

# Lizard's Tale

## WENG WAI CHAN

ISBN 9781925603910

RRP AU\$16.99

Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 9+

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### CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.

### SYNOPSIS

Lizard is an orphaned green-eyed boy living in a room above Mak's Tailor Shop in bustling, noisy Chinatown. His guardian, Uncle Archie has disappeared and his friend Lili protects him from the boys on the street who call him 'half-half boy' because he is part English, part Chinese.

It is 1940 and in the British colony of Singapore the Malay, Indian and Chinese population live under the rule of the British Empire. Imperial Japan has invaded China to the north and Singapore is bracing for invasion. When Lizard steals a box from the Raffles Hotel for one of the local crime bosses, he doesn't know that it contains a Japanese code book, wanted by both Japanese and British spies. What follows is a tale of spies, intrigue and adventure in the lead-up to the Japanese invasion of Singapore.

This is a story of spies, kidnapping, solving a mystery and finding a lost family member. It also explores themes of race, empire, friendship and belonging in Singapore in the final years of the British Empire.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Weng Wai Chan was born in Singapore and spent her childhood there. She now lives in Auckland. *Lizard's Tale* is her first book.

### BEFORE READING

1. What can you tell about the plot, characters and setting of *Lizard's Tale* from the front cover?
2. As a class explore the place the novel is set. Locate Singapore, Japan, Malaysia and India on a map of the world. Now share a map of Asia from before 1939. Compare this map with a modern day map. As a class identify what has changed and what has stayed the same.
3. *Lizard's Tale* is set in Singapore about 80 years ago. Some of the places in the book still exist. Using search terms such as 'historic Singapore photographs' look up images of historical Singapore online and create a poster. You may wish to include Chinatown, Raffles Hotel, Changi Prison, Malay stilt houses, emporiums and the Singapore harbour in your search.
4. *Lizard's Tale* is a spy story. As a class or in groups list words and images you associate with spies and spying. Talk about codes and how, and why, coded messages might be used by spies.

### WHILE READING

1. 'Lizard looked down at his old wet shirt, his too-large shorts and his dirty feet. His satchel hung in front of him and he clutched it tight as shame at his shabbiness bloomed hot in his chest' (p.6). Why does Lizard feel so ashamed when he meets Georgina for the first time? Describe Georgina. Do you like her?



2. 'Lizard forced himself not to think about his uncle when he was on a job—Uncle Archie would be disappointed if he knew Lizard did jobs like this' (p.16). Lizard lives in Chinatown where he sometimes works for the crime boss Boss Man Beng. Imagine you are Lizard. Write a letter to Uncle Archie about living in Chinatown and the work you do. Explain why you are doing this work.
3. As you read, collect words that are unfamiliar. Then look up their definitions and create a glossary. Your words could include: Gunjin, Hokkien, House-boy, Hijab, Kagi, Singapore Sling, pink faced snow monkeys. Compare your list to the glossary on pages 307 and 308.
4. Make a menu using all the food Lili and Lizard eat on their adventures in Chinatown. Draw a picture of each dish.
5. What are Sir Wilbur Willoughby's plans for Lizard at the end of the book? Why does he fail? Do you think Lili did the right thing by telling Uncle Archie that Lizard was going to be put into the Changi detention centre?

## AFTER READING

### CHARACTER

1. Create a relationship chart with Lizard at the centre, plotting all the significant people who come into Lizard's life during this story.
2. Choose a character and describe how he or she changes over the course of this book. Use the following sentences as an example.
  - Uncle Archie's strengths and weaknesses are....
  - Uncle Archie's problem is...
  - Uncle Archie solves the problem by...
  - Uncle Archie changes over time...
3. Who is your favourite character from *Lizard's Tale*? Write about why you like him or her.
4. Some of the characters have nicknames (for example Lizard, Boss Man Beng, Buck Tooth and Brylcreem). Make up nicknames for some of the other characters, for example Uncle Archie, Roshan, Lili and Georgina.

### STYLE & STRUCTURE

1. *Lizard's Tale* is a spy story. Table 1.1 overleaf lists the type of things that are usually in spy stories. Some of them may be the same as those you listed in question 4 of Before Reading. Find an example of each of the characteristics from *Lizard's Tale* and fill in the table.
2. Each chapter's title gives a hint about what is going to happen. Choose a chapter heading and write what it tells you about the story.

