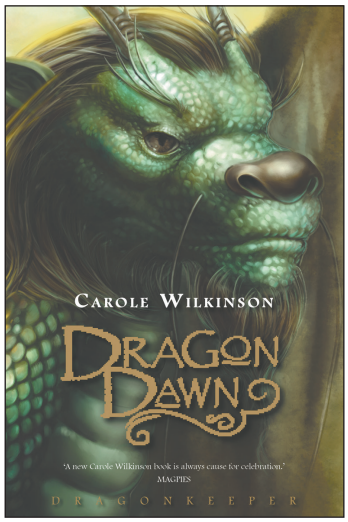

Dragon Dawn

By Carole Wilkinson

Dragon Dawn is the exciting prequel to the now much-loved Dragonkeeper trilogy. As an introduction to this book and the Dragonkeeper series, Carole Wilkinson has provided the introduction to these teachers' notes in an effort to put this period in context...

- The Chinese Empire lasted from 3rd Century BCE until the People's Republic of China was proclaimed in 1949. For twenty-three centuries an Emperor ruled that vast Empire. The Roman Empire lasted for 500 years, the Assyrian Empire for 1000 years, the Ottoman Empire for 600 years. The Chinese Empire survived from 300 years before the birth of Christ until within living memory.

- The name China is a western invention. The first Emperor of China was from the tribal group known as the Qin (pronounced chin). That is where the name is derived from. The Chinese people call their home Zhong Guo which means Middle Kingdom or Central Land.

- It is a huge area 5500 km from North to South, and 5200 west to east and contains two of the longest rivers in the world, and some of the highest mountains.

- Before there was an Empire that area known to us in the west as China, was the home of many different tribal groups known by the name of their ruling families. Written records from these tribes go back almost 3000 years BCE.

- Conflict between different tribes continued throughout the pre-Imperial era. Alliances were formed and broken, states were proclaimed, grew in power and then faded.

- The era just prior to the first Empire was known as the Warring States period. The name tells it all. There was constant war between the 15 or so states that existed. Though even then there was some sense of cohesion as these enemies were considered to be part of the known civilised world called Tianxia which means All Under Heaven.

- The Qin were considered to be uncultured and uncouth mountain men lacking ethical standards. Promotion in the army, for instance, was achieved by collecting up the heads of the enemy soldiers one had killed and presenting them for counting.

READERSHIP
Upper primary to mid secondary students

*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

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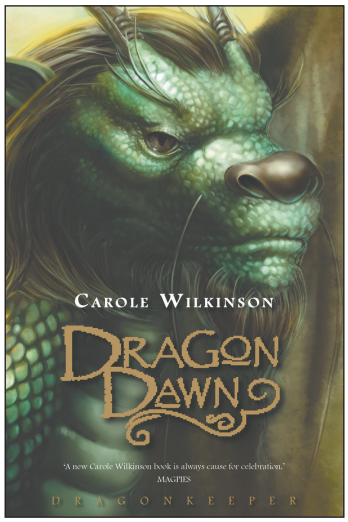

- The Qin were all-conquering, in 256 BCE all the states had been overcome and amalgamated into the one great empire, ruled by the first emperor. Imposing standard weights and measures throughout the empire, and more importantly a standard system of writing, enhanced the unification of the empire. In some ways it is this common writing system that enabled the disparate tribes to come together as one Empire.

- The First Emperor's rule was short, only eleven years. But he left an impressive legacy. The Terracotta Warriors —7000 life-sized pottery soldiers — are the buried army intended to protect the first emperor in the afterlife. His actual tomb has yet to be excavated.

- When Dragon Dawn opens, it is 282 BCE and the Qin are on the ascendancy. They have been successful in battle and increased their territory by five times, absorbing the states of Shu and Song, and a chunk of Wei. They now have their sight set on Zhou, Lu and the rest of Wei. It is a violent time. The Wei are frantically building walls in a vain attempt to keep the all-conquering Qin out.

