



AUSTRALIAN  
PLAYS  
TRANSFORM



Cassandra Fumi  
after Hans Christian Andersen

# THE MERMAID

BY CASSANDRA FUMI

EDUCATION RESOURCE

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# INTRODUCTION

This resource has been developed by Australian Plays Transform to illustrate some approaches to teaching a drama text to English students in Years 7-10. However, the resource can be adapted for use in other subject areas and year levels.

These teachers' notes are designed to support the development of students' understanding of core textual concepts of connotation, imagery and symbol; genre; and intertextuality. It includes a detailed synopsis, a list of related texts, and a series of pre- and post-reading activities.

## AUSTRALIAN PLAYS TRANSFORM

Australian Plays Transform (APT) is Australia's national play development and publication organisation. It hosts the world's largest online showcase and searchable database of the best Australian playwriting. APT seeks new voices for new times, develops plays that change the national story, links them to production, publishes them and promotes them here and around the world.

<https://apt.org.au/for-educators/>

*This resource was developed by Zoe Hogan.*

## TEACHING DRAMA TEXTS IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

In Years 7-10, English students in NSW are required to engage meaningfully with at least two drama texts in each Stage. Engaging with Australian plays provides a wonderful opportunity for students to experience texts by Australian authors, including texts that explore a range of cultural, social and gender perspectives.

Drama refers to a piece of literature intended to be performed in front of an audience. Drama texts differ from many other written texts studied in English because a drama script is intended to be fully realised in performance. To understand how drama texts work, it is useful for students to become familiar with the *elements of drama*, which are combined to create *dramatic meaning*. The elements of drama are atmosphere, audience engagement, focus, language, moment, movement, place, rhythm, role & character, situation, sound, space, structure, symbol, tension, and time. A visual reference for the *elements of drama* is located [here](#).

While Australian plays can be studied and analysed as written texts, we encourage students to consider how drama texts could be performed in front of an audience. This resource includes a range of written, creative, and embodied activities for students in the English classroom.

# THE MERMAID BY CASSANDRA FUMI

A little mermaid trades her voice for legs. She dreams of a human world bathed in sun. A group of teenagers trade stories about life in 2020. They dream of all the worlds that could have been.

Hans Christian Andersen's famous fairytale is radically re-imagined by a collective of teenage and adult theatre makers in *The Mermaid* by Cassandra Fumi. A surreal tapestry of history, poetry, tragicomedy and pop culture milieu is cast over us, woven together by many hands from many threads: H2O: Just Add Water. Planting trees. Private dreams. Global protest movements. Mythology. Murder. Jest. Love.

Only such a storied tapestry could have been woven together by young devisors who, like the little mermaid, were forced to confront and enact their own transformations in a year of being locked down. But where she relinquished her voice, they find theirs.

## ABOUT THE WRITER – CASSANDRA FUMI

Cassandra Fumi is an award-winning theatre director. Directing credits include: *World Problems* (Melbourne Theatre Company), *The Crocodile* (Winner – Best Director 2024 Green Room Awards), *Far Away* (fortyfivedownstairs), *The Mermaid* (La Mama Theatre – 2021 VCE Playlist), *Dog Show* (Melbourne Fringe Hub). She was the Associate Director on *A Very Jewish Christmas Carol* (Melbourne Theatre Company) and Assistant Director on *The House of Bernarda Alba* (Melbourne Theatre Company). Cassandra loves the way theatre can break down barriers, form community and allow for a group of people to work towards a creative goal collectively.

## ABOUT THE PLAY

*The Mermaid* is a devised piece of contemporary performance, created in response to Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* by a group of teenagers and adults in Melbourne in and around the time of COVID-19 lockdowns. The script has two layers: the voice of the young mermaid and surrounding characters (drawing from the original fairy tale as well as pop culture references and verbatim text from the teen creators), and an 'all-knowing' teenage chorus who provide commentary on the original fairy tale.

*The Mermaid* was first produced at La Mama Courthouse Theatre, Melbourne, on Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurundjeri country, in July 2021.

