

CLPE and Cheltenham Festivals: Reading Teachers=Reading Pupils

These teaching notes have been designed to support schools using [The Secret of Platform 13](#) as part of the Reading Teachers=Reading Pupils project in 2025–26. The ideas in the sequence of sessions will support teachers in reading aloud and talking about the selected texts with their children, allowing children to respond to and understand the text in greater depth.

Title: *The Secret of Platform 13*

Author: Eva Ibbotson

Illustrator: Beatriz Castro (25th anniversary edition 2019)

Publisher: Pan Macmillan

The secret of Platform 13 — at King’s Cross Station, no less, the preferred terminus for otherworldly literary platforms — is a hidden portal that appears only once every nine years and leads to a magical island. It opens in this story to reveal four mysterious figures — a wizard, an ogre, a fey and a young hag — who have come to find the prince of their kingdom, stolen as a baby when the door last opened nine years before. In those nine years, however, the much-missed prince has been raised to become a spoiled glutton whose last wish is to be rescued...

Before beginning this sequence

As you read through the book it would be helpful to use a group Reading Journal to organise and store discussions and responses to the text. This is where they could also record and investigate any vocabulary — including Ibbotson’s invented terms — they find interesting or noteworthy and that could make its way into their own writing; they could consider the writer’s use of language and how she creates a particular effect or image. It would also be the place to record any incidental writing they do in response to the text and any non-fiction research they carry out to support their engagement with and understanding of it.

Note: *The Secret of Platform 13* is included in this year’s RT=RP programme as the “classic” text. As well as supporting the children to consider what might earn any title this designation, teachers should be aware that the book occasionally reflects the time in which it was written — it was first published in 1994 — and will want to show sensitivity around such issues as fat-shaming that — thirty years on — might now be considered discriminatory and/or bullying. These notes refer to the 25th anniversary edition published in 2019.

1: Cover and Chapters One to Three, pages 1–51

Focus: Predicting, questioning and making intertextual connections

Without sharing any initial background or context to the novel and before engaging with the text itself, start by looking together at the front cover and inviting children to share their initial impressions. You may wish to provide some questions to focus and develop their responses, for example: *what do the children see? What does it make them think about? What does it make wonder? How does it make them feel? What does the title, in conjunction with the illustration make them think about this book? What kind of book do they expect it to be? Why?*

As part of this discussion, hone in on any details on the cover that might suggest something to them about the story that lies ahead. *Who might the boy and girl be, what might be the relationship between them, what clues do you get from their facial expressions and body language, what they are wearing and carrying? What might be the significance of the blue aura around the porter in the background, the fact that the flagstoned floor is partly lit, with weeds in the cracks, and partly in shade, with cobwebs? The children may notice the old-fashioned style of the railway carriage, may read significance into the posters. They may comment on the motes of sparkling dust floating down. Does this cover remind them of anything they have read or seen before? Scribe children’s suggestions around a copy of the front cover or allow time for them to scribe their thoughts on Post-it™ notes to stick around a copy of the cover.*

In its thirty-year publication history, the title has had at least six different covers. Share these with the children to see what other predictions and speculations these might elicit.



Some children may also know Eva Ibbotson’s name from her other novels (see further reading). *If they have read other books by Eva Ibbotson (and if they haven’t it would be helpful to have copies for them to read before, after or during their reading of *The Secret of Platform 13*), what does this lead them to expect of the story and how Eva will tell it?*

At this stage avoid sharing the blurb (although this could be revisited after reading); instead read aloud the opening pages of Chapter One - from ‘*If you went into a school nowadays...*’ (p. 1) to ‘*...it took the breath away.*’ (p. 4).

Discuss children's initial response: *How does it make them feel? What do they notice? What would they like to find out? What questions do they have?* As children discuss this opening, it would be helpful to display the relevant section using a visualiser/IWB/photocopy or similar so that children can reread at their own pace and refer specifically to words or phrases within these short paragraphs. You could suggest that the class begin to consider why they think the author may have chosen to start the novel in this way, with the idea of a **gump**, with the well-known station but its mysterious platform¹. *What tone does this set for the story you are about to read?*

