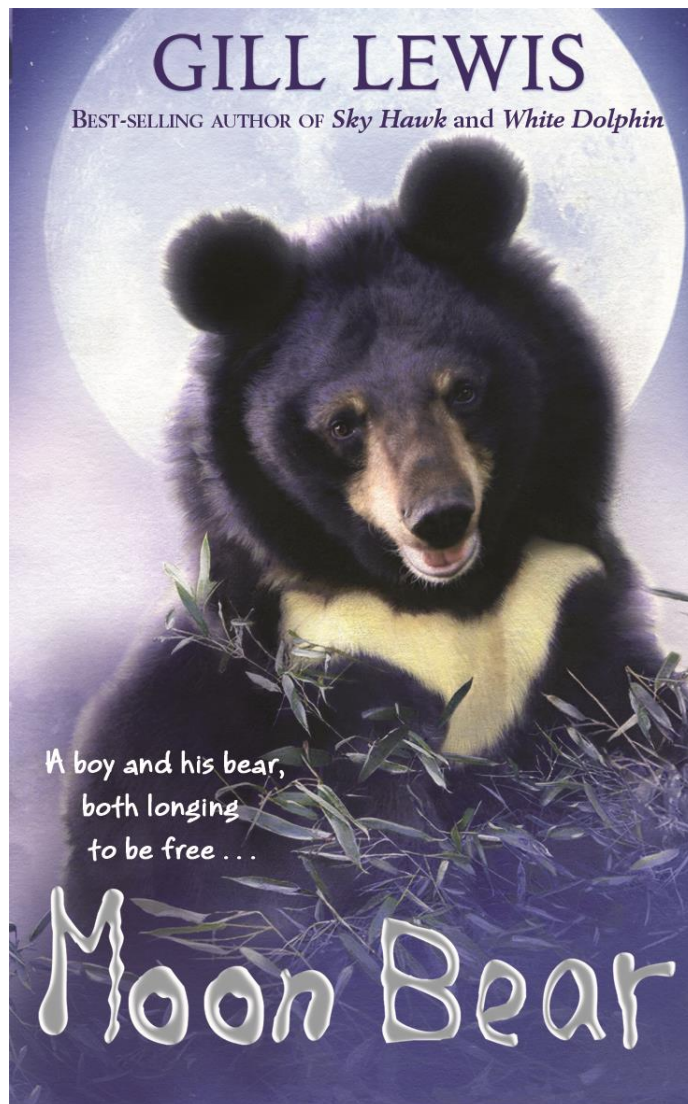


# Moon Bear

Ideas for exploring Gill Lewis's novel with  
children aged 10+



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## Introduction

When a sick cub arrives at the cruel bear farm, no one expects it to survive. But twelve-year-old Tam refuses to give up hope—he nurses the bear back to health and they form an unbreakable bond.

Tam swears to return his bear to the wild—but in a world torn apart by indifference and greed, will Tam ever be able to keep his promise?

Ideal as a class reader or reading group text for young people aged 10+, *Moon Bear* provides extensive opportunities for reflection and discussion on a range of themes, such as:

- Friendship
- Hope and freedom
- Exploitation of animals
- Issues of social inequality
- Environmental issues related to deforestation
- Tourism in developing countries.

To follow are ideas for using the book to reflect on and explore some of these themes through discussion, research, and creativity.



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# First Impressions

## • Things To Think and Talk About

Discuss Tam's character. What is important to him? What motivates him? (*Give examples from the story*).

What hard things does Tam have to face in the book? How do you think he keeps going when life is so hard?

What shocked or concerned you most in the story?

How did you feel at the end of the story? Why?

## • Group Activity

Imagine you were interviewing the author. What questions would you ask her? (*about Tam, the bears, and the situations in the country*). Write a list as a group.

## • Find Out More

Find Laos on a map (there is one included in the back of the book). Use books or the internet to find out more about the country. Draw and label a map with important features of the country (main regions, climate, Mekong River, capital city etc) and illustrate it with the flag and other aspects of the country (e.g. agriculture, religion).

Here are a few useful websites:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15351898>

<http://kids.nationalgeographic.co.uk/kids/places/find/laos/>

<http://www.factmonster.com/ipka/A0107702.html>

## • Get Creative

Produce an illustrated 'timeline' of the story with the main events in order, starting with Tam living in the mountains and ending with him at the bear sanctuary.