## SYNOPSIS

### Prologue: The Classroom

Sebastian the crab gives a class presentation on the Coney Island Mermaid Parade, an annual event that includes and embraces people of all identities. Sebastian says that princes don't exist but mermaids do. The other chorus members dance to the theme song of *H2O: Just Add Water* (a children's TV show about mermaids from the early 2000s), while wearing Ariel wigs.

### Act One: Sea (8 scenes)

The chorus physicalise a series of words that foreshadow the story to come. The Mermaid celebrates her fifteenth birthday and describes her home under the sea. The Mermaid and her five sisters tend to their underwater garden plots.

On her fifteenth birthday, the Mermaid is allowed to come up to the surface of the ocean – she sees the horizon for the first time and observes the Prince's fifteenth birthday party on a boat. He falls off the boat and she saves him, although he doesn't see her.

The Mermaid talks to her grandmother and learns that mermaids live for 300 years then their souls die, whereas people in the 'upper world' have souls that live forever. The only way for a mermaid to avoid this fate is if a human being loves them. The Mermaid compares herself to a worm, and determines to swim up to the surface.

The Mermaid visits the Sea Witch and asks for her help – specifically, she asks for legs so she can explore the upper world, discover a new horizon and see everything. She seems more interested in having legs than in the Prince. The price for this is her voice – the Sea Witch gives the Mermaid a potion and cuts off the Mermaid's tongue as payment. The Mermaid sheds her tail.

### Act Two: Land (4 scenes)

The Mermaid reaches the surface of the world and is alone. She becomes a statue (like the Little Mermaid statue in Copenhagen, Denmark) and talks about all the instances of damage and vandalism that she has endured over time.

The Mermaid returns to the moment when she first stood on land with her new legs. The Prince leads her to his palace where they dance, but the Mermaid's feet start to bleed. The Chorus notices and stops dancing, but the Prince seems oblivious to her pain. The Prince loves the Mermaid like a stray cat, and tells her that the only person he can truly love is the woman who saved him from drowning.

The Prince says he has found the woman who saved him, and the Mermaid dances at their wedding, although her feet are bleeding and she knows she will die that night. She sees her sisters arise from the water – they have traded their hair to the Sea Witch for a knife, so that the Mermaid can kill the Prince and restore her tail to live under the sea again.

In a movement sequence, the Mermaid tries (again) to walk on land for the first time, while trying to decide whether to meet the Prince or not. Eventually, perhaps guided by her younger self, the Mermaid avoids the Prince and they never meet on land.

Act Three: Air (2 scenes)

In a movement sequence, a child version of the Mermaid saves the Prince, and then lets the Prince drown.

Recorded teenage voices discuss the world in 2020 and the future. They speak about the story of *The Little Mermaid* and all the other possible ways the story could have been told.

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#### ACTIVITY: GETTING TO KNOW THE STORY

To explore the world of the play, students need to familiarise themselves with the original story of *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen. The full text of the Hans Christian Andersen version is included in the play text (p.20-39) or you can access text or video versions online (for example, see <https://youtu.be/y26D-Qr2C0M>).

It is important to note that the original story is darker and more tragic than the Disney version with which students may be familiar. Some key differences include that the Sea Witch grants the Mermaid legs, but every step she takes feels like walking on sharp knives. The Prince and Mermaid enjoy each other's company, but the prince falls in love with another woman who he mistakenly believes saved him from drowning. Finally, in the original version the Mermaid does not win the prince's love and therefore will die and turn into sea foam. Her sisters make a deal that involves her killing the prince, but she refuses and chooses death instead.

However, the Mermaid becomes a spirit of the air instead and has a chance to earn an immortal soul through good deeds. Overall, the original version emphasises themes of self-sacrifice and the pursuit of an immortal soul rather than romance and a happy ending.

This activity is designed to introduce students to the narrative of *The Little Mermaid* through exploring six key moments from the original story. Suggested key moments are:

1. The dream – The Mermaid longs for the human world and an immortal soul.
2. Saving the Prince – She rescues a drowning prince during a storm but watches as he mistakenly believes another woman saved him.
3. The Sea Witch’s deal – She trades her voice (losing her tongue) for legs, but every step she takes is painful. If the Prince doesn’t love her, she will die.
4. Unrequited love – The Prince enjoys the Mermaid’s company but falls in love with another woman, unaware of the Mermaid’s sacrifice.
5. A painful choice – Her sisters offer a way to survive: kill the prince. She refuses, choosing love over her own life.
6. A tragic but hopeful end – The Mermaid becomes a spirit (a ‘daughter of the air’), with a chance to earn an immortal soul through good deeds.