Note down any questions that the discussion has prompted or have children jot them down in their Reading Journals, then reread the opening and continue to read aloud the rest of Chapter One up to '*her tragic voice*' (p. 15). After hearing the rest of the chapter — in which the Island to which the Gump provides access, the mistmakers, the royal baby and his fate are all introduced — the children will have further insights, predictions and questions to discuss. Give them time to share their initial ideas in small groups and as a whole class, then hand out copies of the text so that the children can work in pairs to use text-marking and close-reading strategies to revisit the text at their own pace. Ask them to identify any words or phrases that support our understanding of how the writer makes us feel, clues to the characters that are introduced, as well as what we understand of the setting/s at this early stage in the book. They should also mark any words that they are not sure of the meaning of. After sufficient time to explore and mark their copy of the chapter, ask each pair of children to join with another pair and compare what they have noted. They might start to support each other in suggesting possible definitions for unfamiliar vocabulary. Suggest that they then summarise their discussion on Post-it™ notes, which can be collated on a class display under the following headings: *What do we know? What do we think we know? What do we want to find out?* Collect a list of the unfamiliar vocabulary that has been identified by the class and start working together to explore definitions as well as investigating the etymology of these words. *What might we infer about setting, character, etc. from the use of words such as plodged and brollachans, ellerwomen and mistmakers?*

Invite children to share and summarise their response to the text so far. The group can begin to explore this with the help of what Aidan Chambers calls '**the four basic questions**' (*Tell Me: Children, Reading & Talk with The Reading Environment*, Thimble Press 2011). These questions give children accessible starting points for discussion:

- Tell me... was there anything you liked about this text?
- Was there anything that you particularly disliked?
- Was there anything that puzzled you?
- Were there any patterns... any connections that you noticed...?

As you read on through the story, the children will benefit from regular opportunities to return to these questions and share their personal responses to the key events and character developments as they occur.

¹ Platform 9 ¾ in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Bloomsbury, 1997) postdates Ibbotson's story by three years.

Go on to read Chapter Two (pp.16–30) in which we meet the Trottes and discover the origins of their “son” Raymond. Give the children time and space to reflect on what they have read, then ask them to summarise and arrive at a shared understanding of the events described and the impact these have on the young prince and the inhabitants of the Island, as well as how the plot has been advanced. Then read Chapter Three, (pp.31–51), in which we meet Odge Gribble and learn of her family background and her quest to become part of the rescue party. *What present do you think Odge might tell the King and Queen she plans to take for their son?*

Provide copies of the text while you re-read aloud and ask the children to **text mark**, looking at the language and structure of these parts of the story and encouraging the children to identify features that stand out for them. You might also get the children to prepare their own rehearsed reading of these sections, thinking about how they might convey the tension in their reading.

Draw the group together to reflect on the character of Odge. Ask the children to complete a **Role on the Wall** for her. To do this, have a prepared template of a girl (the cover or the illustration on page 108 would work well), onto which the children can record their ideas. Ask the children to write words or phrases sharing what they know about her actions and behaviour, her outward appearance or other information about her from the story events around the outside of the outline. Then, use these to begin to infer and deduce her internal feelings and characteristics and note these on the inside of the outline.

To promote a higher level of thinking, ask the children to consider what we know about her from what she says and what is said about her by other characters and by the narrator, and what we have to infer from her choices, her body language, gestures and actions. Support the children in making explicit links between the external and internal. For example, *what does something Odge does — her interaction with the three nurses — tell us about her personality? Or how does Odge’s personality — her independence and strong will— make a specific action seem most likely?*

Encourage the children to continue to return to the **Role on the Wall** as you continue to read the story, using a different colour each time to highlight the knowledge they gain as they read on.

Finish the session by inviting the children to speculate about the rescue mission. How do you think the story might develop? How do you think the Trottes will try to hold on to Raymond? How will the four rescuers fare in the “real” world?

2: Chapters Four to Seven, pages 52–114

Focus: Close reading, summarising and clarifying

Read Chapter Four (pp. 52–74) in which the rescue party arrives in London, makes its way to Trotter Towers, and encounters Ben and then Raymond. After reading the whole chapter through, allow the children some time in small groups or as a whole class to respond to the events that have taken place. *How did it make them feel? Where there any particular moments that stood out to them or that they visualised really clearly? If so, what were they and why do they think they found them so memorable? What did they like or not like*

about this chapter? Do they have any questions? Has it answered any questions that they already had? Did it remind them of anything? What do you think might happen next, as they discover that 'the boy they liked so much [Ben] had nothing to do with them at all!'?

