



TEACHERS
RESOURCE
PACK FOR

DARA McANULTY

KEY
STAGES
3-5

DIARY OF A YOUNG
NATURALIST

TOPICS: NATURE AND CONSERVATION, AUTISM, NEURODIVERSITY

SUBJECTS: PSHE, ENGLISH, GEOGRAPHY



DIARY OF A YOUNG NATURALIST



LESSON PLAN

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

To explore the author's thoughts and feelings in this extract

INTRODUCING THE BOOK AND AUTHOR: 2 minutes

Diary of a Young Naturalist is a book of diary entries that explores the natural world from the author's perspective.

Explain to students that you are going to read an extract from the book together and complete some activities based on the extract. Explain to them that you will tell them more about the book and the author after completing the first activity.

ACTIVITY ONE: 15 minutes

Read the extract, Saturday 31 March, together.

Working in pairs or in small groups, students should discuss what they think they learn about the author from the extract and add their ideas to their brainstorms.

Students can then complete the challenge questions either verbally or in writing if there is time: The award winning author and narrator of this book is Dara McAnulty, an autistic teenager coping with the uprooting of home, school, and his mental health whilst pursuing his life as a conservationist and environmental activist.

1. Is this who you expected the author to be based on your brainstorm?
2. Does McAnulty fit the 'nature writer' stereotype?

Take feedback from the main activity. Before taking feedback on the challenge questions, explain to students that the book is written "through Dara McAnulty's eyes, an autistic teenager coping with the uprooting of home, school, and his mental health, while pursuing his life as a conservationist and environmental activist" (taken from the back cover blurb) and that the book has won multiple awards.

Possible answers for the main task:

- He is on a ferry
- He is excited and nervous
- It is his birthday
- He notices details about places that other people don't notice
- He uses all of his senses
- He finds his mum reassuring
- He seems calm in nature
- He feels trapped and overwhelmed in his daily life





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ACTIVITY TWO: 15 minutes

Working with a partner, students should complete the table comparing how McAnulty feels on Rathlin Island compared to how he feels at home in his daily life.

Students can then complete the challenge question either verbally or in writing if there is time: Why do you think the author feels confined at home but free on Rathlin?

Take feedback and include discussion of the challenge question.

Possible answers for the main task:

	THE AUTHOR'S LIFE ON RATHLIN ON HOLIDAY	THE AUTHOR'S EVERY DAY LIFE AT HOME
What is happening around the author in this place? What can he see/touch/feel/taste/smell?	Hares, seabirds, gannets, kittiwakes, waves, sky, geese	Busy roads, lots of people, schedules, expectations
How does the author feel in this place?	Free, rooted, bursting heart, happy	Stressed, confined, angst, panic
What thoughts does the author have in this place?	He can be happy here. This is "the other world". He can use memories of Rathlin to fight his anxiety.	

Challenge question answers may mention McAnulty's previous experiences on Rathlin, the fact that it's a holiday – there's no school or structure, his neurodivergence, previous experiences at home and/or school, the people around him, the extent to which he is exposed to nature.

ACTIVITY THREE: 15 minutes

Students should discuss with their partners a place where they feel free and/or a place where they feel trapped. They should then write a short description of the place, using each of the five senses, interesting adjectives, and writing in the first person.

Students can then complete the challenge questions either verbally or in writing if there is time: Why does this place make you feel free/trapped? Are there any similarities or differences between how you feel and how the author feels?

Ask students to share their descriptions and encourage other students to give feedback based on the success criteria (five senses, interesting adjectives, first person). Take feedback on the challenge questions.

PLENARY: 10 minutes

Write down three reflections you have after reading the extract and completing these activities. They could be things to remember, things you have learnt, or questions you have.





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EXTRACT

SATURDAY, 31 MARCH

In late-afternoon light, with wind rising from the sea, we sail on the ferry the few miles from Ballycastle on the north-east coast to Rathlin Island. Guillemots and gulls scrabble the air with screeching and cackling. My excitement is intense.

Today is my birthday, and this morning I lay awake in bed for hours before the actual birth time (11.20am) listening to a screeching fox in the distance. All week I've been like this, intensely excited, nervous, for reasons I may never truly understand. Perhaps it's because I love new places and hate new places all at once. The smells, the sounds. Things that nobody else notices. The people, too. And the right and wrong of things. Small things, like how we'd line up for the ferry, or what was expected of me on Rathlin when we arrived. Though I always do the usual mop-up operation in my mind after any journey, look back and usually think how ludicrous it all was, still the anxiety floods in. Mum assures me that our time on Rathlin will be spent either outside or alone with the family. 'It'll all be okay,' she says.

