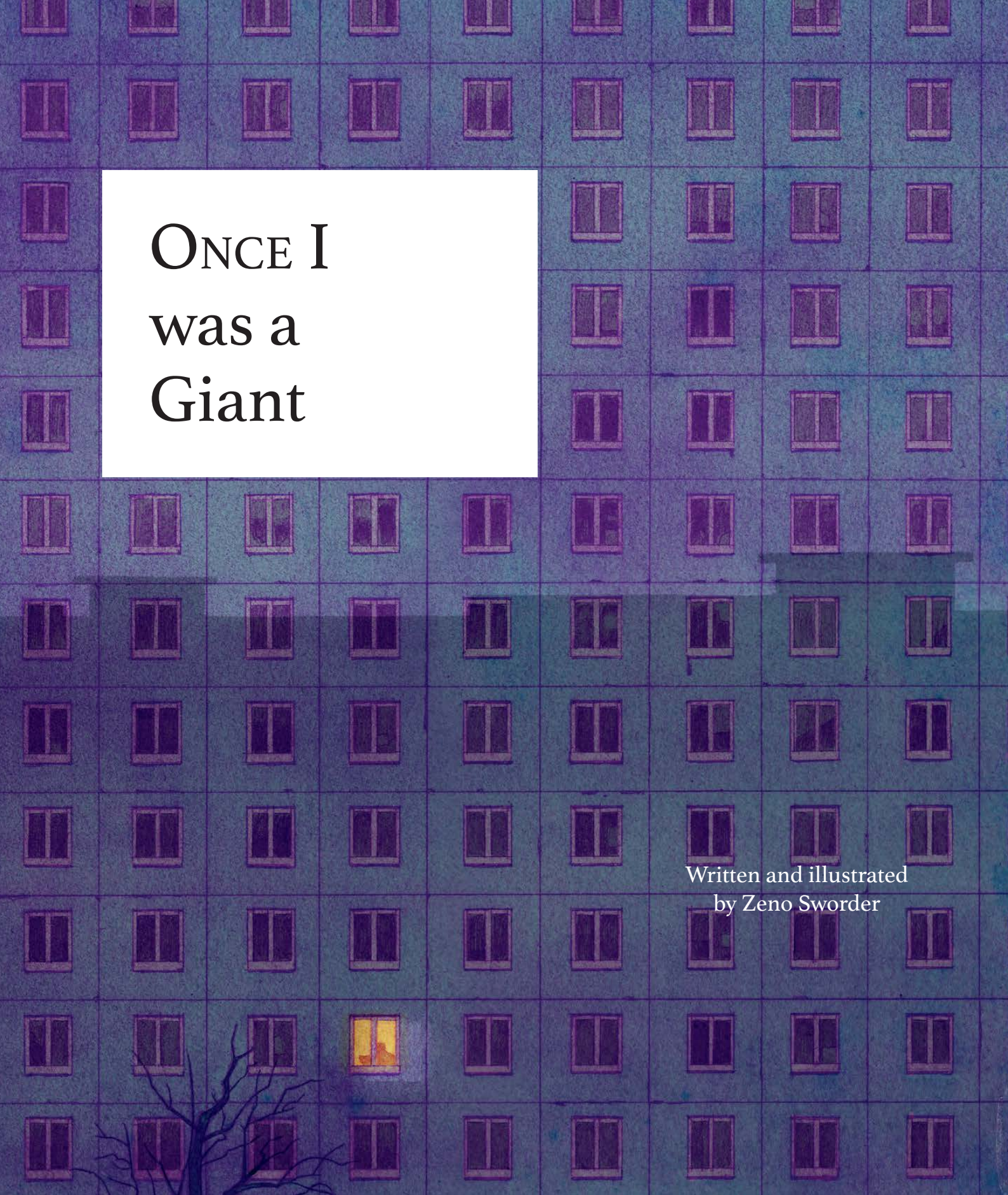




ONCE I was a Giant

Written and illustrated
by Zeno Swarder

Teachers' notes prepared by Christina Wheeler, practising teacher
librarian with a background in the Australian curriculum (English)

Thames & Hudson Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work. We recognise the continuing connection to culture and story passed down through generations of Indigenous Australians that unite people, environment and ways of seeing, and we pay our respects to their Elders past and present and to First Nations people everywhere.

