

# My Daughter, The Fox

## Jackie Kay

### Teacher's Notes And Key

Jackie Kay's story *My Daughter, The Fox* gives the reader an unusual view of the mother/child relationship. As the title suggests, the narrator's daughter isn't human, but the feelings generated between mother and daughter are universal and so the scene is set for the paradox to be played out. The story requires a mature approach and would not be suitable for younger readers. The language used would be accessible, though a challenge, to CEF B1 level learners.

**Please Note:** The teacher should take into consideration the age and cultural background of the pupils because several taboo words are used by the author. If those words are not acceptable in a particular classroom they can be replaced by milder equivalents (euphemisms) or obliterated with asterisks.

#### Pre-Reading Activities

NOTE: *The Pre-Reading activity worksheet does not contain the title of the piece. Do not reveal the title until after this section has been completed.*

1. The first pre-reading activity is aimed at introducing the topic of the story and building up interest and motivation. In the first task the students concentrate on a passage from Part 1, trying to figure out who the word **her** refers to and trying to fill in the gaps. They are not very likely to guess that the missing words are **red** and **fur**. Only after the students listen to the recording will they have the clues as to who **her** refers to - the narrator's daughter, the **fox**. There are also other clues which indicate that the narrator's daughter is not human: she was given *a fresh bowl of water and a raw egg and cracked the shell herself and slurped the yellow yoke in one gulp*.
2. The purpose of the second activity is to build up the vocabulary related to raising humans and animals. In this way the topic of the story is introduced, and at the same time students activate the vocabulary essential for comprehending the text. Students can be asked about their personal experiences and childhood memories, for example whether they were carried in slings, like baby kangaroos in their pouches, pushed in prams, or smacked.

Some of the expressions from this task may refer **both to animals and humans**: stroke somebody's hair, whine and cry, daytime nap, take somebody out. Some are more likely to refer to **animals**: carry around in the pouch, snatch something in the street, smack somebody's nose, bare one's teeth. Some usually refer to **humans**: push in a pram, sit in a high chair, put in a crib, sleep under covers. However, students may give examples of humanlike animal behavior, like sleeping under covers, or examples of people treating their pets as if they were kids and even pushing them in prams and putting them in cribs. They may also talk about situations when people behave like animals or are treated this way.

#### While Reading Activities

**Anticipation questions** are aimed at developing interpreting and predicting skills, they are supposed to encourage students to interact with the text.

At this stage the students only know that a woman is taking care of an animal as if it was her child, but they are still unaware of what animal this is and why the woman does it. They can be asked to speculate about the situation and then they are given the name of the story, which holds the answers to questions about the animal and her relationship with the narrator.

The story is to be introduced in small sections. Between chunks the teachers should ask a number of questions to elicit response from the students. Thus, they will try to predict the next part of the story. Anticipation questions are provided below.

Section	Questions after each section
1.	<p>Now you know that the narrator gave birth to an animal. Can you imagine her initial reaction when she discovers that her daughter is not human? How does the midwife react to it?</p> <p>What is the reaction of the staff at the hospital?</p> <p>What would you assume about the father? Who is he?</p>
2.	<p>How does the narrator's mother react to her granddaughter?</p> <p>Does Anya's father acknowledge his parenthood?</p> <p>How do other people react to Anya?</p> <p>Is Anya raised as a human child or as a baby fox?</p> <p>What does Anya look like?</p>
3.	<p>What changes occur in the behaviour of both mother and daughter after the baby-stage?</p>
4.	<p>Anya starts to behave like an animal. How does her mother respond to this?</p> <p>What is their favourite bedtime reading?</p>
5.	<p>What happens to Anya when the narrator goes back to work?</p>
6.	<p>What will happen next? What is the hardest decision that the narrator has to take?</p>

### After-Reading Activities

This set of tasks is aimed at encouraging student to re-read the text for better understanding of the plot, the underlying motifs and the issues raised by the author, and to consolidate the vocabulary.

