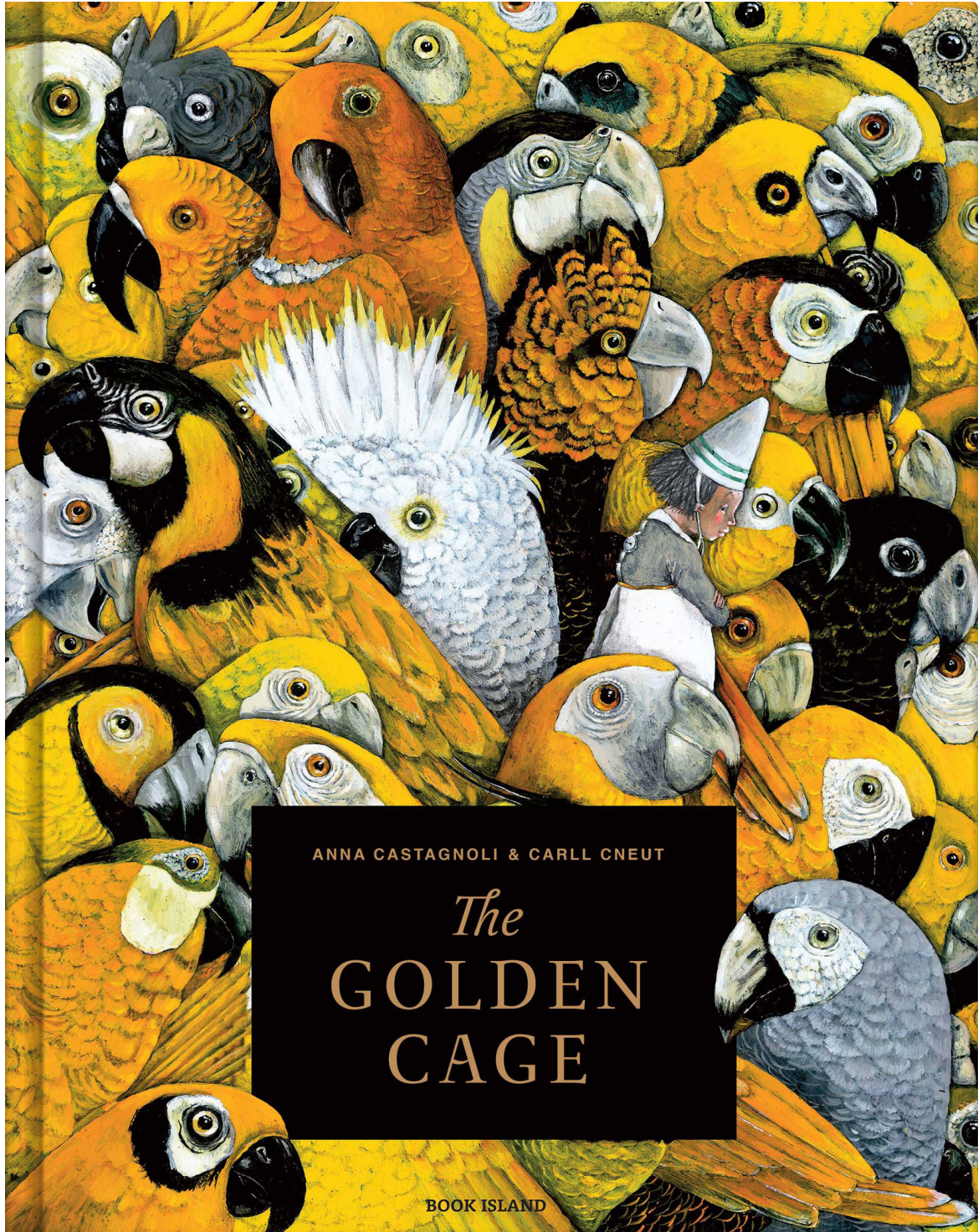


**The Golden Cage**  
**Anna Castagnoli & Carll Cneut**  
**Translated by Laura Watkinson**



**Teaching notes by Stephen Connor**

# Synopsis

*Valentina the emperor's daughter is an obsessive collector of exotic birds. Her servants track down every bird she desires - just one remains unfound: a bird that talks. Servants search far and wide to fulfill her impossible quest - and she beheads those who fail. In Valentina's palace, heads roll every day! Will the golden cage ever be filled?*

This fairy tale explores greed, spite, and a malicious - though perhaps misunderstood - main character, and gruesome details are not spared. It is illustrated in stunning detail by Carll Cneut, whose work only adds to the dramatic scale of this oversized book.

