

# TEACHING NOTES

## *The Garbage King* Elizabeth Laird



“People often ask me where I get my ideas from. ‘They come from the same place as my dreams,’ I say. So where do we get our dreams from? They come from the people we meet, the places we know, the things that have happened to us, and, above all, the feelings we experience. *The Garbage King* was born out of that mixture of people and places and events. It just needed a flash of inspiration to tie it all together into a story...” - Elizabeth Laird

### About *The Garbage King*

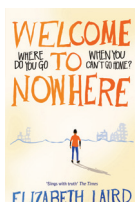
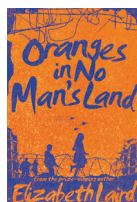
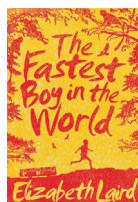
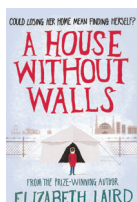
Inspired by the true story of an African childhood lived on the edge of destitution, *The Garbage King* takes readers on an unforgettable emotional journey.

When Mamo's mother dies, he is abandoned in the shanties of Addis Ababa. Stolen by a child-trafficker and sold to a farmer, he is cruelly treated. Escaping back to the city, he meets another, very different runaway. Dani is rich, educated - and fleeing his tyrannical father. Together they join a gang of homeless street boys who survive only by mutual bonds of trust and total dependence on each other.

### About Me

Here's a picture of me, just in case you're wondering what I look like. I've been writing novels for more than 30 years now. A lot of them are still in print, and you can find out more about them on my website [www.elizabethlaird.co.uk](http://www.elizabethlaird.co.uk).

I've travelled all over the world in pursuit of adventures and stories, so take a look at my other books if you'd like to know more.



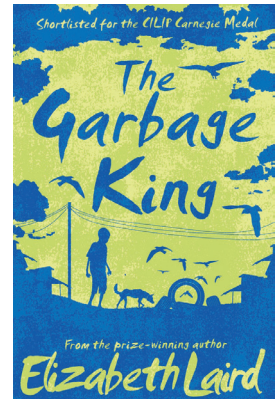
  
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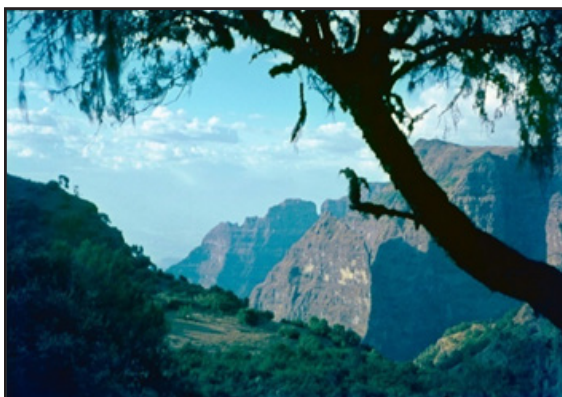
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## Ethiopia: A Great Country

- Ethiopia is a big country in Africa. The capital city is called Addis Ababa.
- More than 100 million people live in Ethiopia. There are fourteen regions, and the people in each region have their own special ways of doing things.
- More than 70 different languages are spoken in Ethiopia. Some people are Christian, some are Muslim and some follow other religions.
- The highlands and the mountains in the middle of the country are cool and pleasant to live in, but the lowlands are very hot. The Danakil Desert in Ethiopia is one of the hottest places on Earth! In the picture below, the white streaks in the desert look like water, but they're actually dried-up salt.



Ethiopian Mountains

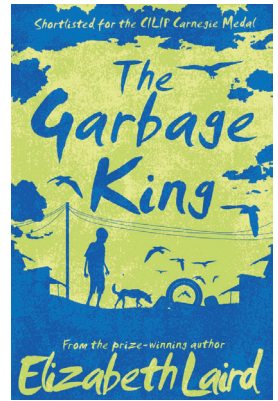


The Danakil Desert



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## Special Ethiopian Stories and Pictures

Ethiopians are wonderful poets and storytellers. You can read some of their stories on this website:  
[www.ethiopianfolktalesforkids.com](http://www.ethiopianfolktalesforkids.com)

For hundreds of years, Ethiopians have been painting beautiful pictures on the walls of their churches and in the pages of their handwritten Bibles and storybooks. The picture on the left shows characters from the Bible. It was painted 600 years ago. The church the right is 800 years old. It's carved out of solid rock. Every detail, inside and out, is perfect.



