

Old Ridley

Gary Crew & Marc McBride

Teachers' Notes

Synopsis

Joachim leads an isolated life—schooled by a tutor who visits his home, he never seems to go out into the world. Joachim's favourite pastime is to gaze on the house next door, where his mysterious and enigmatic neighbour, Ridley lives. Like Joachim, Ridley never seems to leave his house. The rumours are that he is an inventor—and that he is mad.

Terrified, but fascinated by old Ridley, Joachim longs to know more of him and his inventions. Gazing out at Ridley's house one day, Joachim catches his only glimpse of the old man, who is staring back at him. Joachim immediately retreats into his room. He never sees Ridley again, because the next week he discovers that the old man has died, and he watches as the mysterious house is cleared of its furnishings.

Finally, the house is left empty. Day after day Joachim imagines climbing over the wall to explore old Ridley's house, and finally he gets his chance. The house, although empty, is as mysterious and beautiful as Joachim has imagined. Climbing the staircase to Ridley's room, Joachim makes a startling discovery—a drawing of himself. He takes the drawing and the implements old Ridley has used to create it.

The next day, when completing his lessons for his tutor, using Ridley's paper and pen, he finds that he has written strange equations and he has no idea how they were formulated, or how the illustration of the cicada that appears on the paper came to be.

His tutor tells him not to worry, but Joachim knows that all is not as it should be, that old Ridley is somehow using him, or working through him. That night, he catches a glimpse of his reflection in the window, but it is not his face he sees, but old Ridley's. To his horror, he realises that old Ridley's power and madness goes deeper than he had ever imagined.

Motivation

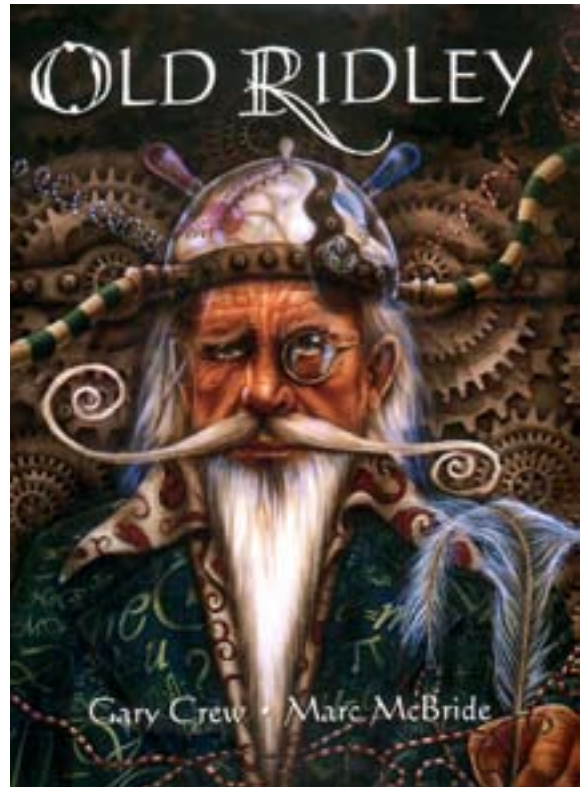
Gary Crew writes:

The story is based on the tragic myth of Eos and Tithonus. Eos, the immortal goddess of the dawn, fell in love with Tithonus, a mortal youth. Eos asked the gods to grant Tithonus immortality so that they might be together forever, but the spiteful gods granted him immortality—and not eternal youth, dooming him to grow old forever. When Eos protested, the gods turned Tithonus into a cicada, which sheds its skin to renew itself.

This myth is re-told through the story of Joachim and Old Ridley.

Marc McBride writes:

Old Ridley is a fairy tale. The illustrations both accompany the text and tell their own story in visual language through colour and shapes. Staircases lead to mysterious doors, gargoyles decorate the Ridley walls and cicada shapes are littered throughout. Huge clocks hang inside the house while sun-dials and hour glasses can be found in the garden to emphasise that Ridley is a man obsessed with time as he plans to unravel the riddle of eternal life.



I wanted Old Ridley's environment to look alive. He may have created it but it is filled with the life force he plans to capture. For me, creating a picture book is a similar experience, where I might come up with some ideas but the picture takes on a life of its own and creates itself, taking me to places I didn't expect to go. Back to Ridley—this life force is seen in the wires that move snake-like by themselves and the flesh-covered walls in Ridley's house, the life cycle in the garden that dies when Ridley dies and of course the live cicadas that move like the electricity through the wires. In contrast to this life, the removal men, the only other people in the story apart from Ridley and Joachim, seem devoid of life—clone-like and mechanical.

I wanted to show visually the equation for eternal life with the mechanical cogs of page 25 morphing into the cicada on page 29. The final image is of Joachim in Ridley's clothes and ring. I wanted this image to emulate the cover as if the cycle continues and this could be the cover for the next book.

Five major points to highlight about the content of the book:

1. The first point is the underlying story of eternal life in the Greek legend of Eos and Tithonus. I tell this story visually in the stained glass window of page 21. It needs looking at for a long time but all the pivotal elements of the story are there in the window. With no start or finish it can be interpreted in different ways.
2. The Cicada reference: The cicada changes its skin like Ridley.
3. Joachim can be spotted in reflections in the windows and above the wall in Ridley's house.
4. Mathematical equations for the speed of light, which can alter time, run throughout.
5. The cogs in the background represent time and how we can capture it by stopping the cogs from turning. Even though the clock hands don't turn, they all tell the correct time twice a day.