Divide students into six groups. Each group receives one of the key moments listed above. Students read the section of the original text that corresponds to their key moment. As a group, students prepare a freeze frame (or a series of three freeze frames) of their key moment (a freeze frame is a still image created using our bodies). As they present their freeze frame/s, one student reads out a caption which describes the key moment.

After watching the series of freeze frames in narrative order, the class can discuss the following questions:

- Did anything surprise you about the original story of *The Little Mermaid*?
- What did you find interesting about the story?
- What do you think about the character of the Mermaid? Do you agree with the choices she makes?
- If you could describe the main theme of this story in one word, what would it be?



## RELATED TEXTS

Excerpts from *The Mermaid* can also be used in a multiple text study. The play is particularly relevant for a 'fractured fairytales' English unit, where students develop their understanding of intertextuality through analysing how traditional fairytales can be fractured, adapted, altered and updated over time (see p.16 for suggested activities).

The following texts are suitable for Year 7-10 students and include thematic links to *The Mermaid*:

- There are a range of films which explore the telling of fairy tales, including *Ever After* (director: Andy Tennant) and *The Princess Bride* (director: Rob Reiner). In particular, the characters of Danielle (in *Ever After*) and Buttercup (in *The Princess Bride*) resonate with the protagonist of *The Mermaid* and its original fairytale, in that they challenge reader's/viewer's preconceptions of the archetypal role of the princess in fairytales.
- The ocean and water creatures are common themes in myths and folk tales throughout the world. There are a number of animated films that are based on water-related folk tales, including *Ponyo* (director: Hayao Miyazaki), based on Japanese mythology, and *Luca* (director: Enrico Casarosa), inspired by Italian folklore.
- There are a range of 'fractured fairytale' texts that could be an engaging introduction for students to the idea of re-examining and re-imagining classic fairytales. For example, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka, *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book?* by Lauren Child, and *Into the Woods* directed by Rob Marshall.
- *Skin of the Sea* by Natasha Bowen – a young adult fantasy novel by Nigerian-Welsh writer Natasha Bowen which draws on West African mythology to reimagine the story of *The Little Mermaid*. This novel offers a rich cultural viewpoint from which to consider the Western fairytale. This aligns with curriculum guidance on using texts that represent the voices and experiences of people from diverse cultures, backgrounds, religions and beliefs.

# CONNOTATION, IMAGERY AND SYMBOL

*Words and images can signify more than what they denote, extending us beyond their literal everyday meanings to understand and experience one thing in terms of another. This extension of meaning may, through connotation, evoke associated feelings or, through imagery and symbol, lay down new traces of images, sounds, senses and ideas.*

## STAGE 4

*Students understand that the effect of imagery is subjective. They learn that*

- *imagery and symbol communicate through associations which may be personal, social or cultural*
- *words invite associations (connotations) in responders which bring related ideas and feelings to a text*
- *figurative language can invite participation creating emotional resonances or potentially exclude and challenge.*

From English Textual Concepts, ETA & NSW Department of Education (2016)

## IMAGERY IN THE LITTLE MERMAID

There are a range of images and symbols associated with Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. While many of us will be familiar with the images and symbols associated with the Disney film adaptations (in 1989 and 2023) of the story, there are many personal, social and cultural associations that can be made to the original text.

Images and symbols can also evolve in meaning throughout a story. For example, at the start of *The Little Mermaid*, the sea initially symbolises home, freedom, and wonder. Then, as the Mermaid's interest in the human world grows, the sea begins to be associated with entrapment and confinement.

The script of *The Mermaid* draws on some well-known symbols of *The Little Mermaid* – such as red hair and mermaid tails – to subvert our expectations of the story. From the prologue, we are invited to make our own associations with the character and story, thinking about popular culture and cultural events that are connected to the mythology of mermaids. The following exercises guide students to reflect, explore and extend their understanding of connotation, imagery and symbol.

