When the great inventor Daedalus is imprisoned in a high tower by King Minos, he begins to plan how he can escape. Daedalus builds a pair of wings for himself and his son Icarus. Before they set off, Daedalus makes Icarus promise that he won’t fly too close to the sun or the wax that holds the wings together will melt. But in the excitement of his first flight, Icarus forgets his father’s words.

The story of Daedalus and Icarus is one of the best-known Greek myths and has been retold many times. The story features on pottery dating from 650BC, but it is likely the tale would have been well-known already by then. Most modern retellings draw on the version told by the poet Ovid in his poem Metamorphoses (written in the reign of Emperor Augustus, 27BC–14AD). Susan Gates’ version uses a character called Amara, Daedalus’ servant, to tell the story.

Themes and Ideas
Stories with a message or moral
• In the story, Daedalus warns his son about flying too close to the sun, as this will damage the wings. But Icarus is so elated by the sensation of flying that he forgets his father’s words. This story gives children the chance to think about stories that contain a message, in this case the importance of listening to advice.

Before Reading
Background knowledge
• Daedalus and Icarus is a well-known story, so it is possible that some children will have heard a version of it before. Even if the children are not familiar with this particular myth, it is likely they will have read or heard some other stories from Ancient Greece before. Taking some time to discuss any myths they know and the world they are set in can help children to understand the context of the story.

Common misconceptions
• It can be useful to remind the children about the difference between the world of Ancient Greece and the stories the Ancient Greeks told. While this story is not true and doesn’t feature real characters from history, the people of Ancient Greece who first told it were real.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3
1. Questions for comprehension
• Who is telling the story of Daedalus and Icarus in this version of the myth?
  - Why does the author start with Amara telling the story to the children?
  - Why does she tell them that she ‘flew like a bird’? Will this make them interested in the story?
• Why is escaping from the tower so difficult?
• How does Amara help in Chapter 3?
In pairs or small groups, ask the children to look back through Chapters 2 and 3 and tell the children they are going to plan their escape and then write the story of it. They can.

What signs are there in the text that Icarus might forget his father’s warning?

Tell the children that in some versions of the story, rather than being surly and bored, lazy and proud.

Does the story of Icarus share a message with the reader? If so, what is it? (the importance of listening to advice, perhaps?)

Ask the children where these contractions tend to be found (speech, informal language).

Why can’t Amara sleep at the start of Chapter 4? Whose wings does she borrow?

Ask the children to skim through the book looking for words where an apostrophe has been used to form a contraction (wasn’t p.6; you’ll p.9; couldn’t p.24). Remind the children of what has happened with these words, and the original words they are formed from.

Ask the children which is used in this book (first person).

Why has the author chosen to name the book Icarus?

- Is Icarus the main character? Why/why not?
- Why didn’t the author call the book Amara?
- Does the story of Icarus share a message with the reader? If so, what is it? (the importance of listening to advice, perhaps?)

2. Explaining themes and ideas

Ask the children to think back to the evidence they collected about Icarus and his personality. Recap their thoughts about him based on the final two chapters. Do they still agree that he isn’t very pleasant?

How does this affect how the reader feels about the end of the book where Icarus drowns?

Tell the children that in some versions of the story, rather than being surly and unpleasant, Icarus is a good character who is polite and kind and helps his father to build the wings. Would this change how a reader might feel about the ending? Would it make the ending sadder? Why, or why not?

AP: Can the children articulate and justify answers, arguments and opinions?

3. Evaluating the author’s use of language

In pairs or small groups, ask the children to look back through Chapters 2 and 3 and collect evidence from the text about Icarus as a character. Remind the children to look for direct description of him (bored, lazy and proud) and inferred description through speech and action (leaned against a wall, sulking).

Ask the children: does the author portray Icarus as a pleasant character? Challenge them to justify their opinions with reference to the evidence they have collected for the text.

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2. Drawing inferences

Ask the children to identify the different emotions Amara feels in Chapter 4. They might suggest:
- Scared and excited when she is deciding what to do
- Worried when she begins to drop
- Delighted and exhilarated as she flies
- Sad as she puts the wings back

Challenge the children to explain how they know how she is feeling at each point, identifying information that is given directly, and information that needs to be inferred from the text.

3. Evaluating the author’s use of language

Remind the children about the difference between writing in the first and third person. Ask the children which is used in this book (first person).