Synopsis

When a picture-book maker is lost for ideas, a small voice – that of his pencil – offers to share her own story. It is one filled with dark, light, fear, friendship, uncertainty and renewal. Tracing her journey – from seed to protector, home to birds and insects and giver of life – the pencil recounts her time as one of the giants of the forest and of her friend, the wanderer, who shares with her bird song, stories of adventure and the power of connection.

Gently conveyed with emotive, lyrical storytelling and exquisite illustrations, this multi-layered tale is as timeless as it is tender. Its essence is both soulful and hope-filled, a thought-provoking and beautiful story.

Themes

Nature



Friendship

Hope



Cycle of life

Resilience



Spirituality

Renewal



Interconnectedness

Writing style

Once I was a Giant is a beautifully crafted, softly told story that recounts the journey of a seed as it grows into a magnificent tree, home to birdlife, insects and other critters, and friend to the adventurous wanderer. As the forest is cut down by merciless machines, the tree implores her friend to help those who dwell in her branches and roots to find shelter elsewhere, disregarding her own fate to safeguard that of others. The tree is then manufactured into a range of timber products, including the pencil of a book maker. She wants to share her story which is both an indictment on human actions and an inspiring tale of renewal and the cyclic nature of life.

The author dedicates the book to the Indigenous peoples of the world and their care for the Earth. He prioritises giving 'a voice to the natural world', helping readers to recognise the life that exists in and because of nature. As such, it is a homage to the environment, our connection to it and the powerful renewal that comes from nature; the story is deeply rooted in the tenet that 'we can breathe in because trees breathe out'.

Included in the text are various wordless page openings that invite readers to imagine, ponder and explore themes of hope, resilience and selflessness. The written text shows restraint, complementing the images to create a multi-layered story that is rich yet, at times, ethereal. It is impossible not to feel a strong sense of empathy and connection with both the pencil that was once this magnificent tree and her small friend, the wanderer. The book elicits in readers a moment to pause and view the world through a different lens, one that carefully regards, respects and notices nature.

Once I was a Giant has broad applications in the educational setting. For primary students, it offers a beautiful story about nature, courage and friendship, while at a secondary level there are more complex themes of spirituality, connection and the Daoist and Buddhist concepts of interconnectedness, continuity of life and the mystery of living things: each ending also represents a new beginning. In terms of visual literacy, there is also a wide range of applications across a variety of year levels. *Once I was a Giant* is destined to become a literary classic.