Danzi doesn't want to get involved in the violent ways of men, but if he wants to travel anywhere, it is hard to avoid the conflicts.

- The Dragonkeeper Trilogy opens 100 years later. The Qin are no longer in power. The Han are now reign over the Chinese Empire. Their rule will last longer than the Qin, almost 400 years. Liu Che is the 5th Han Emperor known to history as Wudi.

Chinese Dragons

Unique among the dragons of mythology, the Chinese dragons are the only dragons that do not inspire fear. Unlike their western cousins, and even the physically similar dragons of Japan and Iran, Chinese dragons are friendly, benevolent creatures.

Where Western dragons breathe fire and spit venom and are fond of the flesh of humans, Chinese dragons breath steamy mist, which rises in the sky and forms clouds. From the clouds comes life-giving rain.

So where people feared Western dragons and their only desire was to kill them, the Chinese venerated their dragons, praying to them in the spring to ensure that they woke from their winter sleep to bring the spring rains.

Most of the characteristics of dragons found in the Dragonkeeper trilogy come from Chinese dragon mythology. Their taste for roasted swallows and arsenic, their fear of centipedes and the metallic sound they make (like banging copper bowls together) all came from ancient Chinese works that mention dragons. Their colours, the growth of horns and wings, their birth from dragon stones, are all drawn from these ancient works.

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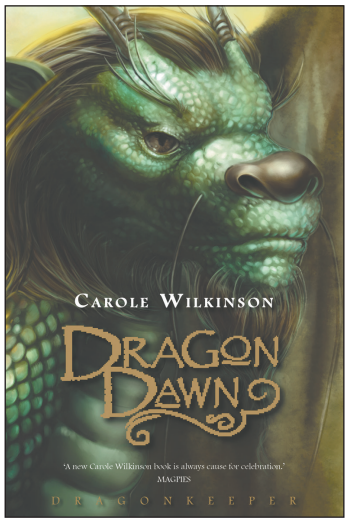

ABOUT THE BOOK

Set in ancient China during a time of war amongst the states, Dragon Dawn is a story about a dragon, Danzi and a human trickster Bingwen and their remarkable journey of discovery. It is also a story about trust, attested to by a breathtaking leap of faith.

Danzi and Bingwen first meet at a crossroads and it does not go well. Danzi takes an immediate dislike to Bingwen, strongly disapproving of his lifestyle. Curiously, their paths keep crossing and they rescue each other in turn from capture by soldiers. Ultimately, they join forces and in a brilliant piece of theatre, which puts Bingwen's trickery to good use for a change, they save the citizens of Luoyang from invasion and certain death.

At Dragon Dawn's heart is the Chinese dragon keeper tradition. Human dragon keepers are a rare breed in China, coming from just two family names. They are identified by three characteristic: the ability to understand dragon-speak, second sight and left-handedness. Danzi's dragon keeper has recently died and he has resolved to go it alone in the future. However, he clearly struggles to manage on his own and it is Bingwen who finds him food and specials herbs and cures his malaise. Although he accepts Bingwen's assistance, Danzi's first impressions of him remain, blinding him to the possibility that there may be more to Bingwen than meets the eye. The story reaches its climax when, on returning his old dragon keeper's few belongings to his family, Danzi is confronted by a revelation – that Bingwen is the dragon keeper heir apparent.

This is a book that will enthrall younger readers. The historical fantasy genre - the blurring of the line between fiction and non-fiction, works so well in Dragon Dawn, as indeed it does in all the author's dragon books, that it seems entirely credible that dragons lived in ancient China!

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

For upper primary to lower secondary students

Ask the librarian to prepare a display of books about dragons. Have students assist with setting up the display.

LITERACY

Visual Literacy

Pre reading exercise — judging a book by its cover

Look at and discuss the book cover building up a list of adjectives to describe the dragon.