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# The Bears

## • Things To Think and Talk About

Discuss the contrast between Tam's view of the wild bears in the mountains (p3-10) and the caged bears at the farm when he first arrives (p63-65). Think about how the bears move, sound, smell, and look. How does Tam respond emotionally and practically to the condition of the bears at the farm? Why does he risk so much for them?

How does the reader know that Tam cares for the bears? Find examples of the language used to express the affection between Sôok-Dii and Tam.

(e.g. 'I was falling asleep as I felt him crawl against me . . . he gave a low humming sound from deep inside his chest . . .' (p108), 'I pressed my head against the bars and Sôok-Dii pushed his tongue out and licked my forehead' (p214), 'He stumbles across in fast strides and nuzzles into me, making the deep humming sound in his chest. I push my face into his fur . . .' (p282)).

Read p144-147 and p168-170 together. What are Tam's concerns about making Sôok-Dii perform for the tourists? Why does he continue to do it? How does this eventually contribute to the bear's rescue? Do you think in this case the end justifies the means?

Talk about the character of the Doctor. What is his attitude to the bears and his customers? What motivates him? What or whom does he fear?

## • Group Activity

Imagine Kham has come up with a new and more daring way for the bear to perform. Role play or write a conversation between Kham and Tam as he tries to persuade Tam to go ahead with it. What would Tam's counter arguments be? (*This gives an opportunity to articulate some of the dilemmas and motivations of the two characters*).

## • Find Out More

What is a moon bear? Research their habitats and endangered status and make a 'fact file,' adding to the facts found at the end of the book. The links below provide facts about moon bears.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/wildfacts/factfiles/10.shtml>

<http://www.bornfree.org.uk/animals/moon-bears/facts/>

<http://www.animalsasia.org/index.php?UID=2JoNIOGTVCA>

## • Get Creative

Use paint, pastels, or collage to create a picture of a healthy moon bear in its natural habitat.



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## Tam's relationships

### • Things To Think and Talk About

Tam's family feature in the story, although he is away from them for much of it. Discuss how his feelings towards and responsibility for his family influence his actions throughout the story.

What is Tam and Noy's friendship like at the start of the story? How does this change when they meet again in the city? How does Tam feel about Noy's betrayal? Why does he not want to tell Noy's brother?

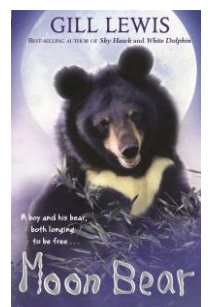
Talk about how Tam's friendship with Kham develops through the story. What are the key moments that bring them together? How does the author use speech to show the changes in their friendship? (*For example, the scorn on p53 when Tam asks about the bear farm, 'Kham snorted a laugh. "Don't you know?"' contrasted with the warmth on p149, 'He smiled. "If we earn enough today, I'll buy you [a chocolate croissant]"*).

Savanh plays a crucial role in the story but the reader only meets her halfway through (p159). How surprised were you that Tam and she become friends? What brings them together? Is their friendship even-sided? (p182, 215, 227-233, 238-241, 249-254).

Imagine you visited Tam at the bear sanctuary and asked him about the important people in his life. What do you think he might say about some of the characters in the book? Who would he say was a true friend? What reasons would he give? (*This gives an opportunity to explore the different relationships and consider important qualities in a friendship, as well as reflecting on lessons Tam has learnt about friendship*).

### • Get Creative

Make a 'word cloud' of all the relationships Tam experiences. Use just the names or add in words describing the relationships. Think about how to use different styles, colours, fonts, sizes, and positioning to represent the relationships. See [www.wordle.net](http://www.wordle.net) for examples or to produce an online version.



# Tourism

## • Things To Think and Talk About

Talk about how the tourists respond when they see Sôok-Dii in the city. Why do they pay to have their photos taken?

Which tourists does Kham say they should target? Why?

Read p135-138 together to 'a tonic for the way home'. Discuss why you think the tourists come to visit the bear farm. What does Tam mean when he says, 'They saw what they wanted to see, and then they walked away, and they forgot.' (p138)?

Discuss how important tourists are to the bear sanctuary. How will they contribute to rescuing more bears?