## Ethiopia Long Ago

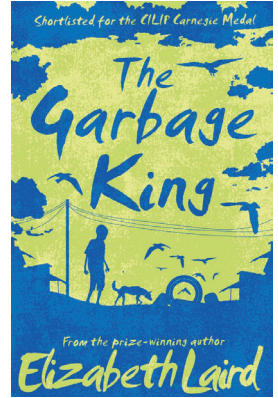
Ethiopia has a long and noble history. Great monuments, castles and churches still exist from more than 1,000 years ago.

For two thousand years, Ethiopia was ruled by emperors. The last one was called Haile Selassie. He ruled for a very long time. He tried to make Ethiopia more modern, but he couldn't change things fast enough. When he was already old and tired, the climate was beginning to change, and it didn't rain for a long time. The farmers couldn't water their crops, so the harvest failed and there wasn't enough food. Many people died of hunger. When this happens, it's called a 'famine'.



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Some people thought that the Emperor didn't care about the famine and didn't help people enough. They started a revolution, to take away his power and put another kind of government in place – one that would be fair to everyone. Unfortunately, the 'revolutionary' government became very severe and cruel. Anyone who disagreed with the new rulers was put in prison or even shot. There were more terrible famines and times of war.

## *Ethiopia Today*

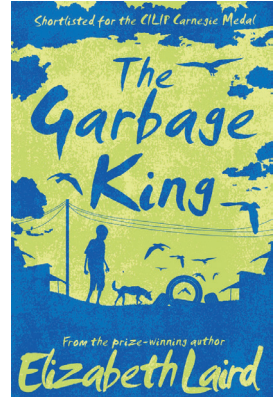
- Today, Ethiopia is one of the fastest growing countries in Africa. Addis Ababa is a busy modern city with motorways and high-rise buildings. There are new universities and schools in every big city.
- But problems still remain. Life for farmers in the countryside is still very hard. Farmers' children, like the boy in the second picture, often start looking after the family's sheep when they are only four or five years old.



- Climate change is making things worse on the farms because sometimes there is not enough rain. People are always afraid of another famine.

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- Life is better for most people in the towns and cities. Like every other country in the world, Ethiopia has rich people, poor people, and many in the middle who have good jobs, nice homes and happy families. The family in this picture is offering delicious Ethiopian coffee to their guest, in a special 'coffee ceremony'.

## *Children on the Streets in Addis Ababa*

In every country, some families go through bad times and parents can't look after their children. Unfortunately, when this happens in Ethiopia, there are no social services to step in and take the children into care. Some find their way to Addis Ababa and other big cities and try to manage by themselves. They live on the streets, looking for food in the bins behind restaurants; they beg, or they do little jobs, like guarding cars while their owners go shopping. At night, they have to sleep out on the streets. Sometimes it's very cold – cold enough that ice can form on the ground. Street children learn to rely on each other to survive. They often form groups and look out for each other. They share food and clothing, and try to help each other when they're sick.



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### *Why I Wrote The Garbage King*

I got to know a gang of boys while I was living in Addis Ababa as a teacher a long time ago. Every Saturday, when I went to buy my food at the grocery store, they would dash up to my car, offering to guard it for a few coins. Sometimes I'd ask them if they'd like a ride. They'd jump in the back of the car and we'd go for a drive around town.

I met up with another gang of boys when I went back to Ethiopia thirty years later. They showed me where they slept, introduced me to their dog (called Suri) and told me about their lives. I asked if they would mind if I wrote a story based on what they'd said. They didn't mind at all.

One little boy in particular I shall never forget. He had lost his front milk teeth, so I think he was about six years old.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he replied. "My mother died before she could tell me."

I asked him what he wanted to do when he grew up.

"I want to be like that movie star Jackie Chan," he said.

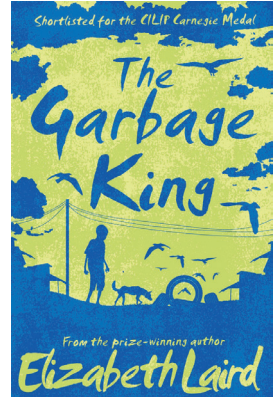
"You've been to the cinema to see his movies?" I asked.

"No, but there's a big picture downtown of a man kicking and flying through the air. I want to be like him." A bad cough interrupted him. He didn't live long after that. I based the character of Karate in the book on that little boy, and I gave him a name that I think he would have liked.