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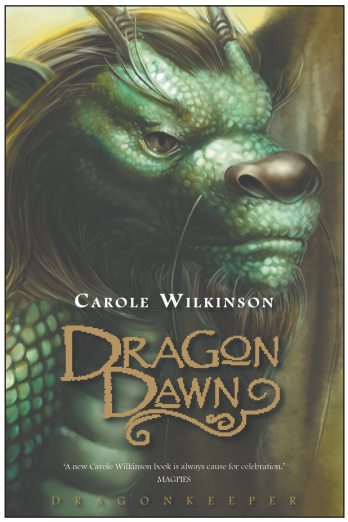

Dragon profile — post reading exercise

Based on a reading of the book, create a profile of Danzi. Compare with pre-reading impressions. Should you judge a book by its cover?

Poetry

To pass the sleepless winters, Danzi and his dragon keeper had sat around a cheerful fire composing poetry…

Imagine that, like Danzi, you can fly.

Write a poem about the sensation/experience of flight.

Story writing

Write your own short story about a dragon.

Drama

Be a talk show host. Prepare a 5 minute interview and perform for class.

Have half class prepare interviews of Danzi, the

INTEGRATED STUDIES

History

Be a history sleuth: In what time period in ancient Chinese history is Dragon Dawn set?

Tip: Look at the book map carefully — The Great Wall had not yet been built, although some states had short defensive walls.

Tip: Reread p. 54. Luoyang referred to as the capital of Zhou

Answer: Between 770 BCE when Luoyang became the capital of Zhou, and 221 BCE when the Qin dynasty began. (It was during the Qin period that work on The great wall began.) In Dragon Dawn the states of Wei, Zhou (or Chou) and Qin (Ch'in) are at war, the Zhou capital had seen better times (p, 54) and the Qin are in the ascendancy. Super sleuths might discover that this period of war amongst the states occurred from 403 BCE until the establishment of the Qin dynasty, which would narrow the time frame considerably.

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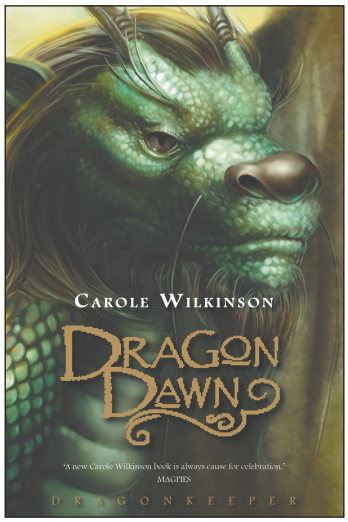

Note: To avoid confusion, alert students to the fact that English spelling of Chinese words has changed over time.

Geography

1. Compare book map, (not to scale), and a modern-day map of China

Locate capital, Beijing, on modern-day map.

- What is the name of the city where the Yangtze River enters the sea? (Shanghai)
- What is the Chinese name for the Yellow River? (Huang He or Huang Ho – English spellings vary)
- What is the name of the ocean marked on the book map? (The Yellow Sea)
- What is the name to-day of the province where Luoyang is located? (Henan)

2. Do an Internet search for Tai Shan

- What does Tai Shan mean in English? (Mt Tai or Tai Mountains)
- Where is Tai Shan located on a modern-day map? (central Shandong province just north of Tai'an city)
- Tai Shan has an ancient and sacred history. Find out some interesting information about this history.

Flags and dragon motifs

Three national flags have dragon motifs – Wales, Bhutan and (less conspicuously) Malta.