As you modelled for Odge they could now create their own **Role on the Wall** for Ben, who will be a key character in the unfolding story. Later, the two Roles on the Wall could also be used to point out similarities and differences between characters as well as to explore their relationships.

We also meet other interesting characters as we read on; create **pen portraits** of each of these characters. A pen portrait is an informal description of a person or a group of people, a character sketch in words; it may discuss 'hard' facts, such as age or gender, but it should also focus on 'softer' aspects, such as attitudes and appearance. It might be interesting to let the children choose the characters they think are worth noting, likely to include not just the other members of the rescue party (Cor, Gurkintrude and Hans), but the ghosts and other figures from the "real" world, such as Nanny Brown and the Trottables. Information you could include in the pen portrait might be name, appearance, background, likes and dislikes, as well as any other ideas they have expressed and your own inferences about them from what has been read.

Read on through Chapters Five and Six (pp. 75–97) where we learn more about Raymond and then Ben. As before, allow time for the children to reflect and respond to what they have read. *What do you find out about the two boys, how does the way Eva portrays them deepen your reaction to each of them? Why do you think she might have shown such contrasting behaviour in such contrasting settings (Raymond in his palace cosseted and spoiled by his ghastly mother; Ben in the hospital visiting Nanny Brown)? What do you think might be the significance of the letter she asks Celeste to help her write?*

End the session by reading the opening of Chapter Seven up to '... that's a promise' (pp. 98–104) in which the rescuers consider their task. Pause at this point to debate whether they feel that the characters *should* persist in their efforts to bring Raymond back to the Island. In groups have them jot down their reasons for abandoning the mission and the reasons for bringing the prince home. Discuss their reasoning and ask them to justify their responses based on their reading of the text so far.

Once children have discussed the merits of each option, use a **Conscience Alley** to reach a group consensus. For Conscience Alley, have the class create two parallel lines with a narrow gap between them and select one child to walk between the two lines in role as Cor/Gurkintrude/Hans/Odge. As he/she walks between the lines, each pupil should offer their advice as to what the four should do — one line trying to persuade them that she should abandon the quest, the other line persuading them to persist. When the child in role gets to the end of the line, she/he can make their decision, explaining what it was that persuaded them. You could then move into drafting a brief note of advice outlining what they should do and why — perhaps as a piece of shared writing or as an independent written outcome.

Now, read to the end of the chapter (pp. 104–114), where they meet Raymond face to face and present him with the mistmaker. *Does this scene develop the way you had expected, the way the rescuers might have hoped? Does anything stand out for you?* Children might comment on Ben's exquisite whistling and how it

contrasts with Raymond's awful brattish attitude. *What do you think each character might be feeling or thinking by the end of the chapter, and how might the story develop?*

3: Chapters Eight to Ten, pages 115–156

Focus: Visualising, predicting and empathising

Read aloud Chapters Eight and Nine (pp. 115–141) and, as before, allow time and space to reflect on and discuss what they have heard and consider: *Can you summarise what has happened in these pages? What more do you find out about the rescuers' plan to tempt Raymond back to the Island? What is the impact of the spectacle the Islanders put on? What is Raymond's reaction to the magic, and his ultimate decision and does it surprise you?*

Deepen the children's response to the spectacle and unpick how the author has elicited the response by engaging in **visualisation**. Choose selected moments the description of the spectacle (pp. 126–141) to revisit and re-read aloud. Ask the children to visualise the scene in their mind's eye as you are reading aloud, closing their eyes and picturing what is unfolding as if it were a scene in a film. You could give the children simple art materials to depict their visualisation. Read the sections you have chosen to share two or three times and then ask the children to share what they pictured and to identify key vocabulary or phrases that supported their understanding or interpretation, for example, 'the flaring torches of the wizards', 'glimmering and winking like stars', 'a skein of geese flew in perfect formation across the moon', 'three dozen snow-white doves [...] amazing aerial acrobatics', 'three spouts of water', 'the fish went on waggling and thrashing its tail', 'white shrouds', 'leather shorts [...] embroidered braces and knee socks with the tassel on the side', 'the tree was lit as brightly as on a stage', 'peaches like golden moons', 'pears as big as two fists put together', 'a man's head and a horse's body', 'it didn't have any skin', 'blood rushing around in its arteries', 'the curving shape of its stomach', 'a mass of molten metal which glinted and glittered in the light of the flares'. Ask the children why these words or phrases in particular stood out to them; *what made them so vivid or memorable?*