Eider ducks congregate at the harbour on our arrival, and as we head out to the cottage that we'll be staying in for a few days, my usual dislike of new surroundings softens. This place has something special. It feels so calm here. The air is fresh, the landscape extra-worldly in its abundance. Lapwing circle to our right, a buzzard to our left. The windows are rolled down and the sound circulates through our limbs, stiff from the three-hour drive and ferry ride. We relax and radiate as hares abound and geese honk above. The car climbs above sea level towards the west of the island.

When we reach our roosting place, it looks perfect in the distance: traditional stone with no other dwellings around for miles, and on arrival I jump out to walk and explore. I soon discover a lake with tufted duck and greylag geese. As I walk, hares seem to keep popping up everywhere and my eyes struggle to keep up with all the movement, my brain whirring with all the senses.

I can hear the cries of seabirds in the distance. Gannets fly on the horizon, the squeak of kittiwakes becomes louder. I stand and look out to sea and watch the waves gently swirling, and in the dusk sky a skein of white-fronted geese fly in dagger formation. Although we've just arrived and have a few days here, I start wondering how empty I'll feel when it's time to leave. I feel panic.

My childhood, although wonderful, is still confined. I'm not free. Daily life is all busy roads and lots of people. Schedules, expectations, stress. Yes, there is unfettered joy, too, but right now, standing in an extraordinary and beautiful place, so full of life, there is this terrible angst rising in my chest. I walk back to the cottage in a trance, watching shadows moving in golden fields.

After dinner, song bursts from every corner of the sky and we stop to listen in the twilight. Isolating each and every melody, I feel suddenly rooted. Skylark spirals. Blackbird harmonies. Bubbling meadow pipits. The winnowing wings of snipe. And always the sound of seabirds. We are in the other world. No cars. No people. Just wildlife and the magnificence of nature.

It's the best birthday.

A full moon beams from behind clouds as we watch Venus above the distant houses, and I stand there with numb hands and a numb nose but a bursting heart. This is the kind of place I can be happy in. I wrap my coat tightly around my chest, inhaling it all in, not wanting to go to bed, storing the moment up with all the other memories I keep cached. When I'm ambushed by the anxiety army, when it comes stomping back, I'll be ready to fight, armed with the wild cries of Rathlin Island.





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ACTIVITY 1

--- Read the extract, Saturday 31 March, together---

LEARNING QUESTION:

What are the author's thoughts and feelings in this extract?

After you have read the extract, discuss the question below with your partner and add to your brainstorm.

HINTS TO HELP!

Where is he?

How did he get there?

Who and/or what is around him?

What does he like?

What does he not like?

How does he feel? Why?

What do we find out about
the narrator in this extract?





The award winning author and narrator of this book is Dara McAnulty, an autistic teenager coping with the uprooting of home, school, and his mental health whilst pursuing his life as a conservationist and environmental activist.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal grey ruling lines. In the bottom right corner, there is a decorative teal-colored wave graphic. Overlapping the wave is a small circular logo featuring a black and white penguin standing on an orange oval base.





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ACTIVITY 2

Working with a partner, draw and complete the table below to compare the author's life on Rathlin on holiday and the author's life at home.

	THE AUTHOR'S LIFE ON RATHLIN ON HOLIDAY	THE AUTHOR'S EVERY DAY LIFE AT HOME
What is happening around the author in this place? What can he see/touch/feel/taste/smell?		
How does the author feel in this place?		
What thoughts does the author have in this place?		

CHALLENGE:

Why do you think the author feels confined at home but free on Rathlin?





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ACTIVITY 3

Discuss the questions below with your partner, then write at least five sentences to describe a place where you feel free OR a place where you feel trapped.

THE PLACE WHERE I FEEL FREE/TRAPPED IS...

SUCCESS CRITERIA

5 senses

- Interesting adjectives

- First person





CHALLENGE:

Why does this place make you feel free or trapped?

Are there any similarities or differences between how you feel and how the author feels?

[illegible]



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REFLECTIONS

Write down three reflections you have after reading the extract and completing these activities. They could be things to remember, things you have learnt, or questions you have.

A large, cloud-shaped writing area with a blue outline and horizontal lines for text.A large, cloud-shaped writing area with a teal outline and horizontal lines for text.A large, cloud-shaped writing area with an orange outline and horizontal lines for text.