

# Teacher's Notes



*It's the Sound of the Thing*

Written by Maxine Beneba Clarke

Teacher's Notes by Ernest Price

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## LEARNING OUTCOMES

### RECOMMENDED FOR

Early high school-aged readers (ages 11–13, grades 7 and 8)

### KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- Learning areas: English
- General capabilities:
  - Critical and Creative Thinking
  - Personal and Social Capability
  - Intercultural Understanding

## THEMES

- Growing up
- Identity and belonging
- The role of language

## SYNOPSIS

*It's the Sound of the Thing* is an exuberant and evocative collection of poetry for young people from Maxine Beneba Clarke, one of Australia's most innovative and celebrated poets.

This extraordinary collection celebrates the joy of language and features enticing and relatable poems about everyday life – the sounds of the block, the boredom of detention and the happenings in the schoolyard. Poems about candy, peanut butter and pets. Poems about a big brother's messy room, a grandfather's fading memory and a grandmother's garden magic.

Through haiku, sonnets, narrative verse, rhyming couplets, limericks, free verse, tongue-twisters and more, Maxine invites readers to fall in love with the wonder that is poetry.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR/ ILLUSTRATOR

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**Maxine Beneba Clarke** is the author of the short fiction collection *Foreign Soil*, the memoir *The Hate Race* and the poetry collections *Carrying the World* and *How Decent Folk Behave*. Her children's picture books include the CBCA Honour book *The Patchwork Bike* and the illustrated poem *When We Say Black Lives Matter*, which was longlisted for the Kate Greenaway Medal. She is currently Poet in Residence at The University of Melbourne.

## PRIOR TO READING

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Students will come to Clarke's collection with a range of preconceived ideas about the role and nature of poetry. *It's the Sound of the Thing* offers a chance for students to reimagine their relationships with the art, and to be excited by the opportunities of word play.

### Activities

- What are students' earliest memories of poetry? Ask them to trace their initial memories of poetry, and to consider the cultural connotations of the form. Have them share their experiences with their classmates.
- Ask students to share any experiences that they have with poetry. Have they worked with particular poetic forms? Can they remember the rules and parameters of a haiku or a sonnet? What themes have they explored in their work previously?
- Screen '[What Does Poetry Mean to Me?](#)', where Clarke participates in a Red Room Poetry project. Unpack Clarke's statements about her love of poetry as a class, and discuss students' reactions to her enthusiasm for the art.
- Have students read 'A Note from Maxine', and investigate the influences Clarke lists in the first paragraph. What can they discover about *Far Out, Brussel Sprout!*? What do they know about Shakespeare's sonnets? Can they discover Linton Kwesi Johnson's influence on the development of spoken word?

## WHILE READING

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Clarke's work centres on poetry as a spoken form. It is vital that students engage with *It's the Sound of the Thing* as a living text. They should consider the ways that the text sounds when read by Clarke, by their teacher, by their peers and by themselves. Give them licence to explore the roles that rhythm, rhyme and emphasis play in shaping the audience's experience of the text.

### Activities

- Have students read the poem 'TikTok Dance' on the page, and have them note their initial observations. What do they notice about the structure of the poem? What about the word choice? How do they imagine this poem to sound?
- Now screen a video of Clarke reading '[TikTok Dance](#)'. Have students note their response to this performance. Discuss what was similar and what was different about their experience of the poem on the page and on the screen.



- As students engage with poems from the text, have them read the poems aloud. Ensure that you are culturally sensitive in how you distribute this work – do not ask students to appropriate voices and experiences that are not from their own communities.
- Allow them time and space to experiment with their vocal delivery, and scaffold their understanding of how rhythm and rhyme may work. Avoid asking students to read the text cold in front of their peers; focus on allowing students to work on their delivery, and to make the delivery their own. Encourage them to work with their peers to find a performance that feels right to them.
- Have multiple students develop vocal interpretations of the same poem, and discuss the different artistic choices that the students make as a class. How do students' interpretations of the poems change with different readings?

## THEMES

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*It's the Sound of the Thing* traverses rich thematic territory. Across the collection of 100 poems, there is a point of entry for all students. Clarke's work simultaneously celebrates the capacity of young people to consider rich, complex ideas whilst also viewing the world with the optimism and playfulness of youth.

### Activities

- Introduce students to the overarching themes detailed below, scaffolding a brainstorm about the issues and ideas associated with these concepts.
- Ask students to curate a list of poems from the collection that might align with these ideas. Students should consider the way that these ideas are explored within individual poems, and how they develop across the work as a whole.

### Growing up

Clarke explores the joys and anxieties of growing up: from the chaos of the schoolyard to the sadness of watching a grandparent die. The collection hums with the stories of moments that seem mundane until they are exposed to a child's gaze. These magical tales sit alongside reflections on momentous and life-changing events that only seem significant once they are in the rearview mirror. The collection documents the rites that constitute childhood, from the safe spaces created by trustworthy adults to the first tentative steps towards independence.

### Identity and belonging

*It's the Sound of the Thing* explores the complexities of finding a place in the world. It shines a light on the rich moments of connection that come from shared experiences, familial bonds and cultural understanding. Clarke also explores the ways that people can be ostracised by social norms and expectations, and the way that these norms can dim a child's light as they seek to balance their understanding of themselves with their place in the social world. *It's the Sound of the Thing* is a rallying cry for young people to celebrate all that makes them unique, and to disregard the heavy burden of the push to conform.