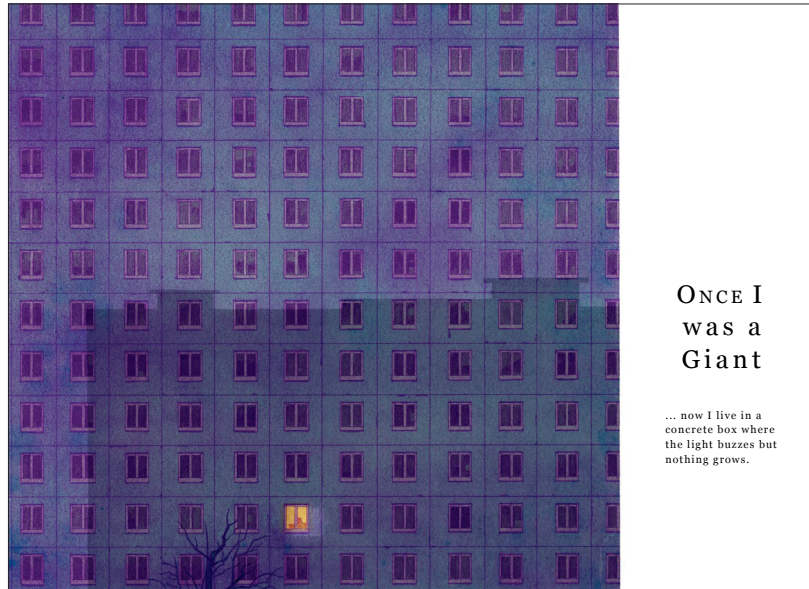
Author motivation

I began writing this story in late 2022, during a time when there was growing momentum in Victoria to end logging in native forests. While that movement succeeded, the logging of native forests continues in many parts of Australia (and across the world). Inspiration for this book also came from my childhood sense of wonder for trees and recent discoveries into their intricate social lives. The findings – how trees communicate and nurture each other – are nothing short of magical. It made me want to tell a story from the perspective of a tree, exploring ideas of interconnection and metamorphosis, in a way that was personal and passionate. My hope is that this story will encourage readers to consider a much older way of thinking – one in which we see trees and other living things as our kin. A way of thinking that extends the sanctity and love that we have for ourselves to the other living things on our planet.

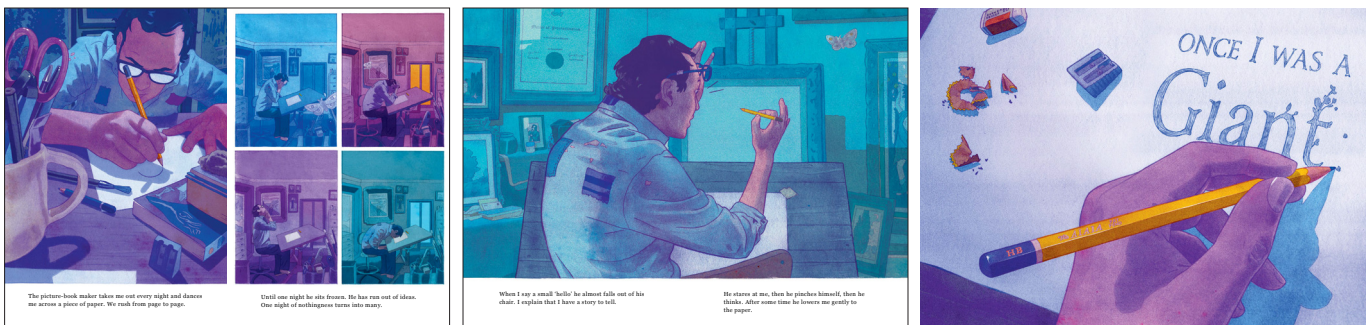


Study notes

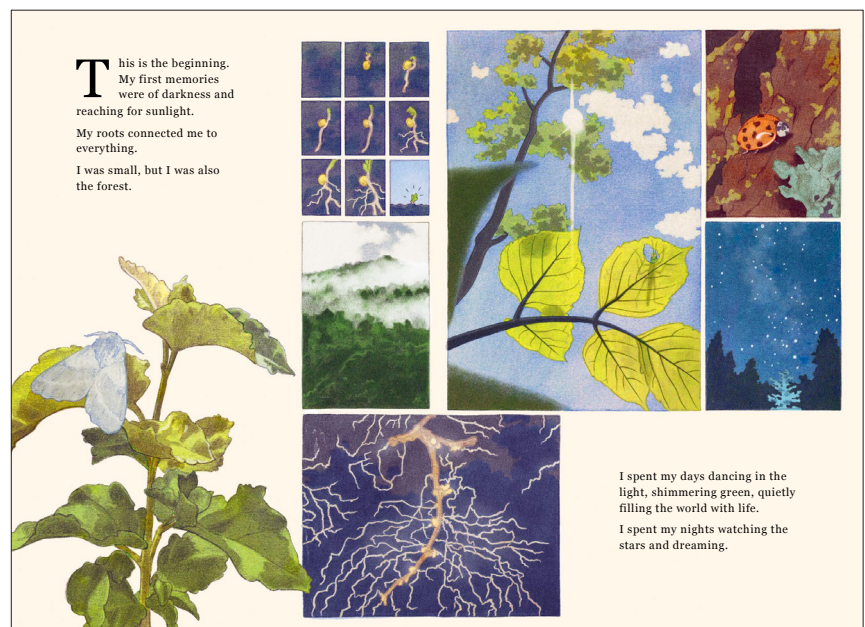
- Before reading *Once I was a Giant*, examine the front cover, blurb, title page and endpapers. What are you wondering about this story? Make predictions about the narrative. What themes might a story like this have?
- On the first page (below), we are introduced to the sombre setting of a 'concrete box' in which 'the light buzzes but nothing grows'. After finishing the text, return to the small light in this window. What might be different about this space now that the pencil has shared her story?



