



Published by  
Usborne, 2018



# The House With Chicken Legs

Explore Russian folklore and plan a range of activities around Sophie Anderson's enchanting debut novel

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**T**he House With Chicken Legs is the extraordinary debut novel from Sophie Anderson. Steeped in traditional Russian folklore with the author's own unique twist, the story focuses on the traditional tale of Baba Yaga.

In many tales, Baba Yaga is a crooked, evil witch with a long nose who rides around on a pestle and mortar and eats children. Here, Baba Yaga (more affectionately known as just Baba) is

actually the sweet grandma to main character, Marinka. She is also the guider of the dead through the gate to the next world, which happens to reside in their house – a house with chicken legs that regularly uproots the pair to different places around the world.

Much to her chagrin, Marinka is destined to be the next guardian of the gate. When Baba disappears, Marinka has to figure out on her own whether she is truly suited for such a destiny. With the

help of her house – which has a mind of its own – and friends she meets along the way, Marinka has to quickly mature and be brave as she seeks to truly understand her own fate and find her beloved Baba.

2018 offered up many excellent books and this one is no exception. It makes a tremendous addition to primary classrooms and there are endless possibilities in terms of things you can do to link learning to the book, including finding out about other cultures and researching fascinating Russian folklore.





## Practical activities

### Wherever you will go

A main theme of the novel is that the house (which has its own personality) can get up and go to another place on a whim. It moves to find new collections of dead people who need to pass through its gates. With this in mind, there's interesting scope here for some collective writing and geography.

Where could the house take you? Using physical and online maps and atlases, research and look at various places around the world and then describe the house moving there. What would you see from the windows? How might the terrain of the new area affect the house's movements? What culture would you find yourself immersed in?

Because there are so many options, there is opportunity here for multiple short bursts of writing. Take it a step further and use the maps to figure out which other locations the house would pass on the way to its new location. Can you design a trip around the world? What would the challenges be?

## This is your life

When the dead amass at the house, Baba states that one of her favourite things that happens during the



feast before they leave is that they share their whole life with her – their family, memories, legacy and everything they have experienced and felt over the course of their lives.

If, through some seriously unfortunate series of events, your pupils found themselves at the gate, what would their legacy be? What could they tell Baba about their life that would make her happy and leave a lasting impression on her?

This is a lovely opportunity to get to know your pupils better as they discuss their family, the people they love, the places they've been, the food they like to eat, their best memories and so on. This information can be presented in many different ways, including a memoir, but perhaps the most interesting would be to have the children present it as a speech to Baba Yaga. This will allow you to focus on the genre of speech writing in class and it's also a great way to show children how to be really emotive with their language.

## Free online resources

Download our free newspaper front page template for this lesson at [teachwire.net/teaching-resources/newspaper-template](https://www.teachwire.net/teaching-resources/newspaper-template)

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## Building a house

How often is there a great link to design technology within a class novel? Not often enough for my money, so what a tremendous opportunity there is here to literally design and build a model house.

Children should begin by designing the house, using what they know about it from the book. It's a good idea to limit the rooms to one bedroom, the kitchen, a bathroom and the living room with the gate in it. Pupils need to consider how they are going to get this house to adequately stand up on chicken legs. What materials do they need to make this happen?

***Take it further*** ➡➡➡

## YOUR OWN GLOSSARY

In the back of the book, author Sophie Anderson has produced a helpful glossary of Russian terms to make the story more accessible to readers who do not speak the language or are not familiar with the culture.

Ask pupils to imagine they are writing a book about the country they come from. Hone in on the food they eat as part of that culture. Create your own glossary, naming foods from

that culture and detailing what they mean. Pupils may want to use more informal names for dishes. For example, sausage and mashed potatoes – a British staple – might be referred to as ‘bangers and mash’, which is a term that may need explaining. Include colloquial terms such as ‘grub’ or terms with different dialectal meanings such as ‘dinner’ to give the reader more information.





How sturdy do the legs need to be and how can we achieve this?

Take things further by designing the front of the house on a hinge that can be opened (the book is very explicit about the facial features of the house). Work on making legs that have joints so they can move. After building your houses, ask children to review and evaluate them, thinking about how they could have been even better.

## A feast for the dead

When the dead come to Baba and Marinka's house, it is customary that the guardians hold a feast for them to enjoy before they pass through the gate. Throughout the book we are introduced to a plethora of Russian traditional foods including pirog, borsch, blini, schi, kvass and chak-chak, to name a few. Explanations of these can be found in the book's glossary.

