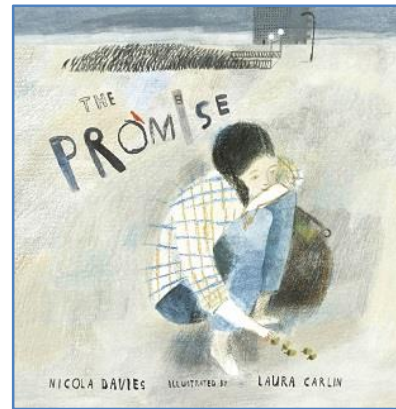Title: **The Promise**
Illustrator: **Laura Carlin**
Author: **Nicola Davies**
Publisher: **Walker Books**

First look

- *The Promise* is a fable. The story takes our understanding beyond what happens to make us think deeply about our environment, our communities and ourselves. The pictures also work to extend our thinking. It helps our understanding if we look closely and discuss the meanings and metaphors we find in both words and images.
- Start by sharing the whole book with the shadowing group – reading aloud with little interruption. Ask them to point out to each other anything that strikes them as interesting about the artwork.
- Chat in pairs or as a group about whether they enjoyed *The Promise*. What did they like or dislike and why?

Look again

Being a picturebook means that the full meaning of *The Promise* can only be fully understood by the combination of word and image. Look through the book again but this time, spend more time on each page to reflect on the use of colour, line, shape and space on each page.

- Look at the front cover first. It should give clues to the whole book. In the bleak, grey city there is a hint of optimism represented by the bright red bird. The girl has a smile on her face and she also has some colour in her shirt and jeans. But launch into the story and the cityscape in the first half of the book is dull and uniform – tiles, bricks, buildings echo each other both in colour and line. Even the people are grey and cheerless, shuffling together, like people in a trance, down under the ground. There seems to be no individuality here – no differences.
- When do any bright colours appear? Are they part of reality or a dream?
- The character of the book's narrator is presented to us through pictures. We first meet the narrator on the front cover but, the picture shows a scene several pages into the book. At the beginning of the story, all we see is a mean-looking face. Next the narrator is seen stealing from the pockets of people standing in a crowd. Then a dark and threatening image shows only a shadow trying to wrench a bag from an old lady. Not a pleasant girl. After the violent theft, look at each picture as the 'magic' acorns take effect on the girl. Gradually, page by page our narrator becomes more and more caring until she has changed her world.
- One page starts with the words: **Nothing changed at first.** But you will notice that a lot has already changed, not least the colours creeping on to the page. What is that yellow-ish shape? Is it the dog dreaming of playing hopscotch? Colours, playing, chatting, growing and – probably – dreaming all make definite appearances on the next page. As the acorns grow, the grey, lifeless city disappears and is replaced with vitality, growth, animals, birds and active, happy people.

Talk about any visual aspect of the book that interests you, i.e. endpapers, font choices, title page and layout. Do these 'extras' to the story contribute to the overall impact of the book?

Interpreting the texts
It is always beneficial, when studying a book, to use tasks which require imaginative response to encourage students to engage fully with the text. The following suggestions may help the group of young readers to become engrossed in the book.

Discussion
Talk about how the story ends. What do you think happens to the narrator? How does the story continue? Fables usually have a moral - a lesson to be learned about life. What is the moral of *The Promise*? Do you agree what the moral's message is?

Retell the tale in a different medium
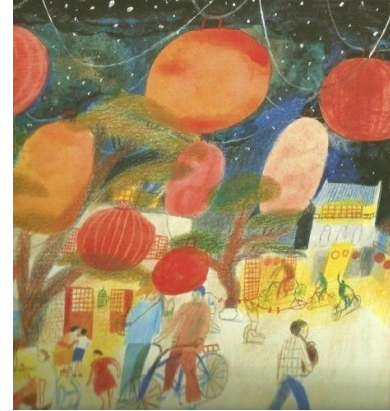Use drama, movement and/or music to retell this story.
Start by deciding three parts of the story to depict.
For example:
Scene 1. The drudgery of the city.
Scene 2. The thief in action – finishing with the promise being made to the old lady.
Scene 3. The plants grow and life begins.

Art
The use of colour is very powerful in this book. On one sheet of paper show two images similar to the first and last endpapers in the book, one showing a bleak cityscape, the other the same scene but filled with life and colour.