Later I met up with two grown-up men who, when they were boys, had begged from me on the street thirty years earlier. They had both done very well. One was a lorry driver. The other ran his own tourism company. They showed me that happy endings can happen.

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## Together We Learn

Together We Learn is a brilliant small charity which supports education in Ethiopia through links with British schools and teachers. Without their help, some of the students they support would have to fend for themselves as Mamo and his gang do. Together We Learn makes links with UK primary and secondary schools, and many British students and teachers have visited schools in Ethiopia and are still supporting education there.

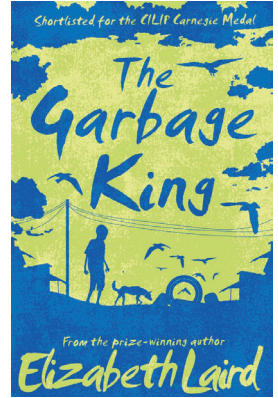
If you want to find out more about how your school could join in, go to their website at: <https://twlethiopia.org>. You never know – it could be the start of something exciting!





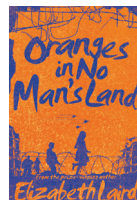
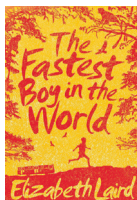
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### Discussion Notes

1. Imagine what it feels like to be snatched from your ordinary life, taken far away, and sold to someone you don't know. How would you feel?
2. Which do you think is easier for a boy without a family of his own in Ethiopia: life in the countryside or life in the city?
3. How do Mamo and the gang of street boys manage to find enough food to eat?
4. Do you think that Million is a good leader of the gang? In what ways?
5. Not all the boys in the street gang are without families. Dani has a father, a mother and a little sister, but he still chooses to run away and live on the street. Why? Pretend you are Dani. Write a letter to your father, explaining why you felt you had to run away from home.
6. Dani can read and write, and he has skills that he can use to earn money. How do you think your education will help you when you grow up?
7. Some people end up living on the street even in rich countries like ours. Why do you think that is?



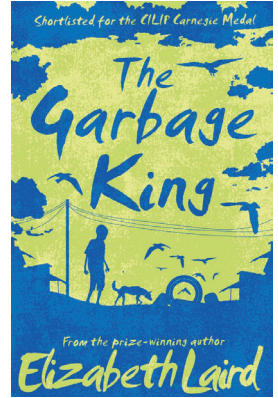
  
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## Keyword Glossary

**Emperor:** Somebody who controls an 'empire' or, more generally, has complete control of a country or region.

**Famine:** Severe hunger affecting a large number of people, for a long period of time, because of a lack of food. Famine can be caused by many things, including poverty, drought, crop failure, war and natural disasters, or a combination of factors.

**Revolution:** Causing/involving total change from the current state. A person can be referred to as a 'revolutionary' if they are engaged in this change.

**Terrorism:** The use of violence and intimidation to create fear amongst civilians in order to get a message across.

## Curriculum Links

### Upper KS2 - years 5 and 6:

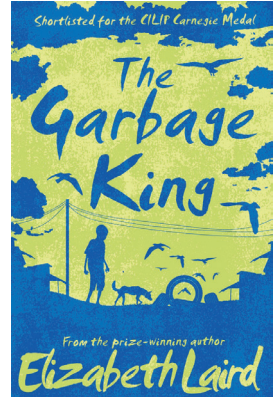
- Reading
- Writing
- History
- Geography:
  - Locational Knowledge
  - Human Geography

### KS3:

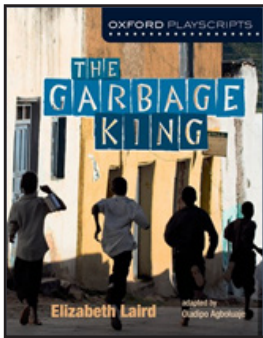
- Reading
- Writing
- History
- Citizenship
- Geography:
  - Locational Knowledge
  - Place Knowledge
  - Human Geography

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## *The Garbage King Playscript*



In 2013, Oxford University Press published a playscript of *The Garbage King*, written by Oladipo Agboluaje. The play was performed at the Unicorn Theatre in London, and later at the International School in Addis Ababa. Several other schools have performed it as well.

- ISBN-13: 978-019913802

## *Photo Credits*

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