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### ACTIVITY: EXPLORING THE IMAGERY OF *THE MERMAID*

What images do you associate with *The Little Mermaid*? Students can list/draw/brainstorm their ideas or create a digital pinboard (such as a Padlet) of relevant images. Invite students to share with the class and discuss the following questions:

- What images are similar? What images are different?
- Where do these images come from? How are you familiar with them?
- What personal, social, or cultural associations do you have with these images?

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### ACTIVITY: CREATING A PHYSICAL MOVEMENT SCORE

In *Act 1, Scene 1: Many Mermaids*, members of the Chorus embody a 'physical movement score', containing the key moments of the story of *The Little Mermaid*. In this activity, students create their own physical movement score (this is an adaptation of the popular Drama warm-up activity known as 'Ten Second Objects' or 'Knife and Fork'). Ideally, you will have an open space without desks and chairs for the following activity.

Students work in groups of three or four. Begin by calling out the name of an object, then all groups have to make that object with their bodies, as you count down slowly from ten to zero. Each group makes a single object, so participants have to collaborate and make and accept offers from each other. You may choose to give points to the fastest / most creative groups. Start with prompts such as 'washing machine', 'toaster', 'a day at the beach'.

Then, offer the following prompts one by one (in no particular order):

- Time
- Warning
- Saving
- Potion
- New Legs
- Statue Longing
- Storm
- Boat
- Meeting Sea Witch
- Loss of Voice
- Dance
- Choice
- Release

*(You may choose to photograph student responses as stimulus for a follow up writing activity).*

As a class, read *Act 1, Scene 1: Many Mermaids*. In this scene, members of the Chorus wear masks and enact a physical movement score which foreshadows the story to come. Although the script includes the movements used in the theatre production (e.g. for 'Time', the Chorus 'check an invisible watch'), make sure that students understand there is no right or wrong interpretation – in fact, they may think their ideas are more interesting! Like the director and actors involved with the production, students have interpreted the script in a way that reflects their knowledge.

Students may discuss or write short responses to the following questions:

- Did your physical movements differ to those included in the script? If so, what meanings/connotations did your physical movement score convey?
- Why do you think the creators of this play created a physical movement score at the start of the play? Why would they want to foreshadow the story?

## IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM IN THEATRE

Imagery and symbolism are essential tools in theatre to create and deepen meaning, evoke emotions, and convey concepts and themes beyond the literal dialogue and action. Imagery and symbolism can be reflected in set design, costume design, lighting design, sound design, the use of props, and in the movement and gestures of actors.

In theatre, a set and costume designer will develop a visual and sensory language, and in many cases, this will draw upon imagery and symbolism. For example, an empty stage may reflect a character's loneliness or isolation, and changes in costume can reflect shifts in a character's status or emotional state.

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### ACTIVITY: SET AND COSTUME DESIGN

In the original La Mama production of *The Mermaid*, Dann Barber's set and costume design used imagery and symbolism to great effect. In fact, Dann Barber won a Green Room Award for Design for his work on this production.

Theatre critic Michael Brindley wrote the following reflection on the set design:

“The set is a key factor in tying things together. Designer Dann Barber gives us a very naturalistic swimming pool, with beat-up old tiles, underwater lights, and a ladder for getting in and out. It’s a public space where teenagers meet – and a space where they are on display and under scrutiny: body image and gender definition are important sub-texts here.” (Brindley, 2021)

As a class, look at images of the production’s set and costume design (see <https://www.dannbarber.com/themermaid> or use Google Image search).

*Think-pair-share:* In pairs, students list all elements of the set and costume design (for example, empty swimming pool, Ariel masks, pool inflatables). They discuss the following questions:

- What do you associate with these images? (These associations may be personal, social or cultural)
- What ideas or feelings are connected with these associations?
- Does the set and costume design include any symbols that stand for specific things or ideas?
- What do you think the Designer is trying to convey with the set and costume design?

