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# A world beneath the waves

In David Wiesner's *Flotsam*, an undersea world captured on a mysterious camera gives children the chance to explore the depths of their imagination, says Seven Stories...

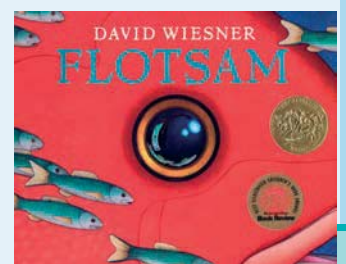
**A** boy finds a camera washed in by the tide. The pictures it contains give him a glimpse into an amazing story world beneath the waves, as well as a record of all the children who've had the camera before him, linked together in an unending chain that stretches back in time and right across the world.

David Wiesner's wordless, imaginative and exuberantly detailed picture book, *Flotsam* (Clarion Books, 2006), is a joy to share with children at KS2. Its playful sophistication conveys a

complexity of ideas that linger in the mind long after the book has been closed, encouraging discussion and inspiring all kinds of responses. With panels of varying sizes that subtly shift the tension, pace and mood, as well as stunningly beautiful double-page spreads, this book has all the advantages of a graphic novel and picture book combined and makes a wonderful starting point for activities.

Themes include imaginative undersea worlds; invented creatures; light and cameras; microscopes and collections of

natural specimens; floating and sinking; biodegradability and rubbish; geography and ocean currents; historical timelines and community cohesion; as well as numerous opportunities for writing, drama, music, art and dance.



**1 Plot synopsis**

Collecting shells on the beach, a boy is caught by a wave. When it recedes, he finds an old-fashioned camera containing seemingly impossible scenes of underwater life. There's also a record of the last child to find the camera. She took a picture of herself holding the photo of the previous child. The boy looks more closely, only to discover a trail of photos inside photos, heading back in time. He takes his own photo and throws the camera back into the sea. It's washed ashore on the other side of the world, and the cycle begins again.

Set the scene before sharing the book by trying one or more of the following activities.

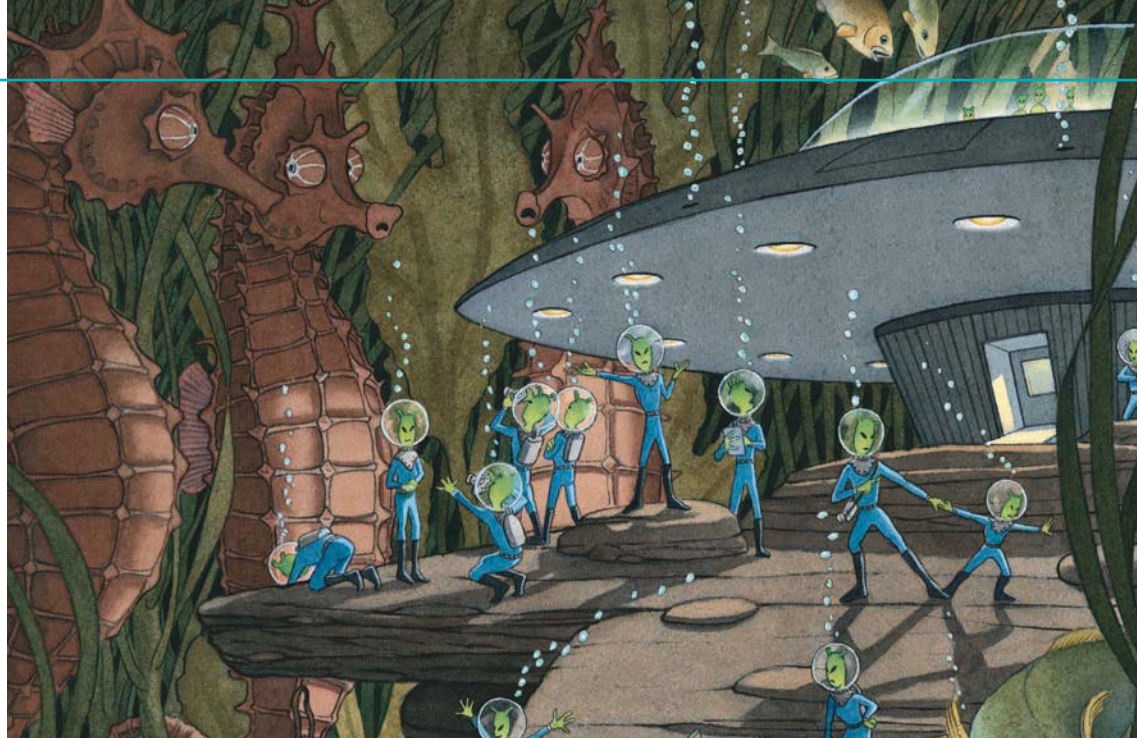
**2 Cameras with character**

Borrow some old-fashioned cameras and ask children to explore them. Weigh and measure the cameras, as if they are scientific specimens and make notes about the materials used. Describe what can be seen, felt and heard. Draw the cameras from different angles, as accurately as possible.

Bring in some historical photos of your neighbourhood. Ask children to look and comment. What might these cameras have seen on their journeys through time? Encourage children to become more imaginative in their thinking. Add to your collection of words, this time thinking of the best adjectives and similes to describe the cameras and what they represent.

**3 A mysterious film**

Using a camera with roll film, photograph close-up details of well-known landmarks in your neighbourhood, or views seen from an unusual angle. Bring the camera into school. Invite children to take the film out; explain how real film works. Encourage



speculation about what the pictures might show, then get the film developed (maybe a local shop will allow your class to see the process?). Are the photos what the children expected? Can they identify the places pictured? What might people see in the usual, the everyday, if they stopped and looked more closely?

