

# Beneath the Surface

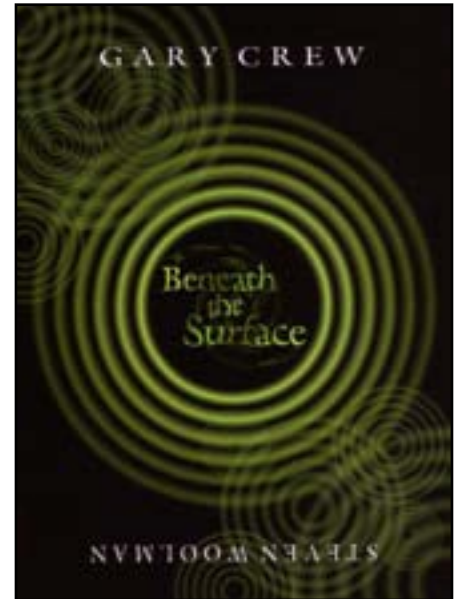
Gary Crew and Steven Woolman

Teachers' notes written by Robyn Ewing (B.Ed Hons, PhD, University of Sydney)

## Introduction

*Beneath the Surface* is a powerful, enigmatic and disturbing picture book. It is appropriate for upper primary, secondary and adult readers alike. It continues the story of *The Watertower* published in 1994 and winner of Children's Book of the Year (1995) and the Bilby Award (1995). Water is a recurring image throughout the text and a number of very important possibilities are suggested through the story and the stories within the story. These are intertwined and include:

- a search for answers
- 'conspiracy' theory
- invasion by aliens
- mind capture
- things are not what they seem
- other realities
- alienation from self



In addition the images and text often seem juxtaposed. The book provides an excellent opportunity for students to develop their understanding of visual text.

## Brief Biographical Notes

Gary Crew is one of Australia's most celebrated writers and is well known internationally. He has won the CBC award four times and has been twice nominated for the Edgar Alan Poe Award in the US.

Born in 1947, Gary has three adult children and lives on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland with his wife, Christine. An English teacher for eighteen years, he has an M.A. in Literature. As well as writing fulltime, Gary lectures in Creative Writing at several universities. Having lost count of the number of books he has written, he writes because he loves writing. It is evident from both his picture books and novels that he is intrigued by science fiction and the unknown. He aims to challenge readers and stimulate their thoughts and imagination. *Beneath the Surface* certainly fulfils that aim. He cites gardening and walking as two of his recreational activities.

Steven Woolman is an extraordinary artist who received the IBBY Ena Noel Award in 1997 for his body of work. Born in Adelaide in 1969, Steven works in a range of media ranging from acrylics to chalk to pencil. He has a degree in design and illustration and now works full time illustrating children's picture books. His fascination with science fiction and the bizarre is evident in his images for both *Beneath the Surface* and *The Watertower*.

## Before Reading Beneath the Surface

- Revisit *The Watertower* and spend some time viewing the images and discussing what has happened to Preston's inhabitants. What could have happened to Bubba? What leads them to this conclusion?
- What does the dominance of a black background create for the reader/viewer?
- Why is the book printed in landscape format—is it important that it physically has to be turned upside down? Why is the type reversed? Do these techniques reflect that things in Preston have been turned upside down?
- Depending on students' experiences it may be useful for students to do some background reading on watertowers, look at the architecture of some real-life examples and, perhaps, even sketch one. Do they dominate a landscape? Compare

the images they have researched with the watertower in these books. How are they different?

- How much does the watertower resemble a spaceship? Again, this could lead to researching different kinds of spaceships.
- Compare the cover of *Beneath the Surface* with that of *The Watertower*. What do the ripples, vaguely suggested on the cover of *The Watertower* now foregrounded in the cover of *Beneath the Surface* imply?
- Open the cover of *Beneath the Surface* out – what feelings are suggested by the black mass?
- What do the endpapers of *Beneath the Surface* suggest? The universe?

(Alternatively, read *Beneath the Surface* without reference to *The Watertower* and then look back at the earlier book.)

### After reading the book

The suggestions for discussion and activities have been organised around each opening of the text but it will not be relevant to focus on each one—it's important to remember Nadia Wheatley's plea that when a book is used for close study it is never 'done to death'!!