- How do the colours in the page openings below reflect the book maker sitting 'frozen', unable to create his next book? Why is there a moth on the second page opening? Make predictions about the story the pencil is about to tell. Write the story of *Once I was a Giant* before reading further.



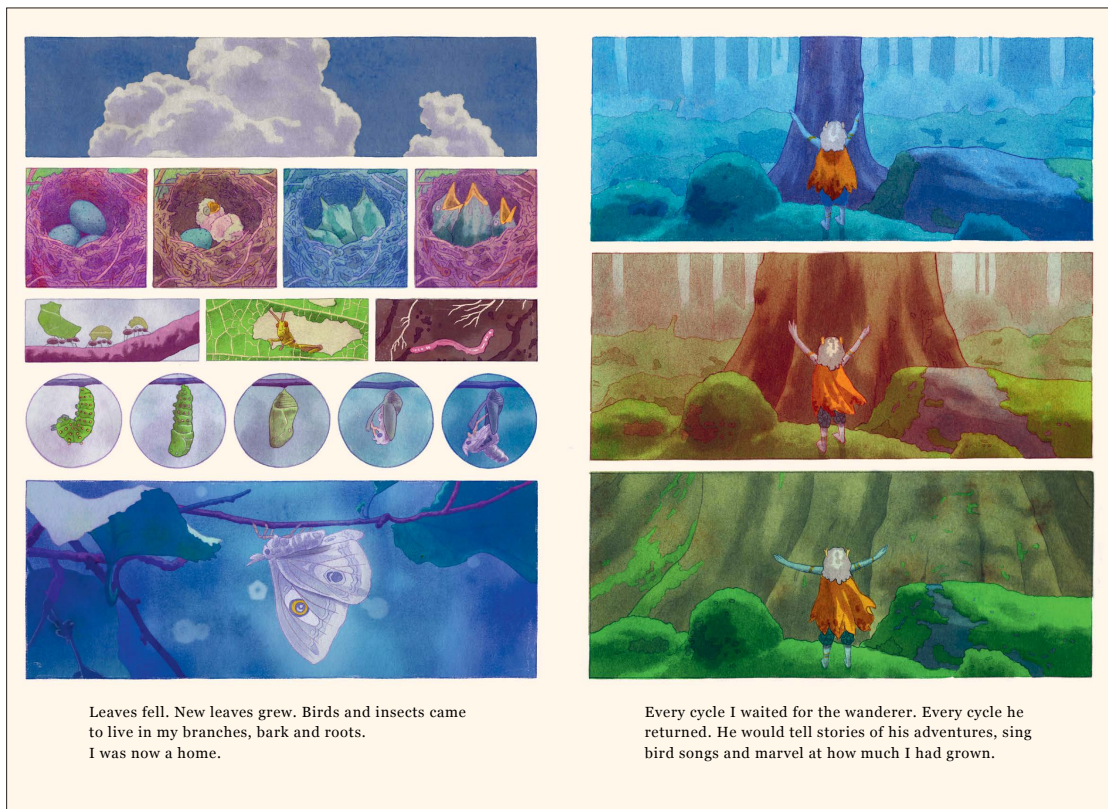
- Describe the nature of the pencil, both in her present state and in her previous existence.
- In what ways might the book maker and pencil be like one another? Give reasoning to support your thinking.
- Discuss the use of light and dark in *Once I was a Giant* in both the written text and the illustrations. How is the motif of light used throughout the text?
- The pencil says, 'My roots connected me to everything'. What does she mean by this? Discuss connections that Indigenous peoples have to their lands, Ancestors and families. In a reflection, write about your own roots and the connections they give you. Why are these connections so important?
- What does the pencil mean when she says, 'I was small, but I was also the forest'? Discuss the use of contrast to depict the quiet voice that the author gives to nature in this text.
- What is the author sharing with his audience about the place of nature in our world and lives?
- The pencil shares that she '[spent her] nights watching the stars and dreaming'. What do you think she dreams about? In the role of her as a tree, write a poem or journal about these dreams.
- How does the sequence of images in the illustration below share the essence of this story?



