

Teachers' Notes
for
Plato the Platypus
Plumber (Part-time)

Author: Hazel Edwards

Illustrator: John
Petropoulos

SYNOPSIS

Plato the Platypus Plumber (Part-time) is the story of a young boy called Zanzibar and his imaginary friend, Plato the Platypus, who has a tool-kit stocked with interesting items. Plumber Plato fixes taps and pipes but he also fixes grumpy people and he's always on call. When things go wrong around Zanzibar's house Plato helps solve the problems, along the way teaching Zanzibar some useful water conservation skills.

LOOKING AT THE TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Compare the first illustration of the flowing creek with the one later in the book when Plato is swimming home up the creek. What differences can you see? What effect do you think this could have on Plato, and other animals that live in or near the creek?
2. Plato is a plumber. What is he doing when Zanzibar first calls him? What has he used to fix the pipe?
3. Plato is sometimes chased by 'the ferals'. What are they? How do you know this?
4. How has the illustrator shown the feral's surprise on the page where Plato tricks it?
5. Which of the items in Plato's tool-kit do you think ordinary plumbers might use? Which items do you think they would not use?
6. In your own words, describe Zanzibar and his family. How many family members does he have? What do his family members like doing?
7. How do Zanzibar and his family use the leftover water, after Plato has fixed the broken shower hose? (Hint: they do more than one thing with it.)
8. Compare the picture of Plato swimming home up the creek with the illustration on the next page. What effects has the drought had? How can you tell this from the illustrations?
9. What has happened to Plato's foot on the page after he fixes the toilet? How does Zanzibar help him?
10. At the end of the book, what is Zanzibar's class learning about? Can you find Plato anywhere in the picture?
11. Plato says he is a monotreme. Look up 'monotreme' in a dictionary. What does it mean? Which other Australian animal, apart from the platypus, is a monotreme?

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

1. In the book, Plato describes some of the things that have changed since 'Before the Drought'. What other effects can drought have on the environment?
2. Drought doesn't only affect the environment – it can affect our everyday lives too. In what ways can it affect farmers? How does it affect people living in cities?
3. Throughout the book, Plato helps to save water by fixing leaking pipes, hoses and water tanks. Can you think of any other ways you could save water around the house?
4. Zanzibar's family also makes good use of water by recycling it. What are some ways you could reuse waste water around your home?
5. Plato faces threats like littering, feral animals and pollution of the waterways. What other problems might face native wildlife?
6. What are some ways that people could help protect wildlife? What are some things that *you* could do to help?
7. Sometimes Zanzibar's family members get upset or grumpy. How does Plato help?
8. Do you think this would work in real life? If not, what are some ways you could help to solve arguments or cheer up family members in real life?
9. When Zanzibar has a problem he talks to Plato. Write down the names of at least three people you could talk to if you have a problem, or if you are upset about something.

CREATIVE RESPONSE

1. Design a new tool-kit for Plato, with extra items that he could put in it. (Some of these could be real tools, but others could be made up.) Label each item with its name and a description of what Plato would use it for. If you have given the tool-kit or any of the items special features, make sure you describe them too. Remember that a platypus is amphibious (it goes underwater as well as on land), so the tool-kit may have to be waterproof.
2. Draw a cartoon strip showing one of Plato's adventures – it could be one of the adventures mentioned in the book, or a made-up one. (If you create a new adventure for Plato, it should still be about feral animals, leaking objects or littering.) Make sure you clearly show the events that take place, and how the adventure ends.

3. Sketch or paint a picture of what you think Plato's burrow would be like. It should still be shaped like a real platypus burrow, but you can include any extra features that you think Plato would add to his house.
4. Make a poster telling people either how to save water around their houses, or how to help protect native animals. Make the poster bright and colourful, but remember to include information as well. Once you have finished, ask your teacher if you can put it up on the classroom wall. Maybe you could create a class poster wall.

RESEARCH

1. Platypuses are very unusual animals. Find as much information as you can about their physical features, habitat, lifecycle, food and predators, and put together a slideshow (including visuals) about them to present to your class.
2. Droughts are very common in Australia. Do some research and list as many droughts as you can that have occurred in Australia over the years. Draw a timeline and mark these droughts in, making sure you write the years of the droughts and which state or states they happened in.
3. In groups of three or four, pick either the most recent or one of the most severe droughts in your state and research it. Find out how long it lasted, the effect it had on crops and livestock, if it led to any other natural disasters (such as bushfires or dust storms), and how it ended. Now present a TV news report about the drought to your class. One group member could be the news presenter and others could be farmers, scientists or politicians who are being interviewed about the drought. If you'd like to, you can also use props and costumes.
4. Research different ways to save or recycle water, or to make recycled or salty water drinkable. Who developed these methods? How long have they been in use? How well do they work? Are they cheap or expensive? Take down notes in dot point form, then share the information you've found with a friend.
5. Plato the Platypus shares his name with a historical Greek man called Plato. Find out who the historical Plato was. When was he born? Where did he live? What is he famous for? Why do you think Hazel Edwards named the platypus in the story after him? Give a short speech to your class, explaining what you found out.
6. Find out more about the author and the illustrator. For somewhere useful to start, try visiting Hazel's website at <http://www.hazeledwards.com>, and a page about John at <http://au.linkedin.com/pub/john-petropoulos/13/187/695>. You could also check the library for other books they've written or illustrated.