### The role of language

Clarke's collection of poems for young people is a celebration of the possibilities of language. Clarke leads by example, centring the joy of sound and experimentation. She asks students to open their imaginations and their hearts, to consider the wild and wonderful ways that they can use language to both document the world that they live in and to create the world that they want to inhabit. The work can be used to teach the power of individual poetic strategies, with a suite of poems devoted to celebrating some of the poet's most popular tools, or to look holistically at the ways that poetry lives not only on the page, but also on the



stage. Clarke seeks to empower young people to take control of their language, to bend and stretch it to fit their own purposes.

## WRITING STYLE

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*It's the Sound of the Thing* is part manifesto, opening students' eyes to the rich possibilities of the many poetic forms that Clarke explores in the text. Explicitly teach the rules and the parameters of the forms that Clarke uses throughout the text. There is capacity here to differentiate for your learners, selecting the forms appropriate to their current level of skill and knowledge.

### Activities

- Teach students the [rules and rationale of found poems](#). Have them return to the found poems in this collection. What comments do they think Clarke is making on the world around her?
- Have students consider [free verse](#). Why do they think Clarke has chosen this form for her poem 'Detention'? What about for 'The Way Down the Block'?
- Students have likely had some experience with [haiku](#) in primary school. Stretch them to consider not only the syllabic rules, but also the thematic concerns of the form. What can they notice about Clarke's use of the form in her seasonal quartet?
- Ask students to consider [poems for many voices](#). Why do they think Clarke chose this form for the poem 'Climate March Chant'?
- Work with students on understanding [rhyming couplets](#), differentiating the lesson for your learners. Focus on analysing Clarke's use of the form in 'The Poet in You' and 'Superhero Strong'. Ensure students work with reading the poems aloud to dissect the effect that Clarke achieves.
- Introduce students to the [sonnet](#). What similarities and differences can they notice between 'Blue-Tongue Lizard' and 'Grandma's Garden'?

## COMPREHENSION

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### Activities

Have students answer the following questions, organised by theme.

- **Growing up**
  - What does 'Weightless' reveal about the path from childhood to adolescence?
  - How does the seasonal haiku quartet portray the role of the seasons in our lives?
  - Why does 'Screen Time' visit multiple generations of a family?
  - Do you see yourself and your friends in the 'Climate March Chant'? Why or why not?
  - What does 'Spotify Love' suggest about youthful relationships?
  - Can you relate to the experience of 'Confiscated'? Why or why not?
  - What kind of relationships are at the centre of 'When School Went Back'?
  - How does the 'Barbershop' portray the experience of becoming an adult?
- **Identity and belonging**
  - What is the central idea explored in 'Detention'?



- How does Clarke portray the experience of a neighbourhood in 'The Way Down the Block'?
  - What role does music play in the relationships depicted in 'Sunday Music'?
  - Why does Clarke refer to several historical figures in 'We Stand as One'?
  - How does Clarke portray the grandad in 'Remembering'?
  - What does Clarke suggest about black girls' hair in 'Crown'?
  - What questions does Clarke raise about superheroes in 'Superhero Strong'?
  - Why does Clarke explore joy in 'That Black Boy Joy'?
  - What ideas does Clarke raise about belonging in 'The Best Days of Your Life'?
  - How does Clarke explore history in 'Bossa Nova'?
  - Why does Clarke focus on 'Grandma's Garden'?
  - What is the role of community in 'Black Magic Black Girls'?
- **The role of language**
    - Why does Clarke address her work to 'The Poet in You'?
    - How does Clarke explore the intersection of form and content in 'Onomatopoeia', 'Alliteration', 'Personification' and 'Idiomatic'?
    - What is Clarke's message in 'Make Art'?
    - What does Clarke suggest about the importance of books in 'There's a Shelf in the Library'?

## WRITING EXERCISE

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### Activities

- Have students create a folio of their own poetry responding to the central themes of Clarke's work. Depending on your students' readiness, you can either mandate the forms that students must use, or you can have them select from the full breadth of Clarke's work.
- Have students write analytically about Clarke's work, either in a body paragraph or an essay. Scaffold their understanding by brainstorming responses to the following prompts as a class, generating ideas and evidence from specific poems.
  - 'Clarke explores the power of poetry.' Discuss.
  - '*It's the Sound of the Thing* shows the joy to be found in language.' Do you agree?
  - 'Clarke suggests that there is wonder all around us.' Discuss.
  - '*It's the Sound of the Thing* demonstrates that it's important to be true to yourself.' Do you agree?
  - 'Clarke reflects the importance of community.' Discuss.



## ILLUSTRATION STYLE

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*It's the Sound of a Thing* is shaped by a range of line drawings that draw on the poem's subject matter. Clarke's illustrations create the sense of her work as organic, and true to the childhood experiences that she chronicles in her poetry.

### Activities

- Have students select their favourite illustrated poem. What do they notice about the interaction between the words in the poem and the illustrations?
- Have students select an unillustrated poem and illustrate it in Clarke's style.

## CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

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### Activities

- Have students create a title, cover art and illustrations for their own poetry folios. Have them work within the thematic and form boundaries of *It's the Sound of a Thing*.
- Ask students to perform at least one poem from their folio. They should work with small groups, experimenting with reading aloud. They should read their own work, and that of their peers, offering each other feedback on the most effective performance styles.
- Hold an event in class allowing students to showcase their poetry, both in performance and in the written form.

## RELATED READING

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- [What Does Poetry Mean to Me?](#) By Maxine Beneba Clarke
- [Found Poem](#) on poetry.org
- [Free Verse](#) on poetry.org
- [Haiku](#) on poetry.org
- [Poems for Multiple Voices](#) at the Illinois University School of Children's Literature
- [Rhyming Couplets](#) at Masterclass
- [Sonnets](#) on poetry.org