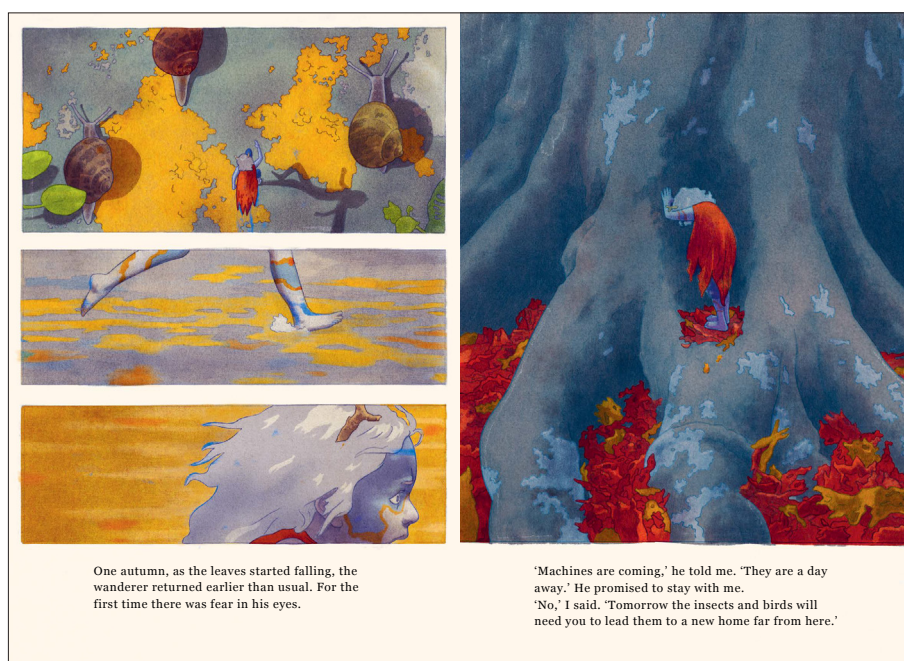
- What is the role of the wanderer in *Once I was a Giant*? Describe the relationship between the tree and the wanderer. How would the story be different without this character in it?
- Retell *Once I was a Giant* from the wanderer's point of view.
- Discuss the different perspectives offered through the illustrations in *Once I was a Giant*. How do the various gazes, angles and points of view add depth and meaning to the storytelling?



- How is the concept of the cycles of life revealed in pages such as the one below?