**4 Share the story**

You'll need several copies of the book, so that children can follow the illustrations in small groups. Children will enjoy getting an overview of the story as a class, then exploring the book individually afterwards. Later, you can focus on single illustrations or sequences of images as the starting point for other activities.

**5 Generate questions**

You'll need one copy of each of the seven depictions of the undersea world. Working in an open space, put large sheets of paper on the floor, each with a picture on it. Children should move around the room, looking at the pictures and generating interesting questions. Ask them to write each question next to the image to which it relates. Repeat. Then give the children post-it notes and ask them to supply answers to the questions generated by others. They should be as imaginative as possible. Each question can be answered many times by different children. Share the questions and answers, discussing each picture as you go. This process can lead to story writing, if you wish.

**Recommended reads**

- > *Tuesday* and *Art & Max*, both by David Wiesner - surreal, engaging and fun in equal measures.
- > *Wave* by Suzy Lee - a wordless picture book to encourage thoughtful exploration, discussion and the development of visual literacy.
- > *Little Boat* by Kathy Henderson and Patrick Benson. This picture book follows the fortunes of a model boat as it crosses the open sea, linking children on opposite sides of the ocean.
- > *The unforgotten Coat* by Frank Cottrell Boyce - This book about a girl's friendship with a Mongolian refugee is illustrated with photographs that make the everyday world seem exotic.

**6 Record soundtracks**

Why not try creating a soundtrack for a sequence of pictures, or even the whole book? Children could experiment to find the best ways of producing different sounds, then record their soundtrack on CD.

**7 Portraits and people-chains**

Look at the children in the underwater photo. Who might they be? Invent names, characters, backgrounds and stories. Make a collection of old photographic portraits - the sort available cheaply in postcard form from antique markets work well. Again, use the images (and messages, if there are any) to generate ideas about who these people could have been.

You can create your own people-chains by asking children to draw a picture of a character. Reduce using a photocopier, then stick onto the next drawing to act as the 'photograph' in the character's hands. Repeat! Talk about the idea of 'six degrees of separation'. How many countries are your children connected with, via holidays or links with family and friends? How might you present this information in charts or diagrams?



## 8 Dance with waves

Take the initial sequence of images where the boy is swamped by the wave and finds the camera, and the sequence at the end, where the boy is again splashed by the wave (which reclaims his pictures). Talk about the images with your class. How would it feel to be experiencing these events?

Use the sequences to inspire movement and drama. Experiment individually and in groups, asking children to move like water in a wave. Pair them, asking them to mirror each other's movements, then progress to a 'conversation', where one child makes a movement answered by a different movement from their partner. Extend this into a dramatic scenario where a child taunts the waves. Ask your class to explore this via body movements. This can build into an exercise where half the class are 'taunters' on the beach, and half work together as the waves, 'replying' to them. Share Suzy Lee's *Wave* (see Recommended reads).

## 9 Create undersea creatures

Make a collection of everyday items such as coat hangers, belts, unused rubber gloves, plastic cups, scarves etc. Divide the class into small groups. Give each a selection of three items, plus access to as many clothes pegs as they need. Explain that they're

going to create an imaginary undersea creature, using pegs to secure their objects together. How would these creatures move? With each child holding part of the creature, groups must animate them like puppets, making them swim around the room. Play music (such as Debussy's *La Mer*) as each creature performs.

What are these creatures called? What are their habitats and life cycles? Ask children to draw and write about them, creating entries for an encyclopedia about newly-discovered underwater life. You can research historical beliefs in sea monsters, if you wish, and the high-profile frauds that were perpetrated (eg. Phineas T. Barnum's 1842 Feejee Mermaid). Try websites such as the American Museum of Natural History's Mythic Creatures ([amnh.org](http://amnh.org)).

## 10 Keep it going

Why not try a photography project in the school grounds or local park? In the same place, close to trees and plants that will change with the seasons, photograph a different child at weekly intervals. On each occasion, ensure the child is holding the previous photograph, as the boy does in the book, to create a series of pictures recording the timeline of children involved in the project. Mount an exhibition and invite parents, carers and the local community. Children could write and produce invitations, posters, exhibition viewing notes, labels and a write-up for the local paper.

## Take the topic outdoors

- ▶ Try a sketching trip to the aquarium, or twin your class with a school overseas, exchanging pictures and stories and making new connections.
- ▶ How about visiting your nearest beach to identify and observe the wildlife? Or you could conduct a survey of rubbish washed up by the tide, researching topics such as flotsam and beach combing.
- ▶ Children can find out about ocean currents and environmental problems including the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, an estimated 100 million tons of plastic rubbish in the sea. Check out photographer Mandy Barker's website ([mandy-barker.com](http://mandy-barker.com)) for images of swirling plastic detritus, including *Indefinite*, a series in which plastic objects are made to look like strange new creatures.

## Get more book topics

This article is adapted from *Hooks Into Books from Seven Stories*. If you have enjoyed *Flotsam* and the recommendations, sign up to *Hooks Into Books from Seven Stories*. You will receive a termly pack of specially selected books complete with summary information sheets and suggestions for their use, all for £70 a term (available for O-3, FS, KS1 and KS2). To find out more, call Lisa Moll on 0845 271 0777 ext 719, email [lisa.moll@sevenstories.org.uk](mailto:lisa.moll@sevenstories.org.uk) or visit the website ([sevenstories.org.uk](http://sevenstories.org.uk)).

*Flotsam* is published by Clarion Books and is available from the Seven Stories bookshop. Place your order by calling 0845 271 0777 ext 712 or visit the online shop ([sevenstories.org.uk](http://sevenstories.org.uk)).