.....

This book would be enjoyed by children in Key Stage 2, who would be enamoured by its illustrations and its darker content, and could even be shared with a younger audience as part of a fairy tale unit of learning.

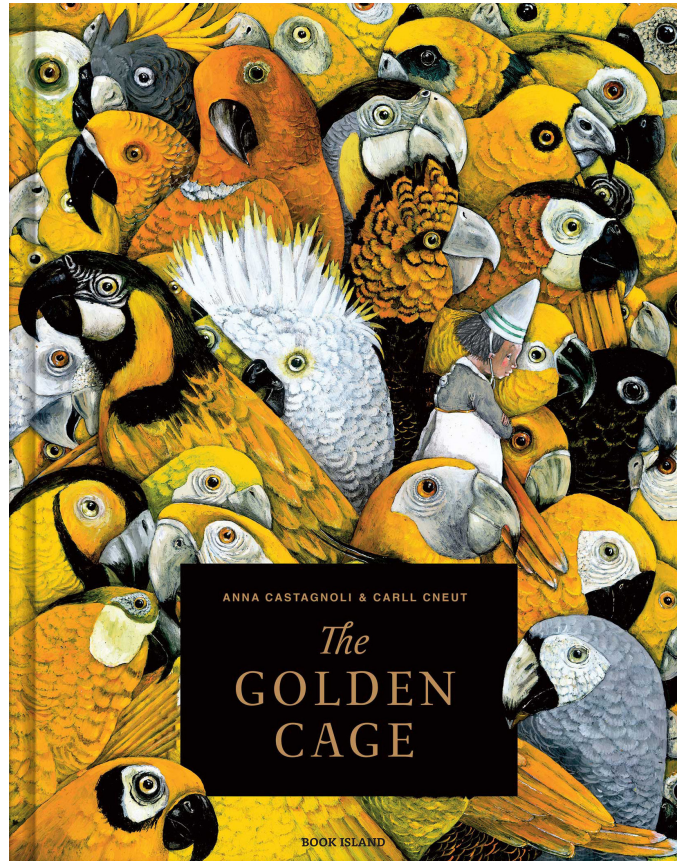
.....

**indicates an activity**

**indicates a grammar  
teaching opportunity**

[Click here](#) to read an interview with illustrator Carll Cneut about his creative processes for this book.

## Front cover



Possible questions to ask:

- *who would own a golden cage?*
- *what would they want with it?*
- *why might the illustrator have included so many birds here? What impression might he be trying to create?*

The children could make simple predictions based on the discussion here, considering what the purpose of the golden cage might be. Older children might consider the possible values or morals of someone who owns a golden cage...

## p. 2 - Begin by sharing the illustration



*What impression do we get of the little girl (Valentina) from this picture? Consider her size, position on the page, her body language...*

*What might all of the pictures tell us about Valentina?*

*How do you feel about Valentina at this moment? Why?*

*Who drew the pictures of the birds? Why?*

Once discussion has been had, read p.2. Repeat the final question above - have any children changed their minds about her? In what way might she be '*a nightmare*'? Can we relate to Valentina at all (teacher could share a time when they have been called *a nightmare* by a friend!)

Explore the use of the conjunction **but** on this page. What impact does this have on the reader?

Model an example using the **but still** example in the story:

*Valentina was known for her grand collections, but still she wanted more.*

Then try the **but most of all** template:

*She loved all of her birds, but most of all she loved the one that laid golden eggs.*

What can the children write?

## p. 4 (*In her garden...*) to p. 11 (image below)



Read the text on from p.4 onwards, pausing to talk to the children about what we are learning about Valentina - why would she want so many cages? Take time to dwell on the gorgeous artwork, particularly on the double spreads.

Consider Valentina's requests for more unusual birds. Is she realistic? Is she being deliberately difficult? Why?

At this point, the children could create their own wondrous birds for Valentina to demand. These could be portrayed through art, looking at Carll Cneut's methods in his work, or even create information texts about these created birds. See Rebecca Meaker's fantastic work on this by [clicking here](#).

Study the use of noun phrases used on p.8 - how could we describe our imagined birds? The teacher could use images or videos of existing birds here, such as a kingfisher. Develop description by focusing on one feature of the bird, then move to building similes too. This might also be a chance to write some list poetry.

*- I want a bird with azure wings / with wings that glitter like the night sky / that can slice through the water like a blade.*

## p. 12-15 - Share the illustration below, but hide the text if possible



**Who are the people in the illustration?**

**How are they made to appear? What might they be thinking?**

The children may describe the servants as being panicked, or rushing around.