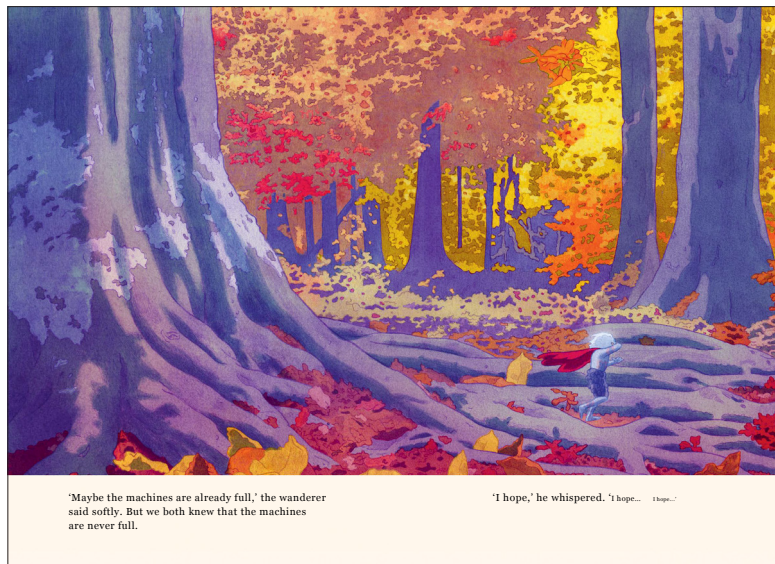


- Describe what is happening in the sequence of images below. How can we tell what is going through the wanderer's mind? How are facial expressions and body language used to convey meaning? Discuss the selflessness of the tree, who says, 'Tomorrow the insects and birds will need you to lead them to a new home far from here.' How does she try to put the wanderer's mind at rest? What does this share about the tree's character and the special bond she has with the wanderer?



- In a freeze-frame or drawing, depict how the birds, insects and other critters of the forest feel towards the tree.
- In what ways is *Once I was a Giant* a story about courage and friendship?
- Why does the wanderer 'gently [touch] his forehead' to the tree's bark? How does the tree respond to this? What is the link between this and the theme of interconnectedness in the text?
- At the beginning of the text, the wanderer says, 'I hope... I hope... I hope...', with the text size getting smaller each time. Later in the text, this is repeated, this time with the tree saying the same thing. What are they hoping for? Why does the text become smaller as they continue to hope? In the role of either the tree or the wanderer, prepare and perform a short monologue that shares your hopes in *Once I was a Giant*.

- How do the colours in the page opening below represent both hope and despair?



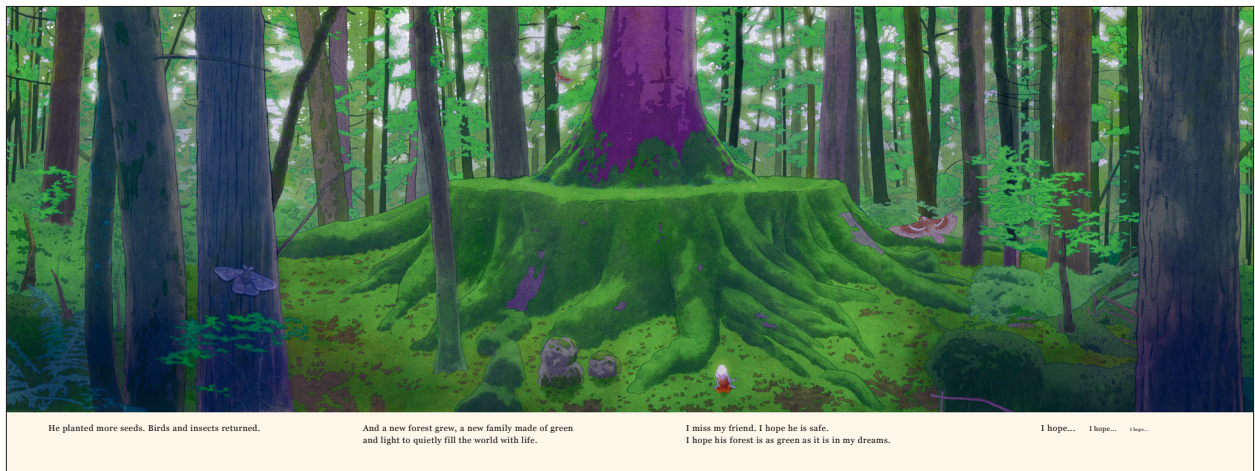
- View the wordless page openings in the text. Why has the author chosen to leave these particular pages wordless? If you were to compose the text for these pages, what would you write? Why? Why do you think the last four page openings are wordless? Discuss with a friend what is happening in these final pages of the story.
- What were your first impressions when seeing the pages on the left below? What comment is the author making in this illustration? With older students, compare this image with real-life photographs of forests that have been destroyed for human gain. One example is of the battlefields of World War I, such as the one below. Time permitting, use certain excerpts from the verse novel *Silver People: A Tale from the Panama Canal* (UQP) by Margarita Engle, in which trees narrate their destruction as the Panama Canal is dug.