Read aloud Chapter Ten (pp. 142–156) and support the children in reflecting on what has happened. After Raymond - in his greed for gold - had agreed to return to the Island, *how does this chapter make you feel? Are you surprised? Why? Why not? How do you explain his mysterious disappearance? How do think his rescuers and Ben might be feeling? What more do you find out about Odge and Ben and their growing friendship? What do you think will happen next?*

4: Chapters Eleven to Fifteen, pages 157–227

Focus: Clarifying, summarising and questioning

In the five chapters the children read in this session the action really picks up and comes to a head with a spectacular climax. As always, after each chapter allow space and time to reflect on and discuss what they have heard.

In Chapter Eleven, we return to the Island and see the agonies of the Queen and meet Mrs Smith and her flight of harpies. *How does it feel to return to the kingdom and see the Queen's suffering? Do you think she is expecting Raymond to be the kind of boy we now know him to be, and how might that affect her? How does*

it affect you as a reader to have this privileged knowledge that even she his mother does not have? What impression does Mrs Smith make on you, how does she and her attitude compare to the four rescuers we have seen in action on the other side of the Gump? Do you think the harpies will become involved, and how might they alter the course of the story?

In Chapter Twelve, we find Mrs Trottle in the bath, drenching herself in her favourite scent *Maneater*, and plotting some terrible fate for Ben, and through the Plodger discover that she and Raymond are holed up at the *Hotel Astor*. *How does the news that the rescuers have located Raymond and Mrs Trottle affect you? Do you think they will now succeed in their mission? What obstacles do they still face? What more do we find out about this woman and her “son”?*

In Chapter Thirteen we join the rescue party scouting out the *Astor* and find out more about how mother and son are guarded. Children could write another note of advice, this time to the rescuers, suggesting how they could use their combined talents and those of their allies this side of the Gump to abduct Raymond from Mrs Trottle. *How will they stay safe from Bruce and Doreen Trout? What do the new characters such as the witch Mrs Frampton and Melisande add to the story and your enjoyment of it?*

In Chapter Fourteen we switch briefly back to Nanny Brown in her hospital bed, nearing her end. *What do you think is the significance of this woman who is the closest Ben has had to love and to whom who feels loyalty and duty? How might her being alive — or dead — affect the story?*

In Chapter Fifteen, everything comes to a head as the rescuers somehow succeed in seizing Raymond, but at great cost. Support the children in considering the structure and shape of the wider novel narrative; and how Eva brings all elements of the story together and sustains the pace and action of the scene in the dining room. *Do you think all will be well now that the rescuers have their hands on Raymond? What concerns do you have for Ben?*

5: Chapters Sixteen to Twenty-One, pages 228–287

Focus: Summarising and noting the text structure

Read aloud the rest of the novel, pausing to allow children time to respond, discuss and reflect on the tumultuous events described, including the harpies’ delivery of Raymond in a sack, Nanny Brown’s death, the implacable deadline of the Gump imminently reclosing, Ben’s recovery and arrival with Odge on the Island, the revelations about his identity, and Odge’s roller-coaster of emotions.

Invite them to share how the resolution of the story has affected them, and how they feel about the book as a whole. Consider: *How do you think each of the characters feels at the end? How do you know? Are you satisfied about the way the story ends? Do you feel this is the right outcome for Odge and for Ben, for the King and Queen, for Raymond and Mrs Trottle? Would you change anything? How do you think the author wants us to feel about Ben and Odge, and what they might go on to do?*

Sibéal Pounder has written a sequel to this title set in the same storyworld, and the children might consider what other adventures Ben and Odge or other characters we have met might have, how the characters we have encountered here might develop.

Invite the children to choose and read aloud short extracts of this final section that they particularly enjoyed or found effective, sharing the reasons why they selected them. This could include further **text marking**, giving them insights - for example - into how the author sustains tension, paces action, uses dialogue for effect or leaves a cliff-hanger, depending on the excerpts the children choose.