1. Putting the events into the correct chronological order, the students summarize the whole story. This may be difficult at times because of the flashback narration used by the author. The correct chronological sequence is as follows:

*The narrator saw a dead fox on the hard shoulder.*

*The scans didn't seem to pick anything up.*

*On the stroke of midnight the narrator gave birth to a baby fox.*

*The narrator and her mother tiptoed into the bedroom where Anya was sleeping in her crib for her daytime nap.*

*The driver put on the sirens and raced screaming through the dark streets.*

*Anya chased the rabbit, killed it, brought it back and buried it, saving it for a hungry day.*

*The narrator extended her maternity leave for an extra three months.*

*Mother had to empty the room of everything that could be damaged.*

*Mother felt the foxes wanted to claim Anya as one of their own.*

*The narrator pulled the top bolt and then the bottom one. She opened the door and let her out into the night.*

2. Students are asked to find the lines in the text that develop the following themes.

- the narrator's unconditional love for her daughter;

*It's something I've learnt about mothers: when we are loved we are not choosy.*

*I was crying when she was first born...Not because she wasn't what I was expecting, I was crying because I felt at peace at last, because I felt loved and even because I felt understood.*

*How could anybody not see Anya's beauty?*

*It never occurred to me to dump Anya or disown her or pretend she hadn't come from me.*

- the otherness of the daughter;

*I doubt that many had ever seen daughters like mine before.*

*They told me I had to leave straight away; the fox was a hazard. It was awful to hear about my daughter being spoken of in this way, as if she hadn't just been born, as if she didn't deserve the same consideration as the others.*

*She liked to get right under the covers with me. It was strange. Part of her wanted to do everything the same way I did: sleep under covers, eat what I ate, go where I went, run when I ran, walk when I walked; and part of her wanted to do everything her way.*

*She chased the rabbit, killed it, brought it back and buried it, saving it for a hungry day. It thrilled me when she was a fox like other foxes, when I could see her origins so clearly. Anya had more in common with a coyote or a grey wolf or a wild dog than she had with me.*

*I knew that no nursery would take her, no childminder. I couldn't bring myself to find a dog-walker: Anya was not a dog! It seemed so unfair.*

- the narrator's loneliness (both before she gave birth to Anya and after);

*I know her life will be shorter than mine will. That's the hardest thing about being the mother of a fox. The second hardest thing is not having anyone around who has had the same experience. Nobody was as sympathetic to me as I thought they might be.*

*I had never had company like her my whole life long. With Anya, I felt like there were two lives now: the one before I had her and the one after, and they seemed barely to connect.*

*I was left to cope with all the problems completely on my own. I had to use my own resources, my own imagination... When I tried to tell my colleagues about Anya's antics, they would clam up and look uncomfortable, exchanging awkward looks with each other when they thought I wasn't looking. It made me angry, lonely.*

- the narrator's attitude to forgiveness;

*I don't think anybody has ever taught me more about myself than Anya. Once when she growled at the postman, I smacked her wet nose. I felt awful. But five minutes later she jumped right onto my lap and licked my face all over, desperate to be friends again. There's nothing like forgiveness, it makes you want to weep. I stroked her long, lustrous fur and nuzzled my head against hers and we looked straight into each other's eyes, knowingly, for the longest time. I knew I wasn't able to forgive like Anya could. I just couldn't. I couldn't move on to the next moment like that. I had to go raking over the past. I couldn't forgive Anya's father for denying her, for making promises and breaking them like bones.*

- the animal side of humans and the human side of animals.



may be asked; questions can also be related to personal experiences – for example about blood-curdling screams they have heard or foxy people they have encountered. This will help students to memorize the vocabulary and develop speaking skills.

5. In this exercise students are asked to fill in the gaps with prepositions/adverbs. This task can either be done after reading Part 3 or after reading the whole story. It may serve as a bridge to discussing the questions in the next task.

*It was the same look **on** people's faces when I took Anya **out** in her pram. I'd bought a great big Silver Cross pram with a navy hood. I always kept the hood **up** to keep the sun or the rain **out** People could never resist sneaking a look **at** a baby in a pram. I doubt that many had ever seen daughters **like** mine before. One old friend, shocked and fumbling **for** something to say, said 'She looks so like you.' I glowed **with** pride. 'Do you think so?' I said, squeaking **with** pleasure. She did look beautiful, my daughter in her Silvercross pram, the white of her blanket **against** the red of her cheeks.*

6. In this task students are asked questions aimed at enhancing their language awareness, ensuring they understand the connotations of words, various shades of meaning.