## THEMES

### Identity & belonging

1. Georgina tells Lizard, 'Don't tell me I don't belong here! I don't belong anywhere!' (p.205) Lizard is called 'half-half boy' by the boys in Chinatown (p.22). He says, 'I'm...I don't know', when he is asked whether he is Chinese or English (p.7). 'They had never discussed it, but Lizard knew that Lili's whole family would disapprove of her friendship with him. Lili was fully Chinese; Lizard wasn't. Lili had a family; Lizard didn't. Lili wasn't dirt poor; Lizard was' (p.20). Why do Georgina and Lizard feel they don't belong? Are there other characters in the book who feel the same way?
2. 'Being reminded of his uncle so unexpectedly made his chest ache in a way that he couldn't explain.' (p.16). Describe how Lizard feels about Uncle Archie. Why are the blue trilby and the curry puffs important to Lizard? Do you have any special objects, meals or food that you associate with a family member you are close to?
3. 'I've lied to my family and friends for years', said Miss Adelia. 'My mother lives in Derbyshire. She thinks I teach English at a girls' school. Which I do, but she doesn't know I also teach breaking and entering, weapon handling and codebreaking' (p. 214). Lili, Georgina, Miss Adelia and Miss Neha all have secrets they keep from their families. How are these girls and women expected to behave? How do they actually behave? How does being a woman or girl help their work as spies? Find one example for each character.

### Race & empire

1. 'We've been taking over countries for centuries. That's what an empire is, Sebastian' (p.83). Britain and Japan have both taken over other countries to create empires. As a class discuss what an empire is.
2. 'Lili looked at Lizard and Roshan. Why, she wondered, was the idea of Roshan being served by an Englishman so funny? Because the English were in charge. Exactly why were they in charge?' (p.291). Are the British, Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Malay population of Singapore treated equally in *Lizard's Tale*? Find examples to answer this question.
3. Re-read chapter 23 'A Question of Freedom'. Find two examples from this chapter of the characters presenting ideas about freedom. Is Australia a free country? What does freedom mean to you?

### Friendship

1. What are the barriers to friendship between Georgina, Lili, Lizard, Roshan and Brylcreem? Hint: think about their family backgrounds and where they live. How do they overcome these barriers?
2. Lizard and other young characters in the novel face many challenges in their daily lives. How are their challenges different from the ones you face?

What are these challenges and how does friendship help them face these challenges?

- In pairs, one student pretends to be Lizard and one pretends to be Lili. Write a letter to your partner thanking them for their friendship.

### RESPONDING

- Choose one of the action sequences in the novel and draw it as a cartoon. For example:
  - Lizard returning the box.
  - Escaping from Tanaka's Emporium.
  - Lili attacking the Nakajima in his photographic studio.
  - Uncle Archie being rescued from drowning.
- Design a 'wanted' poster for one of the spies in *Lizard's Tale*.
- Make a code using digits to replace letters. For example, 1 = A, 2 = B. Write short messages using the code that Lizard and Lili might send to each other.
- 'The gamekeeper says that autumn is coming so get marmalade' (p.107). This is a coded message Uncle Archie tells Lizard to pass onto Max Ops. Uncle Archie is the gamekeeper. Autumn is his mission. Marmalade is a message telling Max Ops to set up a meeting or extract an agent. The plot of *Lizard's Tale* revolves around the theft of a Japanese code book and spying. In small groups, give yourself codenames and make up your own code language. Write messages in code to each other.
- Write an advertisement for the Maximum Operations Enterprise (MOE). Your aim is to recruit young people into MOE. What personal qualities and skills should young spies have?
- Research what happened in Singapore between 1942 and 1948. Prepare an illustrated timeline of events as a class. Include information about what role Australia played in these events.

Table 1.1

Spy story characteristics	Example from <i>Lizard's Tale</i>
Action and adventure	
Characters with a mission	
Good and bad groups	
Spies that are 'good guys'	
Spies often work for an organisation	<i>e.g. Lili works for MOE as a British trained spy.</i>
Lots of twists and turns before justice is obtained	
A challenging mystery	<i>Who is the Japanese spy?</i>
Spy fiction is usually set in the past or the present	
Main characters with above average abilities	

Table 1.2

Lizard's Room	Georgina's Room	Chinatown	Raffles Hotel
'Nobody paid him any attention as he went down the narrow corridor to his dark, stuffy cubicle.' p.38	'He glanced into the bedroom and saw two beds, each draped with mosquito netting that trembled in the breeze from the fans'. p.4	'Dogs barking, cats wailing, men stumbling from opium dens, or still gambling and laughing and arguing and cooking and eating.' p.42	'Candlelit tables glowed under a starry sky, and Chinese lanterns hung between the palm trees.' p.218