Contact: www.oxfordprimary.co.uk  Reviewed by: John Dabell

Story Sparks

Children love a good story. It fires their imagination, piques their curiosity, teaches them literacy and builds empathy and understanding. At their best, stories grab the reader, place her at the heart of things, and act as great catalysts to conversations and discussions, inviting children to the party. Capturing imaginations isn’t an optional extra for children’s stories, it’s an essential piece, and language is the greatest force in the universe for getting creativity bubbling.

Oxford Reading Tree Story Sparks shares the same philosophy, and OUP has produced a varied and engaging series of 36 storybooks, which is designed to emotionally engage children in reading for pleasure, and to help ripen and extend comprehension skills. The books are a delightful mix of fictional tales from a range of well-known authors and fabulous illustrators.

The Story Sparks books go from Oxford Level 6 up to Level 11, or book band Orange to Lime. There are six books at each level that are perfectly accessible for children at each stage of their reading journey.

What I think these books will do above all is make children realise how wide a genre ‘fiction’ actually is, that stories cover a range of emotional hot buttons such as anger, fear, hope, love, joy, embarrassment and so on. These books press a number of those buttons, allowing children to explore their feelings in a safe environment. Some of my children who read The Dog of Truth certainly felt like they were on an emotional rollercoaster as the story drew out a heady combination of melancholy, hope and happiness using magic, humour and morality. Story Sparks puts this emotional exploration at the top of the learning agenda whatever the tale, regardless of whether it comes in a comic, rhyming story or picture book.

A compelling narrative is a must for creating an engaging experience through story, but for the primary age groups it means having compelling illustrations too. There are 34 of the best children’s illustrators from around the world selected for this set, and the books certainly benefit from their expertise, which adds extra layers of richness, life and energy.

This wonderful series of tales comes with a teaching handbook that acts not only as an emotional crutch, but as a professional guide to help you get the most out of the stories. The handbook includes discussions on why variety is important, good-quality reading comprehension and the importance of oral language. The notes contain strategies and classroom gems that will inspire discussion and jump-start thinking and ideas; these come as photocopiable activity sheets that include question generators, statement cards, theme cards, thinking talk clouds, vocabulary journals, circle diagrams, bubble maps and story structures.

There are 72 activity sheets in total, two for each story book. So while the stories make great independent reads, they are best used as talking points, so that children can share the same text and interact with each other in pairs or small groups. There is a suggested teaching sequence to follow, and you can find more detailed guidance and activity ideas on the Oxford Owl website (www.oxfordowl.co.uk). Within the handbook you will also find advice for building strong relationships with parents and carers which, as any teacher knows, is an absolute priority, but not always easy to achieve.

These books have emotional authenticity; they have been extremely well written and illustrated and combine intelligently with a handbook of clever activities and ideas. When used as discussion opportunities, Story Sparks will help children build and improve their self-monitoring skills, help them to reflect and infer as well as broaden their reading experiences and emotional responses to them.

Verdict: Read on

If we learn one thing from this fine series it is that reading is far from a passive experience. It’s an active and emotional process bursting with opportunities for speaking and sharing. Story Sparks gets children to intellectually engage with the text and take control of their reading, as well as their thoughts and feelings. The handbook can be purchased separately, while the books can be bought in sets of six or 36. A whole-school package including the handbook is also available. For prices, see www.oxfordprimary.co.uk/storysparks