#### *The title page*

- Compare the opening paragraphs with *The Watertower's: Nobody in Preston could remember ....* Right from the beginning there is the question of where the watertower has come from. Both books discuss the watertower's *dark shadows*, but there is an important difference: the watertower's influence now stretches far beyond Preston. There is also the sense in *Beneath the Surface* that it has now rooted itself *deep within the earth*.
- What does Woolman's opening depiction of the watertower at night with a starry background suggest? How?
- What does the landscape format do? As well as physically making the reader/viewer turn the book to symbolise that the world is being turned, the physical dominance of the tower is elongated and the viewer's gaze is directed to the stars.
- What does the symbol of the eye on the front of the tower convey? This is an important symbol and will be repeated throughout the book.

#### *Opening 1-2*

- What is the purpose of the insets on the page? Students could follow these and examine their connection with those in *The Watertower*.
- Spike feels someone is watching from the time he arrives in Preston. Is it only the typical small town kind of watching? How does Woolman create this feeling of being watched? What feelings do the colours convey?
- Students can sculpt Spike with townsfolk arranged around him and then the sculpted Spike can discuss how s/he felt.
- The eyes of the townsfolk are reminiscent of those in *The Watertower*. It may be useful to revisit the moment when Bubba confronts his nemesis. What effect does this use of direct gaze or demand have on the reader/viewer?

#### *Opening 3-4*

- Why does Spike avoid the question about who he is?
- Students might script the interaction between the clerk and Spike. Is there suspicion there already?
- Are there incongruities in the image of a small-town hotel? (See, for example, the clocks with international time on the wall.)
- The greenish pallor pervades this image too—what emotion is conveyed by this hue?
- Note the segmented symbol used as keytags. What does this imply?
- Once again, the reception clerk looks directly at the reader/viewer. What effect is created?

#### Opening 4-5

- What is happening here? The illustrator suggests that Spike is tossing and turning with nightmares. Do you agree? What does it foreshadow?
- How do the colours chosen reflect Spike's feelings? Why are they reminiscent of the ripples on the cover?
- Woolman describes this as a transitional page—the book now returns to a more traditional portrait format. Why has he chosen to do this at this point in the story?

#### Opening 5-6

- This almost all-white observatory provides a stark contrast to the black framing. Is this conveying a sterility about these two scientists?
- How are the men depicted? How has this been achieved?
- The moon on the screen has green ripples emanating from its dark side. What does this suggest?
- What does a *thick and chilling mist* symbolise? What is it that is dripping everywhere? Dripping has a different connotation to running water.
- Spike points out the incongruity of the mist in a dustbowl—is this related to a change in Earth's atmosphere?

#### Opening 7-8

- Woolman has presented a beach scene here. Is there a suggestion of alien presence here? How?
- Is there significance in the sign that the water is polluted? If the water is polluted, why are people swimming? Does this contrast with the water the girl in the foreground is drinking?
- Why does Spike wish to analyse the contents of the water in the tower? What does he think he will find?
- What does the inset of Spike at the wire fence suggest?
- Study the brilliance and variety of colours in this scene and compare it with others.

#### Opening 9-10

- This scene connects strongly to that of Spike and Bubba wishing to swim in the watertower in the earlier book. The eyes of the Aboriginal girl, however, are once again ominous. What might she be thinking?
- *The gate opened as if he were expected.* Who is expecting Spike?
- What do the markings on the rock behind suggest? Compare them with the markings on the watertower itself and the hotel keys.
- Contrast the watertower Spike knew as a boy with the one he is discovering.

#### Opening 11-12

- What emotion is portrayed by the farmer?
- What does the yellowness of the field convey?
- How are the machines depicted? Do they seem to be controlling what's happening rather than *just a piece of metal* as the text suggests?
- How is the watertower connected to this scene?
- What is the effect of turning the book to examine the inset of Spike? Where does it now locate the reader in regard to Spike?

### Opening 13-14

- Buddhist temples are usually a symbol of peace and tranquility. How does this one challenge these images?
- What do the glints of the monks and the open eyes of two of the statues suggest?
- Is the satellite dish in the background incongruous with a temple? How does it connect with the 'alien' theme?
- The framing of Spike within the rungs of the ladder in the inset once again suggests that Spike is constrained or perhaps imprisoned by his quest. Is he doomed?
- How does Spike's face without his glasses change our view of him?

