walls on page 8. Research carvings and gargoyles. These characters look like monks. Research monks.
27. Notice the small homes built into the trees on page 9. Who lives there? Write essays about these tree villagers.
28. Find the boy and the other characters among the picture of the different books on pages 12-13.
29. Research deserts. (Notice the balanced rock seen in the middle of the archway on page 15. This could be made to represent "Balanced Rock" a scenic rock in the "Garden of the Gods" in the Badlands of Colorado.)
30. Read *Gulliver's Travels* by Johnathan Swift and compare it to *Free Fall*.
31. Research giants. Read other fictional books that have giants in the story.
32. Look at the packages the travelers have on pages 16-17. Describe what wares they would need for their journey.
33. Notice the map falling into the canyon on page 17. Research canyons.

34. Look at the skyline of the city on pages 18-19 and on other pages of the book. Is the city recognizable? (It looks like the Empire State Building is beside the moon on page 18.) Research New York City and other big cities. Remember Wiesner lives in N.Y.C.
35. Research brownstones. Use playing cards to make stacked houses. Have a contest to see who can make the tallest skyscraper or the longest row of brownstones.
36. Make castles or cities with milk cartons and other materials attached to a bulletin board (or just freestanding). Using construction paper, rip a skyline of a city or panorama of a kingdom.
37. Notice the brownstones falling apart and becoming maps on page 19. Read the identification of places on the map. Some are names of parts of the human brain. Research the brain, particularly the part which controls dreams. Using a drawing, label the different sections of the brain and learn their different functions. See a real brain from a laboratory.
38. Play a memory game. Place several items on a tray and put it in the middle of the classroom for students to examine for 5 minutes. Take away the tray and give the students 10 minutes to write down all the items they can remember that were on the tray. Give the student naming the most their choice of one of the items from the tray as a prize. Research about human memory and how it can play tricks on us such as the boy's has on him.
39. Look at page 21. Make or put together a jigsaw puzzle. Use plaster of Paris to make a relief map of a mountainous area, real or make-believe.
40. As the clues to what different objects from the boy's room start to appear on pages 22-23, have students start naming the relationships (ie: the mountains = his croissant, the salt shaker and his chess pieces represent some of the other characters, the patterns on his bedspread and walls become land plots and flying swans and falling leaves represent the patterns in his wallpaper, etc.).
41. Make and eat croissant rolls. Notice the fruit filled rolls and donuts in the background of pages 22-23. Make and eat some of these treats.
42. Notice how the cornflakes shown on pages 24-25 are turning into fish. Notice the boy has goldfish in a bowl beside his bed on the last page of the book. Research goldfish. Keep goldfish as class pets. Eat some cornflakes.
43. Research swans.
44. Collect some leaves and make leaf rubbings or other art projects out of them.
45. Act out what the boy might be saying on page 24.
46. Notice how Wiesner has shown the reflections of the city in the glass of the fishbowl. Have students try to do a similar illustration of a reflection. Maybe go outside and draw what is reflected in a puddle on the playground.
47. Go back through the book slowly and try to associate everything in the boy's dream to something that is surrounding him in his room.
48. Have students go home and sit up in their beds with both drawing and writing paper. Have them write and/or illustrate a dream-like story based upon their surroundings. Share these back at school.
49. Read the summary given on the dedication page. Would the students write a different one if they could? What would it say? Remember to be brief.

Bibliography

Book jacket for *Free Fall* as published by Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, New York, 1988.

Free Stuff for Kids, Meadowbrook Press, Deephaven, MN 55391, 1990.

Vocabulary Test

Match the words from Wiesner's poem listed on the left with their proper definition listed on the right.

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| _____ 1. knight | a. the tallest point of a building or mountain |
| _____ 2. silence | b. moving downward |
| _____ 3. progression | c. when no maps have been made of a piece of land |
| _____ 4. conquer | d. quiet |
| _____ 5. seamless | e. traveling forward |
| _____ 6. pinnacle | f. to defeat or win over |
| _____ 7. descending | g. a special military rank |
| _____ 8. uncharted | h. ongoing without a seam or wrinkle |

Comprehension Test

Complete each sentence.

1. The board game spread about in the boy's room was
 - a. checkers
 - b. chess
 - c. backgammon.

2. The large make-believe animal in the story was a
 - a. flying horse
 - b. unicorn
 - c. dragon.

3. The boy's home is in
 - a. the city
 - b. the country
 - c. the desert.

4. The boy and his friends travel back to the city by
 - a. horseback
 - b. riding donkeys
 - c. "piggy back."

ANSWER KEY

Vocabulary Test

1. g 2. d 3. e 4. f 5. h 6. a 7. b 8. c

Comprehension Test

1. b 2. c 3. a 4. c



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