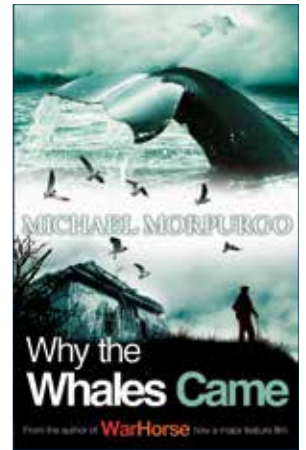


michael morpurgo

Why the Whales Came



Why the Whales Came – A Secret language

'I myself was never comfortable talking to the Birdman in those early days for he would stare uncannily at me whilst I was speaking, trying to read the words as they came out of my mouth. So I would resort almost immediately to pencil and paper, partly to avoid those piercing eyes of his. Daniel never did that. Right from the very start he mouthed the words, contorting his lips into extravagant shapes. He made letters out of his fingers and spelled out the words. He drew shapes in the air; indeed sometimes he did all three at once and talked aloud at the same time. If at first the Birdman could not understand – and he often did not – then Daniel would persist resolutely until he did. Sometimes this might entail acting out a complex charade, and both of them would end up helpless with laughter at his antics and the misunderstandings they created.'

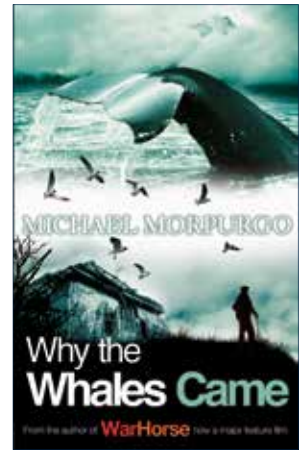
It took some time and it was gradual, but Daniel invented that year a whole new private language of signs, pictures and signals that the Birdman could recognise and understand immediately, so much so that I sometimes found the Birdman could understand what Daniel was saying now before I could. I remember that at one time I began to feel a little excluded, even hurt by this; but the Birdman seemed to sense my unease and took great delight in teaching me the new sign language he was learning. We became so used to using the new language that in time Daniel and I could talk to each other without uttering a word, and we would use it at home now instead of whispering whenever anyone else might be about and we wanted to talk about the Birdman or Rushy Bay.'

(Why the Whales Came, Chapter 6, Pages 81-82)

Working with a partner, invent your own secret language. You can use signs, pictures and symbols. Once you have your code, write a message to each other using this secret language. Can you each work out what the other has written?

michael morpurgo

Why the Whales Came



Why the Whales Came – Island of ghosts

'I looked over towards where Samson lay brooding darkly under gathering storm clouds. About it the sea, blood-red with the evening sun, surged and heaved.

'Island of ghosts,' I said. 'Don't care what you say, Daniel, I tell you there's ghosts on Samson just like father said there was. You only got to look at it. It's cursed, Daniel, I can tell it is.'

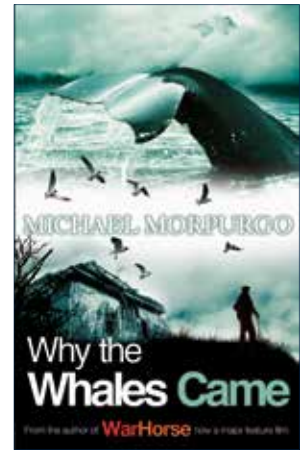
(Why the Whales Came, Chapter 3, Page 40)

Write your own story about an 'Island of Ghosts'.

Where is your island? What is it called? Who are the ghosts? Why are they there? What happens to people who visit the island?

michael morpurgo

Why the Whales Came



Why the Whales Came – The Birdman

“The little I saw of the Birdman was enough to convince me that all the stories we had heard about him must be true. He was more like an owl, a flitting creature of the dark, the dawn and the dusk. He would be seen outside only rarely in the daylight, perhaps out in his rowing boat around the island or sitting high on his cart; and even in the hottest summers he would always wear a black cape over his shoulders and a pointed black sou’wester on his head. From a distance you could hear him talking loudly to himself in a strange unearthly monotone. Maybe it was not to himself that he talked but to the kittiwake that sat always on his shoulder or to the black jack donkey that pulled his cart wherever he went, or maybe it was to the great woolly dog with the greying woollen muzzle that loped along beside him. The Birdman went everywhere barefoot, even in winter, a stooped black figure that lurched as he walked, one step always shorter than the other. And wherever he went he would be surrounded by a flock of seagulls that circled and floated above him, tirelessly vigilant, almost as if they were protecting him. He rarely spoke to anyone, indeed he scarcely looked at anyone.”

(Why the Whales Came, Chapter 3, Page 40)

Above is Gracie’s first description of the Birdman. The detail Michael Morpurgo has included in the description enables readers to develop a clear image of what they think the Birdman is like.

Word choices, adjectives, similes and metaphors are vital to writing good descriptions.

Choose another character from the book and write a detailed description of them, so that someone reading your description can build a picture of the character.