### Opening 15-16

- Where does this scene take place? In an underground mine? Elsewhere?
- Is a sense of danger communicated here? How?
- What could the glowing ball represent?
- What does the dome represent? Is it similar to the dome of the watertower?

### Opening 17-18

- The greyness of the day contrasts with the pink uniforms of the students in the schoolyard in this scene. What symbols are once again represented in this school for 'gifted children'?
- What does the direct gaze of the students in the foreground suggest despite the apparently normal scene?
- *It was dark inside.* This contrasts with the light outside the dome.
- Woolman also depicts the school's entrance as dark. What is the implication?

### Opening 19-20

- Does the Indian lady staring at the viewer convey the same feelings as those conveyed on earlier pages? How?
- Are there symbols suggesting darkness or evil in this scene?

### Opening 21-22

- The text suggests there is nothing in the water from the tower. Is the light at the end of the tunnel? Does this scene of young skateboarders convey hope or despair? How?
- Is the sticker on the red skateboard in the foreground a suggestion to the reader about what is happening?
- Notice the 'beware' and 'wanted' posters on the back wall.

### Opening 23-4

- The board room is dark. Each board member directly stares at the viewer conveying a powerful sense of foreboding. Are they the aliens controlling the world?
- What do the red light fittings suggest? How do they work with the shape of the chairs and the light source?
- There is a uniformity in the seated men—badges, tattoos, expression. What does this convey?
- Why do they allow Spike one sip?

### Opening 25-6

- What emotion is conveyed in Spike's eye? How is the emotion in Spike's direct gaze different to those of characters in earlier scenes?
- This image mirrors Bubba's terror in the original book. Students may like to compare the two.
- The white dots are a reflection of the endpapers. What do they symbolise?

### Opening 27

- *Which was both his end and his beginning.* What could this mean?
- The shattered glass in one lens of Spike's glasses indicates that something has happened. Students may like to imagine what has happened to Spike.

### Questions for Reflection

- The eyes are said to be a window to the soul. What do the eyes in so many of the characters suggest to the reader/viewer?
- Water is often equated with life on earth. What does the image of the green, polluted water suggest?
- The scenes depicted as Spike climbs up to investigate the watertower are from all over the globe. What is the implication?
- What happened to Spike?

### Symbols

There are many powerful symbols in the book. Students can locate all the images of water, the segmented symbol, technology, the green ripples, the tattoos. How do these symbols function to realise the author's/illustrator's purposes?

Students could think about the important symbols in their own lives and discuss their relationship with their vision for the world.

### Style

- *Beneath the surface* is far from a conventional story with a beginning, middle and end or orientation, complication and resolution. There are no answers, only suggestions about what may have happened to Spike. Why has the author chosen to write in this way? How has the illustrator contributed to this uncertainty? How do the students feel about the way the story unfolds? Do they prefer the unresolved ending or a more linear approach to a story?
- Both visual and textual metaphors are very powerful in this book. Students may like to list these explicitly and discuss.
- Students could keep a log to record the different stylistic devices and the feelings/reactions evoked with relevant page references. These could be linked to the themes.

### **Other activities: exploring the gaps in the text**

- It may be interesting for students to write their own conclusions to the story—what do they think happened to Spike and then discuss in small groups. Each group may then weave a scenario incorporating as many of these suggestions as they can. The scenarios could be presented in turn as still images for the class as a whole to discuss.
- In small groups students could create an improvisation around the news that aliens have landed in a small country town.
- Students could develop a dialogue between the adult Bubba and Spiro.
- Hotseat members of the Preston community about the notion that the watertower is really not what it seems.
- Students could also sketch or paint their ending to the story modelling Woolman's techniques.

### **Related Research**

Reports of alien sightings, etc—what are the current perceptions?

Claims of conspiracy theories could be explored—theories about the assassination of JFK, Martin Luther King, Princess Diana, etc.

### **Related Viewing**

Depending on the age and maturity of the students, the following films may be relevant:

*Conspiracy Theory*

*Signs*

*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*

*ET*

*JFK*

*Platoon*

*Cry Freedom*