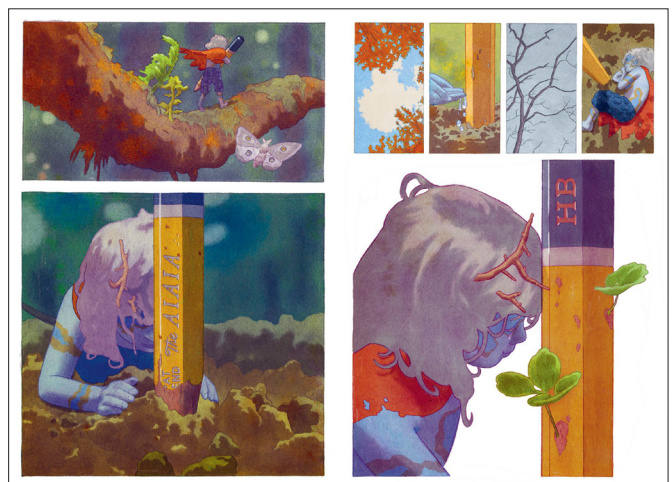
<http://www.eastsussexww1.org.uk/battle-of-passchendaele/index.html>

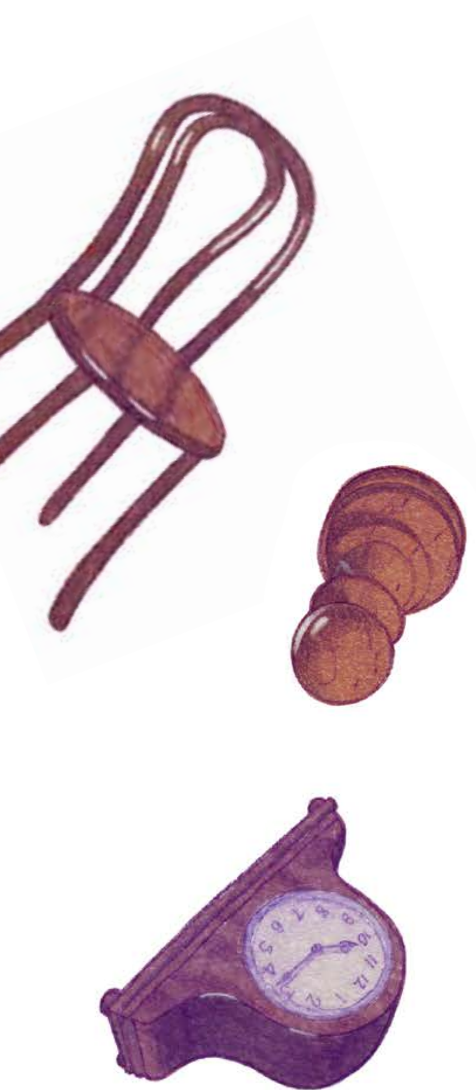
- The pencil 'just wishes she could grow again'. How does this wish come true? What philosophies or belief systems do you know that also share this concept of renewal? (See the Author's Note at the end of the text for more information.)

- How does this book make you think and feel differently about everyday objects made from timber or other living things? Choose one of these to storyboard your own narrative based on the themes of connection, renewal and nature.
- The brand of the pencil is AIAIA. Why might the author have chosen this as the brand name for the pencil? Find out more about this.
- When the pencil is just a mere stub, the author thinks the story should end there. Why is the pencil determined to continue with her story?
- In the role of the tree, write a reflection about the wanderer's efforts to find your seeds and plant them. What stories do you think the wanderer tells the seedling about its mother? Alternatively, write a series of journal entries about this in the role of the wanderer.
- With reference to the panoramic illustration below, explain what you believe to be the purpose and message of *Once I was a Giant*.