# GENRE

*Genre simply means 'type' or 'kind' and refers to groups of texts that have similarities in form and function. Genres are not prescribed categories but have developed through trial and error as the most effective way to achieve a purpose. Some aspects of genres may remain stable and recognisable while others may grow and change over time to reflect new concerns and new values. Similarly, as new media emerge, genres adapt to new technologies.*

## STAGE 4

*Students understand that the expectations of a genre shape composition of and response to texts.*

*They learn that*

- *knowledge of generic conventions can guide composition of and response to texts*
- *genres are efficient methods of communication*
- *genres can be adapted to and combined in different modes and media*
- *genres are adapted to times and cultures*
- *generic conventions may be challenged.*

From English Textual Concepts, ETA & NSW Department of Education (2016)

# FAIRY TALES

Respected scholar Marina Warner (2018) defines a fairy tale as a short narrative that is a familiar story, often passed down through oral storytelling traditions. She also points out that a fairy tale is generally recognisable through combinations of familiar plots and characters, devices and images – there are certain kinds of characters (stepmothers and princesses, elves and giants) and recurring motifs (keys, apples, mirrors, rings and toads) (Warner, 2018).

*The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen is considered a fairy tale – he also wrote other well-known fairy tales including *The Ugly Duckling*, *The Princess and the Pea* and *The Snow Queen*. Hans Christian Andersen's fairytales are known for their themes of personal growth and sacrifice, and while some have typical 'happily ever after' endings, he also wrote several (like *The Little Mermaid*) with bittersweet or tragic endings.

Although fairy tales were written and published by men (including Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm), they were originally shaped and shared by female storytellers, often of lower status, who retold and reimagined the tales through oral storytelling traditions, often to an audience of children at home (Warner, 1994). In this sense, the genre of fairy tales has always been fluid and changing – a phenomenon we continue to see in modern adaptations, such as *The Mermaid*.

*“The Mermaid is a devised piece of contemporary performance, a reimagining and reclamation of Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*, based on the collaborative retelling by teenagers and adults... It is poetic, chaotic, mythical and contemporary all at once. It learns from the past but moves towards a new mythology that draws from traditional character archetypes and folds them into complex, contradictory and authentic human beings.”* Cassandra Fumi

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#### PRE-READING ACTIVITY: FRACTURED FAIRYTALE

Students familiarise themselves with the original version of *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen. This could be through reading the original text (included in the play script from p.20-39) or a condensed version (for example, see <https://youtu.be/y26D-Qr2C0M>)

As a class, map the key moments of the story. For example:

1. The dream – The Mermaid longs for the human world and an immortal soul.
2. Saving the Prince – She rescues a drowning prince during a storm but watches as he mistakenly believes another woman saved him.
3. The Sea Witch’s deal – She trades her voice (losing her tongue) for legs, but every step she takes is painful. If the Prince doesn’t love her, she will die.
4. Unrequited love – The Prince enjoys the Mermaid’s company but falls in love with another woman, unaware of the Mermaid’s sacrifice.
5. A painful choice – Her sisters offer a way to survive: kill the prince. She refuses, choosing love over her own life.
6. A tragic but hopeful end – The Mermaid becomes a spirit (a ‘daughter of the air’), with a chance to earn an immortal soul through good deeds.

Individually, students write a short story – their own ‘fractured’ version of *The Little Mermaid*. Encourage students to play with setting, character, and key moments in the story to make it their own. For example:

- Setting – what time period is your story set in? Where is the story located?
- Characters – in your story, who is the Mermaid? (She may be a mermaid, a human or a different type of creature altogether). How is her freedom restricted? What does she want more than anything?
- Key moments – What does the Mermaid trade in exchange for her freedom? Does she regret this choice? Is romantic love important to the Mermaid, or something else?

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#### ACTIVITY: ROLE PLAY

In stories, there is often an antagonist – a character or force who opposes the protagonist (or hero) of the story. In fairy tales, the antagonist is usually a character who embodies villainous traits such as in the archetypes of the ‘evil stepmother’ and the ‘wicked witch’.

While our understanding of the Sea Witch character in *The Little Mermaid* is shaped by the character of Ursula in the Disney film adaptations, the original character is more morally ambiguous. In this activity, students challenge generic conventions of character through an excerpt of the scene between the Mermaid and the Sea Witch (Act 1, Scene 8).