## • Group Activity

Look at some tourist information from Laos (brochures from a travel agent, or images and information from the internet e.g. [www.tourismlaos.org](http://www.tourismlaos.org)). What attractions are promoted to visitors? Talk about how the country is portrayed through the pictures and descriptions and think about what is hidden from the eyes of visitors. What are the pros and cons of foreign tourism for a country like Laos?

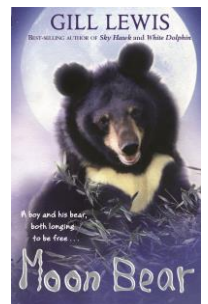
Additional information from an aid agency website e.g. <http://www.savethechildren.org.au/where-we-work/south-east-asia/lao-pdr.html> could provide more information on the contrast between the tourist trail and realities faced by some local communities.

## • Find Out More

Look at websites such as [www.greendiscoverylaos.com](http://www.greendiscoverylaos.com) that promote ecotourism. Find out what experiences are available to the traveller and the benefits they offer to local communities and the environment.

## • Get Creative

Design a poster or leaflet to encourage tourists to visit the bear sanctuary. Think about how you will use images and language to persuade people that they should visit.



# Rights and wrongs: bear farming and logging

## • Things To Think and Talk About

Talk about the conditions the bears were kept in. How did you feel when you read about them?

Why do you think the Doctor wanted to run the bear farm when the UCDA (p72 and 77) can be made in a laboratory?

Discuss the effect of logging on Tam, his family, and their environment.

How did you feel when Tam reached the ridge and saw the forest had all been cleared (p271-272)?

Tam's village was destroyed to build a dam to create electricity. Do you think this was right? What are the ways in which logging and the construction of dams can benefit or harm a country's economy and people?

'Grandfather said the chief had sold our freedom. Pa said he had no choice.' (p20). Talk about the two men's different views. Who do you think was right?

## • Group Activity

Imagine someone who desperately wants bear bile from a farm for his sick child. He strongly believes that traditional medicine is effective and the best bile is fresh and from a strong bear. Split the group in two and prepare arguments to hold a debate on the subject: 'bear farming is unpleasant but necessary'.

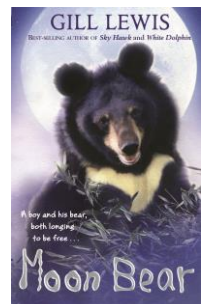
OR:

Hold a debate about the pros and cons of logging. One side represents a villager like the chief of Tam's village, the other a dam builder like General Chan. Why do the arguments like those of the villagers have little influence in decision-making in the real world?

## • Find Out More

If suitable for the group, find out more about how moon bears are being rescued in Asia:

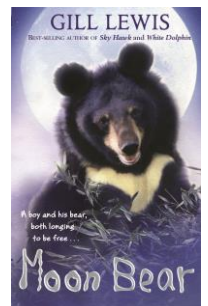
A series of videos (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGzg8q6oYsU>) document the rescue and rehabilitation of moon bears in China by AnimalsAsia, but contain brief footage of a bear farm that some may find distressing. We'd strongly recommend watching the video first before watching with the group, and use your judgement as to whether particular members of the group would find the footage too upsetting.



[www.animalsasia.org](http://www.animalsasia.org) is a charity working to end bear farming. The website contains helpful and encouraging information about the rescue work but there are some upsetting facts, images and video in places. The children's section may be useful for younger members of the group.

- **Get Creative**

Read p1-6 carefully, noting the elements of the mountain forest landscape which are described. Use pastels or watercolours to create an impression of the beauty and wildness of the landscape as Tam sees it at night.





## Wrapping up

### • Things To Think and Talk About

“I may be small,” said Nâm-pèng, “but I am not alone. Did you not hear the bees?” (The First Storm) At the end of the story, Tam’s grandfather reminds him of this old story, saying “Tam, you are like Nâm-pèng . . . You are not alone. Do you not hear the bees?” (p284) Talk about what Grandfather means. Why did the author choose to start and end the story like this?

When Sôok-Dii arrives, the driver says he will bring good luck and great fortune and his name in Lao means good luck. Discuss the ways in which he brings good luck and great fortune to those around him.

Read p 164-165 together. Talk about Tam’s thoughts about freedom. Do you agree with him that freedom may be ‘just an idea, a thought, a feeling’?

On p278 Tam tells the reader that the bears in the sanctuary are ‘as close as they can get to freedom’. What does this mean for the bears? Talk about whether or not the freedom experienced by Tam and his family at the end of the story is different from that of the bears.