CREATIVE WRITING

1. Imagine you are Plato the Platypus and write a diary entry describing the different things you did today: the problems you fixed and the other animals you met, as well as what you did in your spare time. Try to make your diary entry as exciting as possible.
2. Write a short story about another of Zanzibar and Plato's adventures, where something goes wrong at Zanzibar's house and he has to call Plato to help him fix it. Before you begin, plot out what will happen in the story: the introduction, the complication, the climax and the resolution. Remember to use all five of your senses – sight, touch, taste, hearing and smell – to describe things in your story.
3. Pretend you are a journalist from your local newspaper, interviewing Plato about his job and the different ways he helps people. Write an article about him. Make sure you use the five Ws – who, what, when, where and why – when you are describing events. Pick an attention-grabbing title for your article. What photographs would you take to go with your article?
4. Pretend you are one of Zanzibar's classmates and write a letter or email to your local councillor explaining how important you think it is to protect local wildlife and keep waterways clean.

MORE FUN FACTS AND ACTIVITIES

Hazel Edwards' Research

Before writing this story Hazel had to find out lots of facts about platypuses, even though Plato the character is imaginary. She talked to plumbers about their job. She visited the storm water drains with Knox council engineers because platypuses were returning to the city waterways. She met Platypus Watch enthusiasts who 'tag' platypuses with microchips to monitor their movement and lifespan.

These are some of the facts she found out:

Platypus Facts

- Platypuses have a sixth sense: electro-receptors, which detect the movement of food in the water.
- Predators/threats to platypuses include feral cats, foxes, domestic dogs, chemicals, fishing nets and rubbish such as plastic six-packs.

- Cleaner urban creeks and waterways attract platypuses. Their presence in city waterways is an indication of lessening pollution. A very young platypus was seen ‘doing laps’ in a suburban pool. Another was seen near an airfield runway.
- Platypuses can stay submerged for up to 14 minutes.
- Their life expectancy is 13 years in the wild.
- They are nocturnal, and spend 99% of the time out of sight.
- They are one of only two mammals that lay eggs. Female platypuses lay 1-3 eggs.
- They are a living fossil.
- They feed only in water.
- They have a skin-soft duckbill, which is sometimes injured by glass splinters.
- They have a dark brown back and a belly of red and gold.
- It is possible to become a friend of the Platypus Society.
- Platypuses are at the top of the fresh water food chain.
- They are often confused with the water rat.
- Their scientific name is Ornithorhynchus Anatinus, formerly Paradoxus.

Feral Facts

- ‘The ferals’ are ex-domestic cats that roam bicycle paths and walkways near platypus creeks. They attack and damage platypuses, especially on their soft duckbills.

Why did Hazel Choose to Write About a Platypus?

- Her grandma taught her the ‘proper’ name for the platypus, ‘Ornithorhynchus’, and it always interested her (even if it is hard to say!).
- Eco-balance is important to platypus survival, and emotional balance is important for kids in families.
- She liked the fanciful aspect of making it a plumber-fixer, both physically and emotionally; a great problem-solver.
- There is increasing interest from children due to publicity about micro-tagging and the reappearance of the platypus in urban waterways. Some schools already monitor local platypuses.

Hazel’s Platypus-Linked Extension Activity

Try making your own (electronic and board) games based on platypus facts. Here are some different things the games could include:

- Navigation skills: finding a way through the waterways and pipes, or tracking a ‘tagged’ platypus for a special reason.
- Visual rewards: for example, something could wave in encouragement or allow the user bonuses or points to ‘move’ a certain distance down the creek.

- Discriminatory skills: for example, matching or recognising creek-side animals, ferals, types of pollution or unusual debris in storm drains (plastic money, cans, rings etc.)
- Mobile Phone Rap: how to get a ringing phone out of a dry, enclosed gutter where the owner has dropped it.
- A matching game with one player against the computer, or with two players. Match animal names against habitats, for example water rat/burrow.
- Guessing: 'Where is the blockage?' Guessing sizes and shapes and weights.
- Water meals: choices and consequences. How a platypus finds food.
- Ferals: cats threatening and chasing platypuses.
- Unusually shaped plumber's tools: matching items to container shapes.
- Computer camera machine which goes down pipes: deducing and matching the outlines of obstacles (sludge, broken pipes etc.).
- Map reading: for example, following directions to find the right house with the water problems.