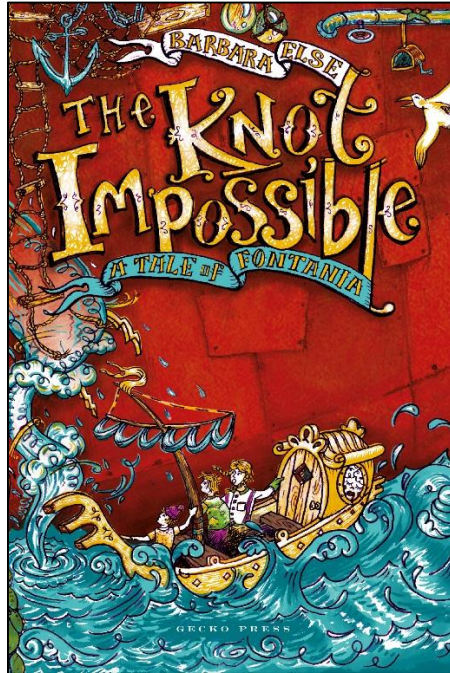


Teaching Notes

*The Knot Impossible (A Tale of Fontania)*  
by Barbara Else



**Synopsis**

Rufkin must learn to try harder. He is sent to work in a salvage yard, where vicious cave-lizards lurk in the mud, among rusting ship hulks saved for scrap.

When he hears a small voice cry “Help!” from the riverbank mangroves, Rufkin and his reluctant new neighbour, Nissy, are caught up in a perilous sea adventure that threatens to bring the end-of-days.

Rufkin, the boy who suffers stage-fright, is suddenly centre stage: the only one who can right an ancient wrong and save the kingdom.

**The Author**

Barbara Else is the author of six adult novels, and is one of New Zealand’s most respected writers. She is a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to literature, and has worked as a university tutor, editor, and freelance author. Her children’s novels, *The Travelling Restaurant*, *The Queen and the Nobody Boy* and *The Volume of Possible Endings*, have won several prominent awards. Barbara lives in Wellington, New Zealand. (Visit her blog at [www.TalesOfFontania.com](http://www.TalesOfFontania.com))

## Themes

This gripping, entertaining, action-packed book deals with several themes.

One of the main themes of the book is that of ordinary children struggling to do the right thing and prove themselves. Rufkin's lack of belief in his own abilities manifests itself in an abysmal 'Statement of Success' and crippling stage-fright. All he desires is to be loved and valued by his famous family of star entertainers and to be as brave and resourceful as his hero, Lord Hodie. Little does he know that through one act of kindness, he will be thrust into an adventure whose successful outcome will depend upon his working alongside those he hero-worships, as well as calling upon his finest acting and musical talents to save the day.

The themes of adventure, magic and fantasy are evident when Rufkin and his reluctant sidekick, the business savvy Nissy, undertake their wild adventure in order to get their charge, Vosco, to safety. Dodging nasty creatures, witnessing strange events, handling magical objects, navigating nautical mayhem and escaping the misdeeds of untrustworthy adults, they traverse a topsy-turvy magical fantasy land.

The themes of trust and loyalty emerge, particularly as the traditional roles of adults and children blur. From the inept Mucclacks to the morally-defunct Mayor Jolliman, Rufkin and Nissy realise that they must be wary of adults and can only truly depend upon themselves. The abuse of the power adults can have over children is also seen when the glamorous, but dangerous, Madam Butterly betrays their trust and uses them as pawns in her dodgy business deals.

These business deals are a direct consequence of the themes of power, greed and corruption, which are personified by Madam Butterly. Her desire for dolleros, as she attempts to emulate her heroine, Lady Gall, leads to plagues of cave-lizards, knots of ships and a vile act of kidnapping. There are adults who are trying to thwart her evil plans, such as Rufkin's hero, Lord Hodie.

The true nature of heroism is another theme explored in the book. Rufkin comes to realise that heroes are just ordinary people, only a bit stronger, like Lord Hodie or a bit more stubborn, like Queen Sibilla. In fact, it soon becomes apparent that Rufkin himself, despite being an ordinary boy, is a true hero, particularly when he embraces his theatrical background, takes centre-stage and uses his abilities and talents to save the day.

Theatricality, a further theme that is found throughout the book, is shown in various forms and guises, from the disguises Lord Hodie adopts, to the theatrical attitudes

Rufkin directs the ship's crew to embody in order to get safe passage through to rescue the loveable Vosco.

Acceptance and love are important themes that are illustrated in the book. Rufkin's acceptance of his abilities, his love of his family and his desire for their love and acceptance, partnered with his love of Vosco and their acceptance of their roles in relation to the deep-dragon, ultimately help right an ancient wrong and save the kingdom.