- Why do people usually **sneak a look at** something? What's the difference between sneaking a look and just looking?
- When do people **fumble for** something to say? Do you often have to do it? What else can you **fumble for**?
- Why did the author **glow with pride** and **squeak with pleasure**? What can make you do the same?
- What did the author's husband mean by saying that she was **off her rocker**?
- Why did he say that he wouldn't pay a penny **towards his daughter's keep**? Do parents in your country often behave in the same way?
- Why do some parents **dump** or **disown** their children?
- Why did the narrator's colleagues **clam up** when she tried to tell them about Anya's **antics**?

## Discussion

Some knowledge of Jackie Kay's biography and personality are essential for more profound understanding of the story. Before doing the tasks, therefore, the teacher should make sure that the students are aware of the following:

*British writer Jackie Kay was born in 1961 to a Scottish mother and a Nigerian father. She was adopted by a white couple at the age of 5 months and brought up in Glasgow. The experience of being adopted by and growing up with a white family inspired her first collection of poetry *The Adoption Papers*. Her poetry and fiction examine issues of race and ethnicity, family, cultural belonging and exclusion.*

1. In this task students are presented with an abstract from an interview with Jackie Kay, where she tells the readers about the situation when she was seriously misunderstood by her adopted mother. The students should speculate about the reason of misunderstanding and try to fill in the gap. *"I came out to her when I was 17. The language I used was conditional. I said, 'How would you feel if I were to tell you I was a **lesbian**?' and she said, 'I would be very upset.' I asked, 'Why?', and she said, 'You would be becoming something I don't know and understand. You wouldn't be Jackie any more.' She's very relaxed about it now, though."*

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/7800799/Jackie-Kay-Interview.html>

Although Jackie Kay doesn't like being labelled as a lesbian writer, this may be another reason for her fascination with themes of identity and exclusion.

This information about the author will help the students to answer the questions in the second task.

2. In this task students share the ideas about the following questions:

- In the story, a human mother literally gives birth to a fox cub which is impossible in real life. What do you think might have made the author choose this kind of plot for her story?
- Does the mother in the story hesitate to accept the 'otherness' of her child? What do you think are the reasons for her readiness to accept it? Would she adopt such a child / a fox?
- In the story, what are the advantages and disadvantages of having a child different from others? Do you think it is the same in reality? How does the narrator benefit from the situation?
- What does she find most difficult in raising a child? What do you think is the most difficult?
- In the story, the father of the child refuses to see or support her. Do you think this is because:

1) the author finds this kind of behaviour natural?

2) she is prejudiced against men?

3) she finds the idea of giving birth to a child different to others repulsive? Can you think of any other reasons?

3. One of the issues raised by the story is unconditional love of parents, however different their child might be. The following poem was written by an American mother who gave birth to a child with a Downs syndrome.

**HEAVEN'S VERY SPECIAL CHILD**

*A meeting was held quite far from Earth  
 It was time again for another birth.  
 Said the Angels to the Lord above -  
 "This special child will need much love".  
 Her progress may be very slow  
 Accomplishment she may not show.  
 And she'll require extra care  
 From the folks she meets down there.  
 She may not run or laugh or play  
 Her thoughts may seem quite far away  
 So many times she will be labeled  
 'different,' 'helpless' and disabled.  
 So, let's be careful where she's sent.  
 We want her life to be content.  
 Please, Lord, find the parents who  
 Will do a special job for you.  
 They will not realize right away  
 The leading role they're asked to play  
 But with this child sent from above  
 Comes stronger faith and richer love.  
 And soon they'll know the privilege given  
 In caring for this gift from Heaven.  
 Their precious charge, so meek and mild  
 Is heaven's very special child.*

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After reading the poem students should comment on it, and say what “special children” and “special parents” mean in this context. They should say what they agree or disagree with and share their personal experiences.

### **Creative Writing And Project Work**

1. The task is to re-write the story from the point of view of 1) Anya the fox; 2) the narrator’s mother; 3) the narrator’s friends or colleagues.

This task is designed to get students to play with perspective, by looking at events through the eyes of a character other than the narrator. Students can either endow Anya with human-like features or depict her as a fox, unable to understand what is happening to her but perceiving everything through her senses. In that case, particular attention will have to be paid to sensory details (smell, touch, sound). When re-writing the story from the point of view of Anya’s grandmother, students can show her excitement before the child is born, her anguish afterwards, her unforgiving attitude or, possibly, compassion, perhaps even ultimate reconciliation with her daughter. Thus, students get a chance to extend the text, think beyond it, invent the “prequel” or “sequel”.

