

# THE BLUE PLANET LIVE!

## EDUCATION PACK 1

### The Merfolk

Stories of sea people, past and present



# The Merfolk

Liz Kessler, author, with Emm Barnes, The University of Manchester, 2008

Stories about mermaids and mermen have been told by sailors and by people who live near the coast for centuries, and stories come from many parts of the world. Sometimes sea people are described as frightening or even evil.

If mermaids (and mermen) aren't real, why are there so many stories about them? One reason might be that men working at sea for months at a time saw creatures in the distance and thought what they had seen were women in the water – the faces of seals can look quite human-like. Another possibility is that sailors saw manatees or dugongs and thought that these were the mermaids from older stories dating back to ancient Greece. Christopher Columbus, famous as one of the first Europeans to see the Americas, wrote about seeing mermaids in 1493 – he actually saw manatees.



*Florida manatee, photo by Jim Reid, US Fish and Wildlife Service*

In Orkney, a group of islands to the north of the mainland of Scotland, the stories are about a different kind of merfolk – selkies. 'Selkie' means 'seal' in the local language, and the belief was or is that selkies are the souls of those drowned at sea, in seal bodies. Selkies can take off their skin and live as humans at night on land. Stories often tell the tale of a human falling in love with a selkie and trying to steal his or her skin to make them stay on the land. Have a look at Clip 1 on the Blue Planet Live website and see what you think – are seals the real mermaids?

# From “The Tail of Emily Windsnap”

by Liz Kessler (Orion, 2003) (pages 14-16)

I crept out of bed and slipped into my swimming costume. It was still damp and I winced and pulled my denim jacket over the top. Then I tiptoed out of the boat and looked round. The pier was totally deserted. Along the prom, guesthouses and shops stood in a silent row of silhouettes against the night sky. They could have been a stage set.

A great big full moon shone a spotlight across the sea. I felt sick as I looked at the plank of wood, stretching across to the jetty. *Come on, just a couple of steps.*

I clenched my teeth and my fists – and tiptoed across.

I ran to the bollards at the end of the pier and looked down at the rope ladder stretching into the darkness of the water. The sea glinted coldly at me; I shivered in reply. Why was I doing this?

I wound my fingers round my hair. I always do that when I’m trying to think – if I don’t feel like pacing. And then I pushed the questions and the doubts – and Mandy’s sneering face – out of my mind. I *had* to do it, had to know the truth.

I buttoned up my jacket. I wasn’t getting in there without it on! Holding my breath, I stepped onto

the rope ladder and looked out at the deserted pier one last time. I could hear the gentle chatter of masts clinking in the bay as I carefully made my way down into the darkness.

The last step of the rope ladder was still quite a way from the sea because the tide was out. *It’s now or never,* I said to myself.

Then, before I had time to think another thought, I pinched my nose between my thumb and forefinger – and jumped.

I landed in the water with a heavy splash and gasped for breath as soon as I came up. I first I couldn’t feel anything, except the freezing cold water. *What on earth was I doing?*

Then I remembered what I was there for and started kicking my legs. A bit frantically at first. But seconds later, the cold melted away and so did my worries. Instead, a feeling of calm washed over me with the waves. Salt on my lips, hair flat against my head, I darted under the surface, cutting through the water as though I lived there.

And then – IT – happened. I swam straight back to the pier, terrified. NO! I didn’t want this – I’d changed my mind!



What happens next to Emily? Don’t write about what actually happens in the book, but about what you want to happen in your version of the story. It can be anything you like. Let your imagination run wild!

# From “The Tail of Emily Windsnap”

by Liz Kessler (Orion, 2003) (pages 54-56)



Everywhere I looked, people were swimming this way and that. And they all had tails! Merpeople! Hundreds of them! There were mermaids with gold chains round slinky long tails, swimming along with little merchildren. One had a merbaby on her back, the tiniest little pink tail sticking out from under its sling. A group of mermaids huddled outside one passageway, talking and laughing together, bags made from fishing nets on their arms. Three old mermen sat outside another, their tails faded and wrinkled, their faces full of lines and their eyes sparkling as they talked and laughed.

‘Welcome to Shiprock – merfolk style!’ Shona said.