### Activities

1. Before reading the book, look at the cover image and title. Discuss what you think this story might be about?
2. This book is an adventure, fantasy, anti-quest novel. In pairs, research the literary genres of adventure, fantasy and the anti-quest. Find and list any examples of passages from the book that fit the criteria of these genres.
3. The book is rich with language features. From the list below, define and then find some other examples from the novel of each. List any other language features you may discover within the text.
  - Simile - 'Seagulls screamed like a delighted audience.' (p. 70)
  - Onomatopoeia - 'Even through the booming wind came the *crack!* of timber and groans of metal, the reverberating *twang!* of great ropes snapping.' (p. 122)
  - Personification - 'And the growling howl of wind at last.' (p. 119)
  - Metaphor - 'Rufkin, you are a bobbing cork.' (p. 22)
  - Neologism - 'Its wheeze was a rumtipaze, family code for *off-key, ear-hurting and jarring.*' (p. 91)
  - Puns - 'The Knot Impossible.'
4. Do you think Rufkin is a strong protagonist? Why or why not? Which other characters do you feel display strength? In pairs, write character studies of five of the main characters. Begin by making a chart to list the strengths and weaknesses of each. How do their particular strengths and weaknesses affect the part they play in the novel?
5. What does the novel say about adults and their influence over children, and the importance of adults during difficult times? List examples of episodes when adults in the novel are either a help or a hindrance to Rufkin.

6. Rufkin is a character who changes emotionally, as events unfold. What is he like at the beginning and how has he changed by the end? What are the different pressures on Rufkin through the novel? What factors lead to the decisions he makes and how does he cope with the situations he finds himself in? Discuss if, and how, any other characters change and develop throughout the book? How do you think their view of themselves has changed? In pairs, write character studies on three other main characters. Begin by making a chart to list the main character traits they display. How do their particular traits affect the part they play in the novel?
7. The book has many beautiful descriptions of places, natural phenomenon, magical inventions, people and mythical creatures, for example, The City of Spires and surrounding landscape (p. 17), the water spout (p. 120), Nissy (p. 39), the old message-bird (p. 56), the all-purpose all-weather contraption (p. 68) and the deep-dragon (p. 303). Using the author's style as inspiration, write your own descriptive paragraph or poem about a place, object or person that is important to you. Read it aloud to a classmate and then get them to draw what you have described.
8. The book is full of dramatic, highly-descriptive, suspense-filled action sequences, particularly chase and escape scenes, for example, when Rufkin and Vosco escape from the knot of ships with Harry chasing them (pp. 118-122) or when Calleena and Captain Thunderhead take Vosco from the Adventurer's Rest (pp. 234-236). Choose an action sequence from the book. Study and discuss the language the author uses. Then write a dramatic, suspense-filled action sequence of your own about something that has happened to you. Present your sequence in either a comic strip, movie storyboard or short children's picture book format.
9. The story is told in the third person. Why do you think the author chose to do this? Choose a passage about one of the main events of the novel. Re-write the passage as a first person narrative monologue in any of the main characters' voices other than Rufkin's, for example, Nissy, Harry, Vosco or Madam Butterly. Think about the kind of vocabulary your chosen character would use, and how their perspective of the event might differ from Rufkin's. Present your monologue to your class. Then compare the two versions and discuss their differences. Do you think the first person narration is more effective? Is there anything you prefer about the third person narration?
10. In pairs either, create Rufkin's Brilliant Academy - End of Year Statement of Success (p. 22), make a fanzine page for one of the characters from the book, using Rufkin's Lord Hodie fanzine as inspiration (pp. 320-323), or make a figurine of Lord Hodie like the one Rufkin keeps in his pocket (p.14).

11. Create an illustrated timeline of the main events of the novel, or choose your favourite moment from the book and create your own artistic interpretation of it, for example, a diorama, painting, model, poem, cartoon strip, movie storyboard, video, etc.
12. Debate the statement: “Money isn’t evil in itself,” said Nissy. “It’s what people do with it that might be bad.” (p. 145). Divide the class into two teams and debate the pros and cons of this statement. Find examples from the book as well as current events to back up your arguments.
13. The cover illustration, chapter openings and colour maps on the inside covers are by artist Sam Broad. What do you like/dislike about them? Design your own illustrations for two of the chapters, as well as a new cover.
14. Trace the map of Fontania from the inside cover and draw the route of Rufkin’s adventure. Create a map that extends it, showing a different part of this fantasy world. Or, choose one of the places mentioned in the book and found on the maps. Create and design an entry for a present day travel book of your chosen place. Include information, such as population size, geography, history, things of interest, weather, etc.
15. Rufkin and other characters adopt dramatic attitudes, tones and looks throughout the book, for example, ‘Attitude-respectful’ (p. 15), ‘Tone-sarcastic’ (p. 109) and ‘Look-disdainful’ (p. 147). In pairs, find more examples from the book and draw a cartoon representation of each. Then in groups, take turns to, without speaking, act out the attitudes and guess which attitude your team member is adopting.
16. This is a stand-alone adventure novel that shares the same world as the previous three Tales of Fontania books. Read one or all of the three previous novels, *The Travelling Restaurant*, *The Queen and the Nowhere Boy* and *The Volume of Possible Endings*. Write a one-page synopsis of the book or books.
17. In groups, imagine you are a film production team attempting to gain financial backing to turn *The Knot Impossible: A Tale of Fontania* into a feature film. Write up your proposal and include one or two scenes from the novel as a film script, and your choices for the soundtrack, casting, location, etc. Or imagine the novel is going to be turned into a stage play. Design a suitable set, programme notes and advertising poster for the play.
18. Write a review of the book, aiming it at the children's page of your favourite magazine, newspaper or website. What did you like about the book? Why? What did you dislike about the book? Why? Give it a rating, such as stars or a number out of ten.