Revisit Aidan Chambers' basic questions, giving the children the opportunity to reflect:

- *Did you enjoy this story? Why? If so, what did you most like about it?*
- *What puzzles did it contain?*
- *What links do you see to other stories you already know?*

On the back cover Philip Pullman is quoted: **'This kind of fun will never fail to delight'**. *Do you agree with him? Did you find the book fun? Are you delighted? Does this capture the way the book feels for you? Who do you think would enjoy this book? What would you say to them about it? How could you make an enticing recommendation without giving away too much of the plotline?*

Discuss how the children feel about the book now compared to their original expectations, and their discussions based on the different covers we shared: *When you first saw this book, even before you read it, what kind of book did you think it was going to be? What made you think this? Now you've read it, is it as you expected? Have you read other books like it? How is this one the same? How is it different? Look back at the cover of the book, and the blurb. Does the content reflect the front cover and vice versa? What do you think makes this book a classic?*

You could also:

- Consider the different characters, the plot and the different settings. Children might like to repeat the visualisation activity with different settings, e.g., the nurses' cave, the Gump on Platform 13, the garden shed at Trottles Towers, the dining room of the *Hotel Astor*...
 - *How does the author use the different settings? How important do you think they are to the story? Do the vividly described settings help to create a credible background to the story?*
 - *Which character, aspect of the story, incident or episode interested the group the most?*
 - *Did any of the characters remind you of characters in other books?*
- Review the story in chronological order and consider the different emotions that Ode and Ben have felt throughout the story, the high and low points, using the **Role on the Wall** to support discussion of their emotional journey. They could also revisit and refine their Pen Portraits and review their storymap to support their recall of the story.
- You could use **hot-seating** to explore the feelings of any of the characters further. In hot-seating one member of the group role-plays a central character from a poem or story and is interviewed by the other children. This activity involves children closely examining a character's motivation and responses.
- The children could work collaboratively to choose words that describe a character's emotions at different points of the story. Write these on post-it notes and then organise them to demonstrate shades of emotional intensity that they have felt in the story and create a **graph of emotion**. You could

also explore the emotional journey of other characters such as Cor, the Queen, Mrs Smith, Nanny Brown or even Raymond or Mrs Trottle!

- Through modelling, ask the children to describe their favourite part of the story. Provide the children with an oral scaffold for example: *the most memorable part of the story was... because...; my top moment in the story was... because...* and in pairs ask them to identify their favourite part of the narrative. Encourage children to give reasons for their choices and invite some children to share these.
- If possible, leave copies of the book in the book corner for the children to revisit and re-read in independent reading time, by themselves or socially in a group.

Suggested titles to further support the exploration of themes arising from the book:

Further Books by – or inspired by - Eva Ibbotson:

- [*Beyond Platform 13*](#), Sibéal Pounder, illustrated by Beatriz Castro (Pan Macmillan)
- [*One Dog and His Boy*](#), illustrated by Sharon Rentta (Marion Lloyd Books)
- [*The Abominables*](#) (Marion Lloyd Books)
- [*The Star of Kazan*](#) (Macmillan Children's Books)
- [*Journey to the River Sea*](#) (Macmillan Children's Books)

Other Classic Fantasy and/or Adventure Chapter Books:

- *Dragon Rider*, by Cornelia Funke, translated by Anthea Bell (Chicken House)
- *Inkheart*, by Cornelia Funke, translated by Anthea Bell (Chicken House)
- *Moondial*, by Helen Cresswell (Faber & Faber)
- *How to Train Your Dragon*, by Cressida Cowell (Hachette Children's Books)
- *The Eagle of the Ninth*, Rosemary Sutcliffe (Oxford University Press)
- *The Dark is Rising*, by Susan Cooper (Puffin Books)
- *A Wizard of Earthsea*, by Ursula K. Le Guin (Puffin Books)
- *The Neverending Story*, by Michael Ende, translated by Ralph Manheim (Puffin Books)
- *The Wee Free Men*, by Terry Pratchett (Puffin Books), and other books in the Tiffany Aching series
- *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, by Rick Riordan (Puffin Books)
- *A Wrinkle in Time*, by Madeleine L'Engle (Puffin Books)
- *Artemis Fowl*, by Eoin Colfer (Puffin Books)
- *The Amulet of Samarkand*, by Jonathan Stroud (Puffin Books)
- *Kiki's Delivery Service*, by Eiko Kadono, illustrated by Joe Todd-Stanton, translated by Emily Balistreri (Puffin Books)
- *The Name of This Book is Secret*, by Pseudonymous Bosch (Usborne Books)

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