1. Wales

- Locate Wales on a world map.
- What is the capital of Wales? (Cardiff)
- Describe the flag (horizontal stripe, white over green with a red winged dragon in the centre)
- What is the flag called? (the Red Dragon of Wales)
- What have dragons got to do with Wales ? (The dragon has been a Welsh symbol since Rome occupied Wales over two thousand years ago. The Romans had dragons on their military standards)

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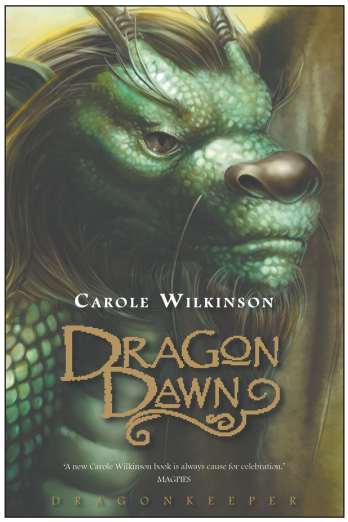

2. Bhutan

- Locate Bhutan on a world map.
- What is the capital of Bhutan? (Thimphu)
- Describe the flag (yellow over orange cut diagonally from bottom left to top right with a white wingless dragon with a jewel in each claw along the dividing colour line)
- The Bhutanese call their country Druk Yul. What does it mean in English? (Land of the Thunder Dragon)
- What, in English, is their national anthem called? (The Glorious Dragon Kingdom of Bhutan)

3. Malta

- Locate Malta on a world map
- What is the capital city (Valletta)
- Describe the flag (vertical stripe, white on the left and red on the right with the silver George Cross outlined in red in the top left hand white corner)
- What is the George Cross (a British military medal for gallantry)
- What image is depicted on the George Cross (St. George, the patron saint of England, slaying the dragon)
- What has the George Cross got to do with Malta? (After WW2 King George the VI of Britain awarded the people of Malta, which was a colony of Britain at the time, the George Cross for heroism. When Malta became independent in 1964 the George Cross was added to the flag.)

Science

A dragon should sleep through winter at the bottom of a pool. In icy water, he would enter a state of hibernation (p.2)

- What is hibernation?
- What happens to the body during hibernation?
- How do creatures prepare for hibernation?
- What is the difference between hibernation, dormancy and torpor?
- Give one example of a warm-blooded hibernator
- Give one example of a cold-blooded hibernator

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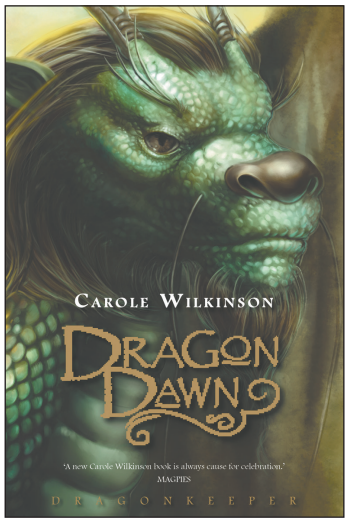

CREATIVE ARTS

Make a cover, hand-drawn or using graphics, for your dragon short story (see LITERACY)

Reread p. 97 and create a picture, hand-drawn or using graphics, of Danzi and Bingwen's dramatic aerial antics that so terrified all the soldiers that it stopped them in their tracks.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Making a Leap of Faith
Reread pp. 38-39

Group discussion:

- What does it mean to make a leap of faith?
- What is the opposite of a leap of faith? (e.g. rational decision-making)
- Is there a place for both?
- Can you think of any examples when we might need to make a leap of faith?
- Have you made a leap of faith?
- Did it turn out to be the right thing to do?
- What did you learn from the experience?

About the author

Carole Wilkinson is on record as saying she loves dragons, so it comes as no surprise that Dragon Dawn in her fifth book on the topic. It follows her award-winning Dragon Keeper trilogy and the totally absorbing and visually stunning everything-you-ever-wanted-to-know- about-dragons encyclopedia.

She is also a lover of history and situates her stories in historical settings, ancient China and ancient Egypt being her preferred periods to date. She is widely acknowledged for being meticulous in her research.

Carole came to writing nearing middle age and hasn't looked back. She has had over 30 books published, both fiction and non-fiction, and received a number of literary awards.

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