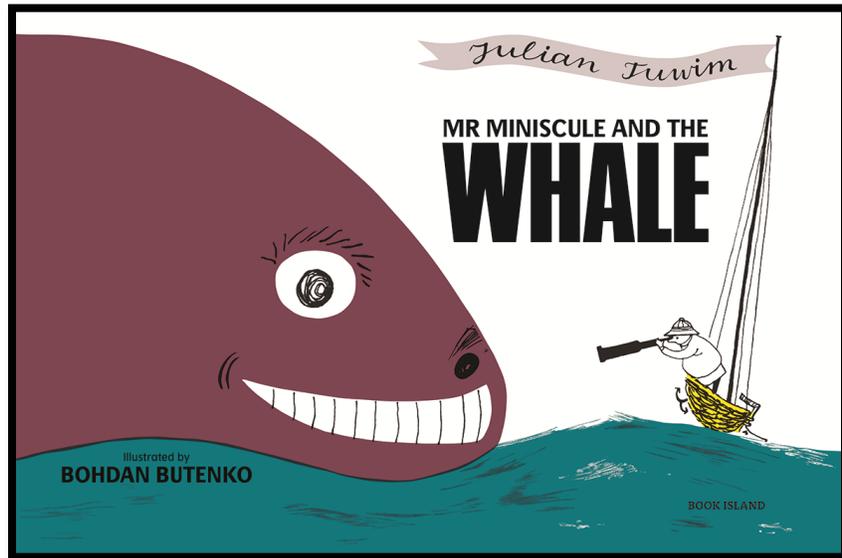




BOOK ISLAND



Teaching Notes
Mr Miniscule and the Whale
by Julian Tuwim and illustrated by Bohdan Butenko

Synopsis

This rhyming adventure tells the story of Mr Miniscule, a teeny tiny explorer with a BIG dream. Mr Miniscule builds himself a wee boat, packs it full of all sorts of miniature treasures, and sets off on the vast ocean in search of a big blue whale. Weeks and months go by. Mr Miniscule does not find a whale, but he does find a big blue island. You can imagine how terrified Mr Miniscule is when the island begins to sneeze, and roar, and call him all sorts of names. The little man packs his tiny boat and floats home as fast as he can. And now when people ask if he's seen a whale, Mr Miniscule is a little vague about the details.



The Author

Julian Tuwim (1894–1953) was one of Poland’s leading poets. He won fame not just for his adult verse but also for his rhymes for children, many of which are classics known to every Polish child. He also wrote satirical verse and loved word games, inventing palindromes (whole sentences that read the same forwards and backwards), lipograms (whole paragraphs that leave out a particular letter), and tautograms (sentences where every word starts with the same letter). Nobody knows if he ever set out to sea to see a whale.

The Illustrator

Bohdan Butenko (born 1931) is one of Poland’s top illustrators, whose drawings appear in more than 200 children’s books. He is also famous for his animated cartoons – especially featuring Gucio the clumsy hippo and Cezar the sensible dog – as well as for his stage sets and television design. He has won many prizes, among them the 2012 Order of the Smile – a special medal awarded by children to adults who are particularly kind to them.

Themes

This whale tale unfolds around the theme of a journey in which our miniature hero sets off on a quest in search of something that is very important to him. He makes his preparations and sets off full of hope. But things turn out very differently to what the hero expects. Life is full of unexpected outcomes.

The central tension in this story is between how things look (appearances) and how things actually are (reality). *Mr Miniscule and the Whale* explores this idea in a few different ways.

This story highlights how a situation can look very different depending on the perspective it is viewed from. When the reader first sees Mr Miniscule’s island it looks just like a piece of land – to the reader and to the hero of the story. On the next page the reader can see from the big picture that the island is a whale, but from Mr Miniscule’s tiny vantage point it still looks like a lump of land, until the whale sneezes and starts to talk. Then we hear the whale’s perspective on what is happening. The whale gets angry, even though Mr Miniscule didn’t mean to hurt him. When Mr Miniscule trembles with terror, the whale thinks he is being tickled. The reader, the whale, and Mr Miniscule all see the situation differently at this point in the story.

A related theme looks at how our feelings about something can change, even if the thing itself hasn’t changed at all. Mr Miniscule’s dream is to see a whale, but after months of searching he is so tired that



he is just happy to find some land where he can rest. A little later he realizes that he has found his whale, but instead of being happy he is terrified and can't wait to get away.

Looking at things differently can also make us more resourceful. We can find new ways of using familiar objects. Mr Miniscule demonstrates this when he uses a walnut shell for a boat, turns a single match into four oars, travels by butterfly, and shoots a mosquito with a cannon.

Activities

Before reading the book, look at the cover image and title.

- Discuss what you think this story might be about.
- Describe the person in the boat – who do you think he is? What do you think he is doing? What sort of person do you think he is? How do you think he is feeling?

When he gets home and people ask him about his experience with the whale, all Mr Miniscule will say is that he has seen “More than just its tail”. Why do you think Mr Miniscule doesn't say more about what happened? How would you answer this question if you were Mr Miniscule?

A key theme in this story is how situations look different depending on who is looking at them. Imagine you are the whale in this story – how would you describe what happened?

Mr Miniscule's search for the whale doesn't turn out the way he expected. Describe a trip you have taken, or a goal you have pursued, that has worked out differently from how you expected.

“Miniscule” is an unusual word but it describes Mr Miniscule perfectly. Can you guess what it means?

This story is full of words and phrases that describe how big or how small something is. See how many 'size' words and phrases you can find. Try to put them in order, from the ones that seem the smallest up to the ones that seem the biggest.

This book is written as a series of rhyming verses. Count how many lines each verse has, and then count how many syllables there are in each line. Which words rhyme with each other? Can you work out a pattern of syllables and of rhyming words? Try to use this same pattern to write your own rhyming verse.

Rhyming verses usually follow a regular pattern or rhythm, like the drum beat in a song. Can you work out the rhythm of the verses in this story? As your teacher or partner reads, mark the beat by clapping your hands or stamping your feet. Which words are emphasized (or stressed) in each verse? Mark these



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words and try reading a few verses out loud, stressing the marked words. See what happens if you change the rhythm of a line or a verse.

Mr Miniscule's dream was to see a big blue whale. The blue whale is the largest mammal in the world. See what else you can find out about blue whales. Choose another type of whale to research. Find out where these whales live, how big they grow to, what they eat, who their enemies are, how long they live for.

Imagine you could go on a journey to see something that you have always wanted to see. Where would you go? What would you take with you? Who would you ask for advice about the journey?

Imagine that Mr Miniscule had landed on a desert island, and that he had to survive for a whole month with just the items that he packed into his tiny boat. Work with a partner to make a list of what each of the items could be used for. How many different uses can you think of for each item? Share your list with another group – how many creative uses for each item can the whole class come up with by sharing ideas and brainstorming together?