Give students copies of the following scene excerpt (p.10-11), starting with “MERMAID: I want legs”, and ending with “SEA WITCH: Patience.”

In pairs, students decide who will play the Mermaid and who will play the Sea Witch. Allow students 5 minutes to rehearse their role play. Encourage the students portraying the Sea Witch to make the character as evil and villainous as possible.

Select pairs to share their scene excerpts with the class. Discuss how the character of the Sea Witch reflects our expectations of evil archetypal characters in fairytales.

Now, ask students to prepare a different version of the scene. This time, the Sea Witch character is not an evil archetype. She may be tired, cynical, friendly, excited, etc. It is up to the students to decide on a different interpretation.

Select pairs to share their scene excerpts with the class. Discuss how the character of the Sea Witch is different.

Which scene versions did students find more interesting? Why?



# INTERTEXTUALITY

*Intertextuality refers to those interrelationships among texts that shape a text's meaning. The recognisable echoes of other texts in a text intensify the experience of the text by adding layers of meaning.*

## STAGE 4

*Students understand that intertextuality enhances and layers meaning.*

*They learn that*

- *intertextual references require knowledge of culturally significant texts*
- *recreating texts provides new insights*
- *transformation provides ways of understanding and appreciating the earlier text.*

From English Textual Concepts, ETA & NSW Department of Education (2016)

## LAYERS OF INTERTEXTUALITY

Pope (2002) distinguishes between three types of intertextuality:

- Explicit intertextuality: alluding specifically to another text through quotation or reference
- Implied intertextuality: where the allusion is more subtle or indirect but may be suggested through shared themes, styles or conventions
- Inferred intertextuality: the connections a responder makes between texts. These will draw on the responder's knowledge and cultural understandings and may include texts that did not even exist when the original text was composed.

There are many instances of explicit and implied intertextuality in *The Mermaid*, where specific texts are referred to by name or alluded to indirectly. Through these layers of intertextuality, *The Mermaid* becomes a reflexive and critical account of how fairy tales and fairy tale tropes continue to shape (in positive and negative ways) contemporary ideas of adolescence.

There are also many different cultural interpretations of stories and folk tales where humans interact with water and water-based creatures – see 'Related texts' (p.7-8) for ideas.

It is also likely that students will make new connections to the text, known as inferred intertextuality. The following activities guide students to build their critical thinking skills through understanding how intertextuality shapes the texts we read.

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**ACTIVITY: INTERTEXTUALITY IN *THE MERMAID***

*Think-pair-share:* In pairs or small groups, students list all references to other texts (intertextuality) throughout the play. Students identify each example as explicit, implied, or inferred intertextuality.

Note: to identify examples of inferred intertextuality, encourage students to reflect on what associations they bring to the text – there are no right or wrong answers.

Act/scene number	Text	Explicit / implied / inferred
Act 1, Scene 7	'Poor Unfortunate Souls' from Disney's <i>The Little Mermaid</i>	Explicit

Students present their ideas. As a class, discuss why certain texts may have been included in *The Mermaid*.

*Creative writing:* In *Prologue: The Classroom* (p.1-2), Sebastian the Crab gives a class presentation on the Coney Island Mermaid Parade. Students write a new prologue for the play which explicitly or implicitly refers to another text. This could involve Sebastian the Crab giving a presentation on another text related to mermaids.

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## ACTIVITY: CO-CREATE A FINAL SCENE

The final scene of the play (Act 3, Scene 14) centres the experiences and perspectives of the teenagers who co-created *The Mermaid*:

Recordings play of teenage voices discussing the world in 2020 and the future. They speak of *The Little Mermaid* and all the other possible ways this story could have been told. (p.18)

As a class, students create their own version of the final scene of the play, drawing on chosen texts that they feel resonate with the story of *The Little Mermaid*.

They will need to consider how their context relates to the original story of *The Little Mermaid* – what aspects of their experience as teenagers in the current year, in their location, resonate with the story? What are some other ways this story could have been told?

This activity can be the impetus for student-led inquiry – students can brainstorm interview questions, interview each other, audio record their peers' responses, and edit together to form a creative work in the style of an audio drama or podcast.

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