The children could take the role of one of Valentina's servants here. Can they share their feelings during a freeze-frame? Or show their thoughts by using a conscience alley?

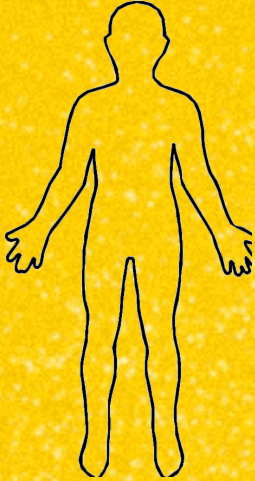
Encourage observers to ask open questions of the servants: *why do you feel panicked? What do you think will happen if you don't get the bird Valentina wants?*

Once the role play has been shared, read p.14 to the children and share the illustration on p.15. Invite opinions of Valentina.

Look at the use of relative clauses to add detail - *where it always rains, where the heat turned anyone..., that birds had built in coral islands*. Model adding own ideas about where the servants might travel, and use relative clauses to build detail.

## p. 16-25

Read p.16, perhaps sharing images of the real birds that have been captured for Valentina. Read to p.24, then ask the children to complete (either individually or as whole class) a Role on the Wall template.



On the inside of the template, record what we know for a fact about Valentina. For example, she has chopped off heads of several servants.

Ensure children are considering the difference between fact and opinion.

Once complete, ask the children to focus on the illustrations of Valentina more carefully - see resource on the following page. As before, look at size, body language, facial expression, colour. What is she thinking here? Why? Add these thoughts to the inside of the template.

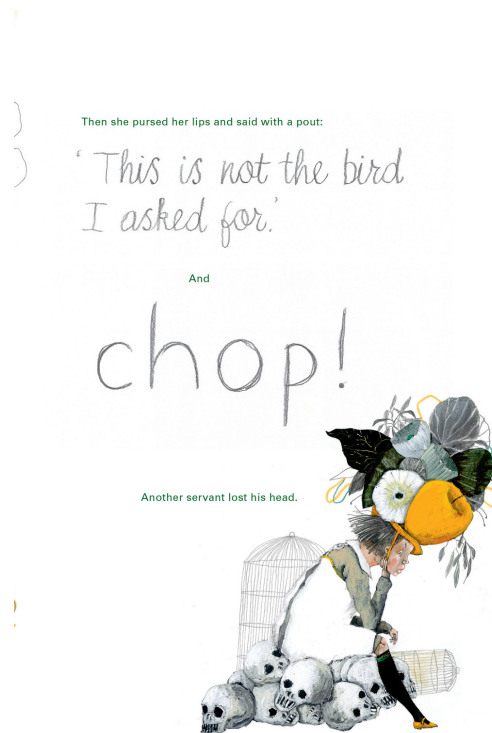
Invite discussion about Valentina. Have any children changed their opinion of her? Does anyone feel sorry for her? Raise the idea that she is never seen with anyone else (family, friends etc).

p.23 - reread the part where *Valentina paced restlessly...*

Discuss the use of the verb *paced* in this sentence. What does this tell us about Valentina's mood? Practise changing the verb to change her emotion - perhaps we could rewrite her as being excited, or annoyed, or nervous. What verb would work best here?

Similarly, we can replace the adverb *restlessly* in order to change the feel of the sentence. Collect a bank of verbs and adverbs and pair them together, considering the impact it has on the reader, and the portrayal of the character each choice offers.

Take time to look at each image carefully, especially around Valentina. Observe her staring up at the birds (p.18-19), looking smaller and in thrall to them. On p.21, she has her back to the birds - what does this suggest? And on p.25 we see Valentina surrounded by her bird portraits and her toys. Are they smiling in sympathy or mockery? Why? Might they have a story to tell?



Teaching notes written by Stephen Connor for *The Golden Cage*, written by Anna Castagnoli, illustrated by Carll Cneut, translated by Laura Watkinson and published by Book Island



## p. 26-33



Share the dream sequence that Valentina experiences on pages 26-27. Question the children as to why this bird is not as elegantly or as precisely illustrated as the others we have seen. Could this suggest anything about Valentina?

This could be an opportunity for a shared writing session. As a class, Valentina's frustrations about her daily life could be written about in a short introductory paragraph. Aim for negativity, bitterness and general rudeness!

Following this, a second paragraph could be written, showing her newfound optimism after meeting the talking bird.

It might also be possible to write in role as Valentina as she prepares her speech (p.28) - consider formality, tone, and vocabulary, and why Valentina would choose to speak in a certain way at this time.