As a group, retell the opening pages of the book in the third person (Amara was the servant girl of ... she lived in the tower ... )

How does this difference in perspective affect the story? What are the advantages and disadvantages of writing in the third and first person?

In the children’s opinion, has the author chosen the most effective voice for this book? Will it make a difference in the exciting parts of the story?

After reading

1. Questions for comprehension

- Why has the author chosen to name the book Icarus?
- Is Icarus the main character? Why/why not?
- Why didn’t the author call the book Amara?
- Does the story of Icarus share a message with the reader? If so, what is it? (the importance of listening to advice, perhaps?)

2. Explaining themes and ideas

Ask the children to think back to the evidence they collected about Icarus and his personality. Recap their thoughts about him based on the final two chapters. Do they still agree that he isn’t very pleasant?

How does this affect how the reader feels about the end of the book where Icarus drowns?

Tell the children that in some versions of the story, rather than being surly and unpleasant, Icarus is a good character who is polite and kind and helps his father to build the wings. Would this change how a reader might feel about the ending? Would it make the ending sadder? Why, or why not?

AP: Can the children articulate and justify answers, arguments and opinions?

3. Grammar and punctuation

Ask the children to skim through the book looking for words where an apostrophe has been used to form a contraction (wasn’t p.6; you’ll p.9; couldn’t p.24). Remind the children of what has happened with these words, and the original words they are formed from.

Ask the children where these contractions tend to be found (speech, informal language) and ask why they might be found in this book (Amara is telling the story).

4. Vocabulary

Remind the children what a simile is (a comparison using as or like) and discuss why an author might use a simile in their writing.

Ask the children to use the Similes Photocopy Master to look back through Icarus and collect some of the similes the author uses.

They can then devise some similes of their own to describe characters or situations in the book.

Responding to the Text

Written response

Ask the children to imagine that Daedalus’ first plan to build wings and fly to safety didn’t work because Amara couldn’t find enough feathers. Their task is to pretend they are the famous inventor Daedalus and come up with another plan to escape from the tower.

Tell the children they are going to plan their escape and then write the story of it. They can draw on the story to help them, but they must use their imagination to for a plan. They could invent a machine or gadget to help them, or trick their way out, but they should
try to think of a way that fits with Daedalus' actions in the story. It is up to them if Icarus escapes this time or if he meets the same sticky end.

Interviews
- Tell the children that they are going to plan and create a radio interview with the key characters from the story of Icarus. Their job is to tell the whole story, collecting every character's view.
- The children can work in groups to plan and perform their interviews. They can divide the roles as they wish, but will probably need: Interviewer (at least one); Daedalus, Icarus, Amara. They could also interview King Minos or the tower guards.
- Their interviews can be serious or funny, but they should try to tell the whole story, using the different personalities and viewpoints of the characters where possible.

AP (Drawing inferences): Can the children ask relevant questions to extend their understanding and build vocabulary and knowledge?

Additional Follow-up Tasks
- Debate the statement: Amara was wrong to take the wings. (spoken language)
- Write a report from one of the tower guards to King Minos explaining what has happened to Daedalus and Icarus. (shorter writing task)
- Retell the story of Icarus in the third person. (longer writing task)

Now Try Reading...
- Another story featuring the characters from this book, such as Theseus and the Minotaur. Good retellings include Atticus the Storyteller’s 100 Greek Myths by Lucy Coats (Orion Children’s Books) and Myths and Legends retold by Anthony Horowitz (Kingfisher Books).
- More stories from Ovid’s Metamorphoses in Changing Shape by Gillian Cross, Greatest Stories, Oxford Level 13.

Responding to the Text
Photocopy Master: Answers
- Credit should be given for any answers that demonstrate children’s understanding of the text or where they express an opinion as requested, justifying their answer. Good answers to the Responding to the Text Photocopy Master might include:
- Question 1: Because Daedalus had angered King Minos.
- Question 2: Because it could cause the wax that held the feathers together to melt.
- Question 3: An answer that identifies a character from the book and offers a plausible supporting reason. For example, Icarus is responsible for his own death because he doesn’t listen to his father; Daedalus is responsible as he comes up with the plan and makes the wings that melt; King Minos is responsible as he locks Icarus away and Icarus dies trying to escape.