2. Students are directed to forums or agony aunts’ columns for parents of differently abled children. They are asked to write the narrator’s letter about her daughter to such a forum because the narrator is concerned as she has no one to guide her (“The hardest thing is not having anyone around who has had the same experience”). She feels lonely, isolated because of her child’s otherness. This is the problem confronted by many parents whose children have special needs. Students can be asked to research the issue of differently abled children and read the forums where their parents exchange information and seek advice. Then students can be asked to write a letter from the mother of the fox and write a reply from some other parent with a similar experience.

For examples go to [http://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/special\\_needs/](http://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/special_needs/)

E.g. [http://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/special\\_needs/1180281-Life-with-an-autistic-son](http://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/special_needs/1180281-Life-with-an-autistic-son)

3. The objective of this project is to compare the image of the fox in British culture and the student’s national culture. Students should search for information on this subject and make a presentation in class. The teacher draws attention to the statement that in the story: NO FOX EVER CAME OFF TOO WELL IN THE TALES OR STORIES and asks the students if it is the same in their culture and what their attitude to foxes is.

The following may help to guide students:

*The fox appears in many pieces of literature. As well as several references in the bible, the fox is central in Aesop's fables from about AD500, features in Canterbury Tales and is the main component of the epic poem Reynard the fox. Even today foxes have an important part in language and literature.*

*Many famous children's stories contain foxes as protagonist. These include The Gingerbread Man, Chicken Licken, The Sly Red Fox and the Little Red Hen and Fantastic Mr Fox.*

*Such stories typify the stereotype that foxes are cunning and deceitful, but also successful and to be admired. In language, to fox means to trick or deceive. It can also be used to refer to a cunning or deceitful person, though more recently a fox or foxy can be used to refer to an attractive woman.*

Wallen, M. (2006) *Fox*. Reaktion Books, London.

## Language Focus

### Task 1. Animal metaphors.

Metaphor is recognized as being pervasive in language, and it's important that teachers should pay more attention to comprehending and generating metaphors in L2. This exercise aims to widen students' lexical repertoire.

First, you might ask your students what they know about these animals, and which of their habits come immediately to mind. In this way you will make sure that the students are familiar with these animals and it will be easier for them to come up with metaphors.

#### KEYS

1. ducking out
2. was fishing
3. beaver
4. bee
5. fish
6. bugs
7. fox
8. dogged
9. fly
10. goose

### Task 2. What animal is being talked about in the following sentences?

This exercise will provide your students with more sound words.

#### KEYS

1. wolf
2. dog
3. snake
4. cat
5. crow, frog
6. pig

### Task 3 A

This is a matching exercises aimed at familiarizing the students with idiomatic words and phrases with the word "fox".

#### KEYS

1. to give sb a flap with a fox tail – to make a fool of sb;
2. to play (the) fox – to be crafty; to pretend;
3. old fox – a sly, cunning person;
4. as sly as a fox – a cunning and experienced person who gets what they want, often in an underhand way;
5. crazy like a fox – behaving in a foolish, frivolous, or uncomprehending manner as a ruse for concealing clever deeds or deeper intentions.

### Task 3 B

The students fill in the gaps using the idioms with the word “fox”.

#### KEYS

Uncle Joe is **an old fox** – he’s been in this business for ages and has never been caught red-handed!

Mike took his relationship with Mary seriously, but it turned out that she just **gave him a flap with a fox tail** all the time.

Yesterday I nearly believed that Sean was really upset about it, but he simply **played the fox** again.

“How did he get away with the fraud?” – “Don’t you understand? I’ve told you before that he’s always been **as sly as a fox**! He always gets what he wants.”

Sometimes it seems that Jenny acts without any plan but later, when she succeeds, you understand that she is very clever indeed – in fact, she is **crazy like a fox**.

### Task 4

This exercise is aimed at broadening the students’ knowledge of gender-marking in English, where feminine names of animals tend to have negative connotations, like “vixen”, which also means “a spirited or quarrelsome woman”.

#### KEYS

lion – lioness

tiger – tigress

cock – hen

buck – doe

tomcat – feline

bull – cow

billy goat – nanny goat

stallion – mare

boar – sow

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Jackie Kay, *Straw Girl*

Blake Morrison, *South of the River*

Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis*

Melvyn Burgess, *Billy Elliot* (novelisation of the 2004 film)

Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (a collection of short stories)