A shared writing session would offer a range of teaching points for grammar, from sentence structure to punctuation, formality to verb tenses. An example is on the following page, but make this suit the needs of your class.

## Example diary entry

*Every day, I make life as easy as possible for my simple servants: find me a bird to fill the golden cage. How hard could it be?*

*And every day, they fail me. Their pathetic attempts at capturing rare, exotic and beautiful birds have left me wallowing in misery. They know how much I want a special bird. They aren't trying hard enough. Do they really think I wouldn't notice that the bird they claim to have a coral beak isn't just a common cardinal? I'm not stupid! Yet they try and fool me...so I chop their heads off. Simple, really.*

*Last night, however, I finally realised which bird it is I want - no, need. A talking bird. It came to me in a dream and it was GLORIOUS. She treated me with the respect I deserve, she told me how much she loved me, and she made me feel...good. Now I will bring her to me. I cannot wait. The talking bird will be mine, and so will true happiness.*

## p. 34-41



Pause at p. 34-35 - why has the choice been made to present this double spread as an almost-blank page? Why no illustrations? Consider what is happening in the text and how it might be reflected in the illustrations (or lack thereof).

Why has *CHOP CHOP CHOP* been included so often? What does the repetition imply? Encourage the children to ponder on whether Valentina cares about these heads rolling, and how this is implied in the text.

p.38 - introduction of the servant boy. Here, linger over the description of his eyes - what could we predict about the boy? What might he try to do?

In pairs, children could perform the interaction between Valentina and the servant boy. Focus on how one might talk to the other, and why that might be. Encourage emphasis and intonation - this could be modelled, and clues could be taken from how the text is presented too.

Speech punctuation and its various conventions could be explored here, looking at how a new line is used when changing a speaker, as well as the punctuation involved. How would each character say their words? Which verbs could be used?

## p. 42-43



Read p.43 and return to the Role on the Wall image created previously. Do we see a change in Valentina here? If so, how could we describe what we have seen? Has anybody changed their opinion of Valentina now? Why? Why not?

Observe the final two double spreads (p.42/43 with the text, then p.44/45 afterwards). Allow children time to examine each - what do they notice?

***Can we see the outlined tree on p.42 has been filled in on p.44? What might this symbolise?***

***What do we notice about Valentina's hair across the two double spreads? What does this tell her about her personality?***

***What might the empty, abandoned cages tell us about what has happened from the time Valentina got the egg to the 'present' moment?***

Before reading the final two pages, encourage the children to predict how they think the story might end. Will Valentina find happiness? Has she been tricked? What motive would the servant boy have had?

Read p.46-47 and take feedback from the children. Use the opener of *The end of the story is never the same. There are those who say...* and invite the children to work on their own ending.

# Valentina



Invite discussion around the character of Valentina. Is she a 'good' character, a 'bad' one, or something in between?

Use the statements below to discuss Valentina. This could be done in groups, with each reporting back to the whole class, or by using a 0-10 continuum, whereby children stand next to the number that represents how much they agree or disagree with a statement.

**Valentina is a lonely girl who just wants to be loved.**

**The servant boy tricked Valentina to exact revenge.**

**Valentina got what she deserved at the end of the story.**

**Valentina was unhappy because of how much she owned.**

**I feel sorry for Valentina.**

**Valentina was spoilt by her parents; that's why she mistreated her servants.**

These statements could also be used to stimulate debate in the classroom - encourage the children to use what they have read and seen to support their views.

# Endpapers

For Amos Saul Winston - C.C.  
For Dr Filippa Gabrielli - A.C.



Prior to the lesson, spend time reading about endpapers and the role they offer in children's picture books. Book Island books tend to have a strong emphasis on endpapers. In *The Golden Cage* we see at the beginning an 'empty' bird, perhaps hinting at the missing bird in Valentina's life, while the rear endpaper is of a bird free of its cage.

Discuss endpapers with the children, and allow them to explore examples from a range of picture books.

Discuss with the children the idea of endpapers: what their purpose is, perhaps personal favourites, and examples from within the classroom.

Challenge the children to create their own endpapers for *The Golden Cage*. Allow them choice in the medium they use, but gently encourage them to draw symbolically, and to avoid giving the story away. Feathers, cages, and skulls could all be discussed...

**Which images will you choose to include? Why?**

**What colour scheme will you use? Why?**

**Share your work with Book Island via email  
[info@bookisland.co.uk](mailto:info@bookisland.co.uk) or Twitter  
[@bookislandbooks](https://twitter.com/bookislandbooks).**



Co-funded by the  
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