Author Information

Gary Crew is one of Australia's top writers for children and one of our most awarded authors. He has won the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award four times, and has been twice shortlisted for the Edgar Allan Poe Mystery Fiction Award in the United States.

Gary writes fiction for youth and adults, as well as the texts of illustrated books. His work is widely published internationally. Since Gary was hospitalised for extensive periods of his childhood, he developed a lifetime love of reading which, he happily admits, has added so much to his writing. Gary has a Master of Arts in Literature and lectures in Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast. He lives with his wife in a cottage in Maleny, set in the beautiful, evergreen Blackall ranges of the Sunshine Coast.

Editor's Comment

The text of Old Ridley is an intriguing one—a story that begins with the simple idea of a young boy fascinated by his eccentric old neighbour, but reveals layers of meaning as it develops. The text was written with the idea that it would be illustrated by Marc McBride, and Gary and Marc worked closely on how the illustrations would interpret the text. Based on the myth of Tithonus and Eos, the illustrations highlight the themes of time, life, decay and renewal, many of them using the cicada motif, as well as cogs, mathematical scribbles and equations.

It is one of Gary Crew's great strengths as a writer that he never allows his text to tell too much, always leaving room for the illustrations to tell part of the story, always allowing the reader to draw his or her own conclusions.

The book is pitched at an older audience, but will also be enjoyed by younger readers for the illustrations, and certainly the story can be read on its own merits, without needing to delve into the hidden layers.

The production of the book—embossing and gold on the cover, rich gold endpapers, and a simple but elegant internal design—were all chosen to highlight the illustrations and to add to the sense that this is not necessarily a story set in the present day. The design and production also add to, without overwhelming, the intricate nature of the illustrations.

EDUCATIONAL APPLICABILITY

Old Ridley can be used in various ways in the classroom:

Creating your version of *Old Ridley*

- Discuss the creation of a picture book—page extent, process of design, layout of pages, use of story board/thumbnails
- Reproduce just the text for students
- Give the students the text and ask them, in groups, to divide the text up to fit into 32 pages—which will be the page extent for the finished book. Students will have to divide the text up so that the page breaks make sense and maintain the flow of the story. Some pages will have more text on them than others. Students may try to divide the text up by paragraph breaks but this will not fit into the 32 pages they have to work with.
- After the text has been put into 32 pages, the groups will need to decide how they want the book to be illustrated and what illustrations need to go onto each page to enhance and add to the text meaning and message. As this is not an art class, students are required to write a description of the illustrations they want on each page rather than drawing them—this works on use of descriptive language
- Create thumbnails/story board of 32 pages

Page 1 illustration Brief Text	Page 2						
						Page 31	Page 32

- Discuss the different interpretations of the text and illustration briefs that each group has come up with

READING

- Make a note of how many references are made to time, the passage of time, and the seasons throughout the story.
- Why has the author made all of the trees in *Old Ridley*'s garden deciduous?
- Why do you think the author has chosen to use following expressions?
 - 'a multi-legged droid, might scurry, insect-like ...'
 - 'an insect of some sort ...'
 - 'It's a cicada ... They shed their shells to renew themselves.'
- Considering the above, read the myth of *Tithonus and Eos*.
- In what genre would you place this story—Fantasy or Science Fiction? Give reasons why it could fit both genres.

WRITING

- Write a letter to either Gary Crew, the author, or Marc McBride, the illustrator, stating your opinion of the book. Don't forget to mention issues such as how the words and illustrations are suited to each other—or, in your opinion, they are not. No matter what point of view or opinion you express, you should always be polite.
- Imagine that Joachim could not face his parents or his tutor after his awful transformation into a younger version of Old Ridley. In the role of the transformed Joachim, write a letter to either [a] your parents, or [b] your tutor, stating exactly what you think has happened to you AND how you feel about it!

LISTENING/SPEAKING

- In the role [and voice] of Old Ridley, make an audio tape that you have left for Joachim to hear. Perhaps it is an account of your life and experiments. Whatever it is, it is for Joachim's ears only.
- Write a short—5 minute—script of a conversation between Joachim and Old Ridley if they had called out to each other, from window to window, before the terrible transformation.

VIEWING

- What finally happens to the green cicada ring on Old Ridley's finger? Why do you think this is so?
- What insect forms the main pattern in both the carpet on the stairway in Old Ridley's mansion, and also the balustrade of that stair way. Why is this so?
- Why do the two pages of illustrations showing cogs, like the interior of a clock, transform into the face of a cicada?
- How is the cicada's antenna identical to Old Ridley's moustache? Why?
- What words can you read in the stained glass window? Why are they there?
- There seems to be numbers and letters—something like a science formula—scattered over a few pages. Why is this and what might that formula be?
- Marc McBride has also illustrated Emily Rhodda's *Deltora Quest* series, and Gary Crew's *The Kraken*. Find these in your library. What visual or stylistic similarities do you see between Marc's art in those books and his work in *Old Ridley*?
- If you could have one of the magnificent original works of art in *Old Ridley* for a Christmas present, which one would you ask Marc for and why?