‘Come on, Shona. Don’t want to be late.’ A mermaid with her hair in a tall bun appeared beside us. ‘Five minutes to the bell.’ Then she flicked her dark green tail and zoomed off ahead.

‘That’s Mrs Tailspin,’ Shona said. ‘History teacher. We’ve got her first thing.’

We followed her along a tube-like channel in the rock. At the other end, where it opened up again, mergirls and boys were swimming together in groups, swishing tails in a hundred different shades of blue and green and purple and silver as they milled about, waiting for school to start. A group of girls were playing a kind of skipping game with a long piece of ship’s rope.

Then a noise like a foghorn surrounded us. Everyone suddenly swam into lines. Boys on one side, girls on another. Shona pulled me along to a line at the far end. ‘You OK?’

I nodded, still unable to speak as we filed down yet another tunnel with the rest of our line.

We each took our seats on smooth round rocks dotted about the circular room. It reminded me of the 360 degree dome at the fair where they show films of daredevil flights and crazy downhill skiing. Only this wasn’t a film – it was real!

Shona grabbed an extra rock and pulled it next to hers. A few of the other girls smiled at me.

‘Are you new?’ one asked. She was little and plump with a thick, dark green tail. It shimmered and sparkled as she spoke.

‘She’s my cousin,’ Shona answered quickly. The girl smiled and went to sit on her rock.

The walls were covered with collages made from shells and seaweed. Light filtered in through tiny cracks in the ceiling. Then Mrs Tailspin came in and we all jumped off our rocks to say good morning.

Shona put her hand up straight away. ‘Is it all right if my cousin sits in with us, please miss?’

Mrs Tailspin looked me up and down. ‘If she’s good.’

Then she clapped her hands. ‘Right, let’s get started. Shipwrecks. Today, we’re doing the nineteenth century.’

Shipwrecks! That beats long division!

Write about a day at mermaid school. What subjects would be studied, where would the classes take place? What are your teachers called? What does everyone look like? How would it be similar to your normal school and how would it differ? Remember – it’s your school, you’re the writer; you can do anything you like!



# From “Emily Windsnap and the Monster from the Deep

by Liz Kessler (Orion, 2004) (pages 44-47)

‘There’s something blocking the tunnel. Look, it’s different from the walls. Feel it.’

Shona squeezed forward to touch the boulder.

I felt my way around its edges. ‘There’s a crack all around it.’ It was almost the same shape at the other end. ‘Maybe it’ll come loose.’

Shona looked at me.

‘Let’s just try.’

‘How do I let you talk me into these things?’ she said with another sigh.

‘Because you can feel it, too? Because there’s something down here that’s making you tingle with excitement? Because the last time we went exploring, we ended up finding my dad? Because being my friend meant you got to live on a beautiful desert island? Because –’

‘OK, enough,’ Shona half-frowned, half-smiled. ‘Don’t get your tail in a tizzy. Let’s just get on with it.’

It didn’t just slip out like the jewel at the other end. We pushed and pushed but nothing

happened. Or nearly nothing. The boulder moved slightly, rocking backwards and forwards as though it was on a hinge, but we couldn’t shift it.

‘It’s useless,’ Shona gasped. ‘We’ll never get it out.’

‘We need to use the rocking. Get a momentum going. Look, it’s swaying. If we both push it from above, it might topple. Wait till I say. On the count of three. Ready?’

Shona nodded without looking at me.

‘One.’ I felt around for a good hold on the rock.

‘Two.’ I stretched out my tail, getting ready to flick it as hard as I could.

‘Three!’

We swished and splashed and pushed, grunting and heaving.

‘Now, let’s go!’ The rock swayed away from us, and then back. ‘And again.’ Another shove against the rock, another slight movement. Again and again, we heaved and pushed until, finally, it started to loosen.





Then Shona stopped pushing. 'I've had enough. I'm exhausted.'

'But we're nearly there!'

'I want to go back,' she said. 'I don't want to do this.'

'What's the problem?'

'The *problem* is that we don't know what's on the other *side*!'

'Exactly! But there is something, isn't there? I can almost feel it vibrating in my body.'

'Me too. And I don't like it, Em. It doesn't feel good. I don't want to know what it is, and I want to go before this place collapses in on us.'

'It's just a boulder. It's not going to collapse!'

