

TED Connection: How Are Books a Secret Door?

Overview

Mensa for Kids' TED Connections are short, easy to use guides that help teachers, parents and youth use TED talks in a classroom or home setting. Rather than a lesson plan format, they have a list of discussion questions, all at higher levels of thinking.



Author **Mac Barnett** shares why he lies to children and it's a good thing. He explains the inviting magic that lies within fiction books and how make believe isn't always pretend, nor should it be.

Message from Mac: Hello! Mac here. Any piece of art is a conversation, between the person who creates it and its audience. I write books for kids because I enjoy talking to kids, and so I'm happy to say hello now, and even happier you're thinking about some of the things I've said.

WATCH THE TED TALK AT:

ted.com/talks/mac_barnett_why_a_good_book_is_a_secret_door

Think about it

1. Barnett quotes Picasso as saying, “We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth or at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies.” This quote is taken from *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art*. Just before he said that, he said, “When I paint, my object is to show what I have found and not what I am looking for. In art intentions are not sufficient and, as we say in Spanish: love must be proved by facts and not by reasons. What one does is what counts and not what one had the intention of doing.”

Explain your agreement or disagreement with the two main points here that art is a lie that helps us recognize truth and that what you do matters more than what you meant to do? How do you see these ideas as connected?

2. The little girl Riley knew she didn’t grow the cantaloupe and yet knew simultaneously that she did. What are some examples of things we know aren’t true and yet somehow are? What role do you think our secret desire to believe plays in this phenomenon?

3. Wonder is what Barnett calls what Coleridge described as “that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.” Readers and audiences will believe things that are not realistic as long as they are consistent and seem believable. Dean Learner said, “If you go to a puppet show you can see the wires. But it’s about the puppets; it’s not about the string.” Barnett says kids get to this place easier than adults. Do you agree with him? What are examples of things that are not consistent or believable in stories you’ve read or seen that get in the way of wonder? (Sometimes this happens when things seem too easy or too coincidental).

4. Barnett describes how people go tour the places in novels and show up at 221B Baker Street, even though they know logically that Sherlock Holmes never lived there. He says, “We know these characters aren’t real, and yet we also know that they are.” What are places from books you’ve read that you would like to see? Who are characters you would like to meet (and can’t quite believe aren’t real)?



5. Portal stories (where characters travel to a different world through a door or other transport location) are common in fantasy fiction. In addition to *Narnia*, we see them in *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Through the Looking Glass*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, *Dr. Who*, *Coraline*, and others. What are your favorite portal stories? If you were to write a book with a portal in it, what would you use for the portal?

6. The most popular of the robot emotion chips in the store at the *LA 826 Valencia* *The Echo Park Time Travel Mart* is *Schadenfreude*. This is a German word that literally translates “harm joy” and means taking pleasure at the misfortune of others. Why do you think this is the most popular of the emotion chips? In Latin, one can have *delectatio morosa*, the habit of enjoying dwelling on evil thoughts.” How are these two ideas connected?

7. Barnett says he sees *826 Valencia* as a book in three dimensions. Universal Studios has *The Wizarding World of Harry Potter*, which could be considered a similar idea. What books would you most like to see lifted off of the page and brought into three-dimensional life?

8. If metafiction is stories about stories, what is metacognition? Meta-analysis?

9. In one Young Mensan's review of *Billy Twitters and the Blue Whale Problem*, the reviewer wrote, "I liked this book because it was a good mix of fantasy and fact. The author is funny, but he also teaches the reader some true things about whales. The pictures were good, the story was unpredictable, and mostly it was funny." (You can read the entire review here bit.ly/billy-review).

This review was published well before Barnett's TED talk. How does it capture his idea of using a lie to teach a truth and the willingness of the reader to suspend disbelief?

10. The reviewer also said, "I did have a little bit of trouble connecting how getting a blue whale could be punishment. I love whales and would never clean my room or listen to my mom if it meant I could have a whale." How about you? Would you want a blue whale? If not, what improbable thing would you want?

11. Why do you think Barnett says Nico is the best kind of reader he could hope for? What kind of reader is Nico? What kind of reader are you? How have you ever tried to connect with an author, a book, or a character?

Do it

- Develop a plan for a fake store, like the pirate and time travel stores Barnett describes. What would you call it? What kinds of good would it carry? Create a flyer advertising it using [smore.com](#) or another online flyer maker (or even just paper!). Be sure to include a slogan for the store.
- Enter the Library of Congress's Letters about Literature contest: read.gov/letters. This contest is a reading/writing contest for grades 4-12. Readers write to an author, living or dead, about how one of that author's books affected them personally. If you're under grade 4, send the letter to the author (if living) directly.
- The American Writers Museum lists authors' homes you can visit. See if there is one in your area: americanwritersmuseum.org/affiliates.
- Many cities offer guides for places readers should visit. For example, London suggests that Sherlock Holmes fans visit this list of places: bit.ly/sherlock-london. Choose one of your favorite authors and make a list like the one London has for places fans should visit. It doesn't necessarily have to be in one city. You can find images for the places in the Creative Commons (search.creativecommons.org) and create a guide that you can share with others.

Read about it

- Read a portal book you haven't yet read.
- Read one of Mac Barnett's books: macbarnett.com/books.

Watch it

- Watch Mac Barnett interview Chris Van Allsburg and Daniel Handler (Lemony Snicket): youtube.com/watch?v=Z-byOhgg2_M
- Watch Mac Barnett speak at the 2011 National Book Festival: loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=5393
- You can see him speak at the 2012 National Book Festival as well: loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=5680
- In this video, Barnett discusses, with other authors, the book that shaped him: loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=5959
- Reading Rockets shares videos of interviews with authors: readingrockets.org/books/interviews

Surf it

- Visit Mac Barnett's website: macbarnett.com
- Visit the website of 826 Valencia: 826valencia.org
- Learn more about blue whales at animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/blue-whale and watch video of them at video.nationalgeographic.com/video/whale_bluecalls