- Use a Y chart to brainstorm words and phrases depicting the scene above. Write a descriptive piece of the scene above. Include figurative language in your piece.
- Take a panoramic photo of a place dear to you (or locate one online). Sketch this scene or describe it in a written piece.
- In the role of the picture-book maker, describe what it was like to be awoken to the wanderer prising the pencil stub from your hands. How does this help you in your own outlook on life?
- Describe what is happening in the sequence to the right. How does this capture the essence of *Once I was a Giant*?





- Compose a piece of music or poem that reflects this story.
- Create a story map that captures the main characters, settings and events of *Once I was a Giant*.
- Retell *Once I was a Giant* in a six-word summary.
- In the Author's Note, Zeno Sworder dedicates his book to 'Indigenous peoples across the world whose enduring wisdom and care continues to nurture this living earth'. How does *Once I was a Giant* reflect these values?
- Discuss the role of nature in *Once I was a Giant* inherent in the quote at the back of the text: 'I have fallen in love outward' (Robinson Jeffers, poet and environmentalist).
- Discuss how the Daoist and Buddhist beliefs cited in the Author's Note underpin *Once I was a Giant*.
 - Daoist concept of *bianhus*: all forms of life constantly move through different states and cycles; each ending also represents a new beginning.
 - Buddhist idea of *pratityasumutpada*: the relationships that hold together the world are based on interconnection and non-separation. Life is intertwined. We can breathe in because trees breathe out.
- Use picture books such as *Tanglewood* by Margaret Wild and Vivienne Goodman (Omnibus) and Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree* (Lothian) as companion texts to *Once I was a Giant*.
- Which is your favourite page of *Once I was a Giant*? Why is this your favourite? Share in a reflection.
- The late Pope Francis frequently used the analogy: 'Rivers do not drink their own water, trees do not eat their own fruit, the sun does not shine on itself, and flowers do not spread their fragrance for themselves.' How do the sentiments of this quote align with the themes of *Once I was a Giant*?

- How do the pages below represent the themes of hope, optimism and renewal in *Once I was a Giant*?



- Discuss why the author has used personification to give the tree human qualities (see examples below).
- Explore the use of figurative language in the text, and the contribution it makes to the reading experience. Examples include:
 - I live in a concrete box where the light buzzes
 - The picture-book maker takes me out every night and dances me across a piece of paper
 - We rush from page to page
 - He sits frozen
 - My first memories were of...reaching for sunlight
 - I was small, but I was also the forest
 - I spent my days dancing in the light, shimmering green
 - The young cloud carrying a belly full of rain
 - There was fear in his eyes
 - The stars turned slowly in the sky
 - The wanderer scrambled through my branches... and tunnelled underneath my roots
 - He gently touched his forehead to my bark
 - Silence...Then clicking. Whirring. Buzzing.
 - I can still feel my crushed branches and greying roots. I can sense the forest.
 - He planted that treasure in the cradle of my tree stump
 - How close I came to touching the sun
 - And a new forest grew, a new family made of green and light to quietly fill the world with life

Extension discussion points

- This story is influenced by folk lore, animism and Greek myths. The following paintings are hidden in the picture-book makers studio; *Apollo and Daphne* by Piero del Pollaiuolo, *The Scream* by Edvard Munch, *Circe Invidiosa* by John William Waterhouse, *Cypresses* by Vincent van Gogh and *Primavera* by Sandro Botticelli. How are these paintings relevant to the themes of the story?
- The name Circe is also used on a box of matches in the story and the pencil is named AIAIA, after the mythological forest island where Circe lived. Who is Circe and how does her magic relate to the themes of this story?
- The dominant colour for the pages in the artist's studio is purple whereas the forest is green. Why has the illustrator chosen these colours? What do they say about the natural world and the concrete urban world? Where do they sit in relation to each other on the colour wheel?
- We see the wanderer standing outside the picture-book maker's window accompanied by a moth. Does this moth appear on any of the other pages? What role could the moth have played in reuniting the pencil and wanderer?