But Shona turned to go back.

'Just one more push.'

'You do it if you like. I'm going.'

'Fine!' I went back to the boulder. It was teetering on the edge of the hole now. I could probably push it on my own.

I didn't even know why I was doing it any more. I just knew we couldn't come all this way without finding out what was down here. It might be our only chance. There was something here. I could feel it. Low vibrations hummed rhythmically through the cave. What *were* they?

Fuelled by frustration, I spun my tail as fast as I could, pushed all my weight against the rock, and heaved.

Very slowly, it teetered, swaying with the rhythm of the water before eventually toppling: a huge, smooth, oval rock slipping down and away from

us, almost in slow motion. Water swirled all around. The boulder was still travelling, rolling, hurtling down through the water.

It felt like when you roll a snowball down a hill and it grows bigger and bigger. Something was building up on the other side of the tunnel, below us, below the island, deep inside the rock.

'I told you, I told you!' Shona screamed. 'It's caving in! We're going to be trapped!'

'It's OK. Look.' I tried to hold my nerve. Everything was still intact in the tunnel. It was just on the other side that the water was foaming and swirling everywhere. And there was something else: a presence. The vibrations had turned into a low rumbling, way down below. Something was down there. Something that didn't feel quite so exciting any more. What was it?

'What's *happening*?' Shona screamed.

'It's just – it's the rock falling to the bottom of the caves,' I said, much more confidently than I felt. 'It's all right. Just stay calm. It'll stop in a minute.'

The rock carried on plummeting and crashing, getting fainter and fainter. Sand and rock particles swirled around, a few of them spinning softly through the hole into the cave.

And then it stopped. No more crashing. No swirling rocks or sand, no hurtling anywhere. Complete silence.

Total silence. Kind of eerie silence.

I smiled nervously at Shona. 'See,' I said. 'Told you it'd all be OK.'

Emily and Shona have got themselves into terrible trouble, investigating a tunnel in an out-of-bounds area of their secret desert island. But what have they found? Make up the next part of the story. Try to make it scary!

# Guidance for teachers and parents

This resource is intended for use by children in years 4 through 6, but could easily be adapted for children in key stage 3, especially if there is scope within school for off-timetable days to permit an interdisciplinary exploration of one theme.

## National Curriculum links

English key stage 2, breadth of study – exploring the range of purposes of writing, focusing in this case on creative writing, that is imagining and exploring feelings and ideas using language in creative ways to interest the reader.

The National Curriculum encourages teachers to use English lessons to promote cultural development – there is scope here to reflect on how being an island nation affects our cultural identity, and to draw in the experiences of children from other sea-bordering nations.

## Ideas for further work

<http://www.lizkessler.co.uk/> is the author's website where you can learn more about Emily's adventures, and how to contact Liz if you want to book a writing workshop or school visit.

[http://www.whiterosesgarden.com/Enchanted\\_Waters/EW\\_content\\_pgs/EW\\_INDEX\\_PG.htm](http://www.whiterosesgarden.com/Enchanted_Waters/EW_content_pgs/EW_INDEX_PG.htm) is a website about mermaid mythology, telling stories from all over the world.

<http://echoes.devin.com/selkie/selkie.html> gives lots of information about selkies, and has links to several stories about selkies.

<http://www.orkneyjar.com/orkney/index.html> is a website devoted to the heritage of the Orkney isles. There are maps on the site, and information about the islands' history. The site has a good section on folklore, including selkies. This page explains why sea tales are so important in Orkney: <http://www.orkneyjar.com/folklore/sea.htm>

An alternative or additional piece of imaginative work would be to ask children to imagine that they live on a boat, like Emily in the stories. Children could write about their home or their life on water. What would it be like to live on a boat moored in a marina? Or on a yacht out at sea for weeks at a time? Designing a boat environment allows for extended activities for gifted and talented or older children – children could consider what source/s of fuel they would use for heating and cooking, and how renewable this would be, how they would source food and fresh water, and how they would dispose of waste. Children could illustrate their work to increase their imaginative engagement.

Take a look at <http://www.theblueplanetlive.com/> for clips from the live show – including of seals – and other packs, games, and information about the show.

Go to <http://www.manchester.ac.uk> to find out more about The University of Manchester.