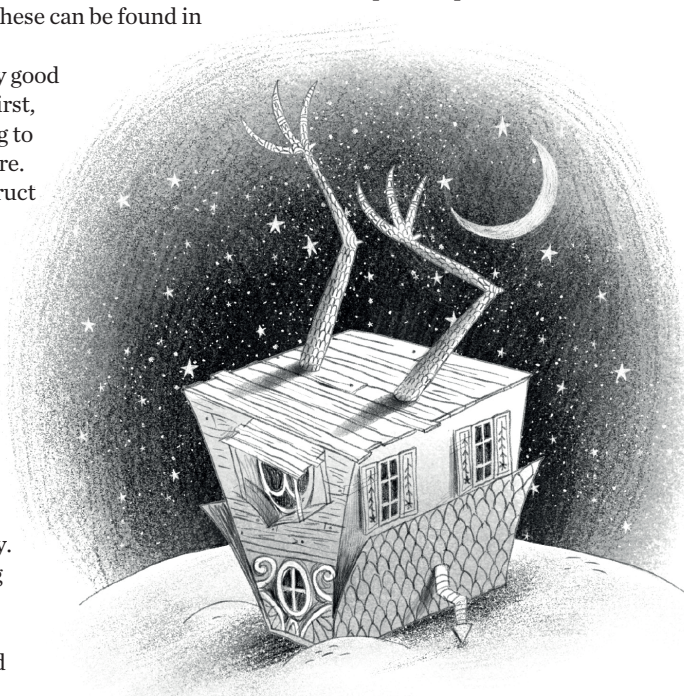
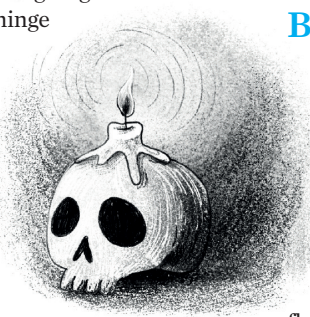
There are so many good opportunities here. First, it would be interesting to research what these are. Ask children to construct a menu based on the different foods presented. By far the most fun thing to do, though, is to cook them as a class and hold your own Russian feast. Children can then evaluate each food and say whether they liked it or not and why. There are also writing opportunities here – ask pupils to become food critics. You could

also invite in parents, other year groups or senior leaders to enjoy the feast.

## Become a reporter

In one scene in the book, Baba and Marinka's house is accidentally set on fire. All the characters desperately work to put the fire out, but in the end the house has no choice but to stand up in a busy area and run into the ocean to put out the flames. Shortly after this, the house, Baba and Marinka have to move on as the general public have seen what has happened.

Here lies a great writing opportunity: imagine you were a member of the public who had witnessed this incident. Write a newspaper report detailing exactly what happened. Interviewing other eyewitnesses is a great chance to practise direct and reported speech. Look at



## Loved this? Try these...

- ❖ *The Jamie Drake Equation* by Christopher Edge
- ❖ *Who Let The Gods Out?* by Mary Alice Evans
- ❖ *Nevermoor* by Jessica Townsend
- ❖ *A Place Called Perfect* by Helena Duggan
- ❖ *Cogheart* by Peter Bunzl

journalistic bias and have one newspaper report that details the event as a magical experience full of wonder and another that details it as a terrifying event that threatens civilians. How would the features differ? Would even small details, like the pictures chosen, be different? Download our newspaper front page template at [teachwire.net/teaching-resources/newspaper-template](http://teachwire.net/teaching-resources/newspaper-template)

## Different legs

Imagine how the house would function and act if it had animal legs that did not belong to a chicken. For example, how might a house with horse legs look? It would surely move faster than a house with chicken legs. What about a house with mouse legs? Surely it would need to be much smaller – or could it just have giant mouse legs?

There's a plethora of discussion work that could be undertaken here, particularly about what pupils see as the optimum animal legs for the house. After this, create artwork or writing based on the ideas the children have come up with. **TP**



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## INSTRUCTIONAL WRITING

There is scope for a variety of instructional writing activities within this book, both non-fiction and 'fictional non-fiction' (written as though it is fact, but rooted in something that is made up).

For the former, get pupils to focus on the idea of having Benji the lamb as a pet. They will need to find out how to look after a lamb and then create a how-to guide for caring for one.

For the 'fictional non-fiction' piece, pupils can write about guiding the dead through the gate. Through reading the

book, children should pick up that there are explicit ways to do this, from the actual ceremony on the night through to building the gate and getting the house to the right place. Once again, this presents a great opportunity for a 'how-to' guide.

## CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

One way of stretching writers that are cruising towards the greater depth standard is to get them to change the perspective of part of

the story. This is a really complex type of writing that demands a keen understanding.

One scene that works particularly well for this is when Baba takes Nina through the gate. The scene is written from the perspective of Marinka, but can pupils alter it to be from either Baba or Nina's point of view? How are they feeling? What's different? What's occurring around them? Afterwards, challenge the children to do a critical evaluation of what they chose to write and why.