Look at the ending of each chapter. How does the author make you want to read on? (e.g. ending chapters at crucial points in the plot and the use of short sentences to add tension, especially in early chapters).

### • Group Activity

Some may say this book is upsetting to read, but others may view it as an inspirational story that could help people to change the world. Collect reasons for each point of view and vote as a group on whether you would recommend it to others and why.

OR

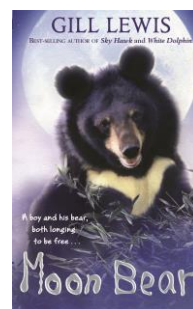
Revisit the timeline produced at the beginning. Add on any other significant points in the story and then use the timeline to ‘graph’ the points of high and low hope throughout the story in the background of the timeline.

AND/OR

Revisit the questions you wrote for the author at the start. Are you more able to answer any of them now?

### • Find Out More

Read a selection of traditional/folk tales from other cultures (e.g. *Tales from China* retold by Cyril Birch or *Stories for a Fragile Planet* by Kenneth Steven and Jane Ray). How do these stories help people to understand situations they face in real life and/or their relationship with the world around them?



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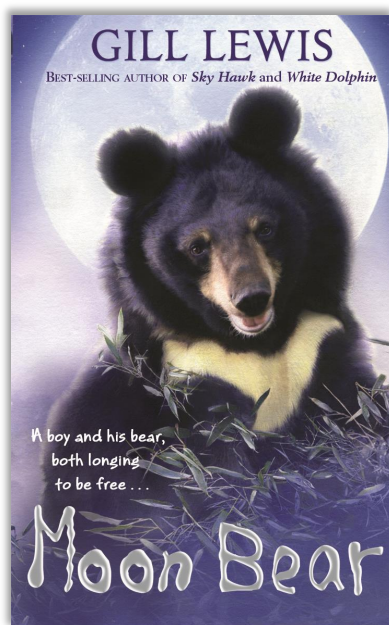
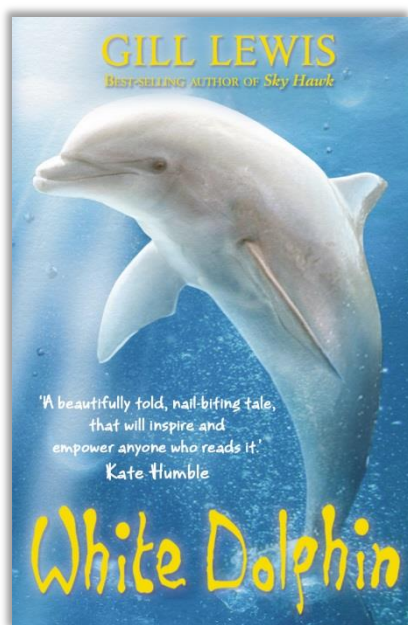
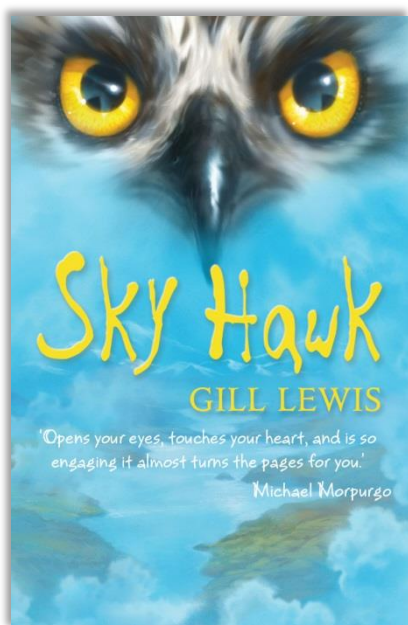
## About the author

Gill Lewis spent much of her childhood in the garden where she ran a small zoo and a veterinary hospital for creepy-crawlies, mice, and birds. When she grew up she became a real vet and travelled from the Arctic to Africa in search of interesting animals and places.

Gill now writes books for children. Her debut novel, *Sky Hawk* was published to much critical acclaim and has been translated into twenty languages.

She lives in the depths of Somerset with her husband and three children and writes from a tree house in the company of squirrels.

Visit [www.gilllewis.com](http://www.gilllewis.com) for more information about Gill.



***Sky Hawk* and *White Dolphin* reading notes** are also available via the Oxford University Press website: [www.oxfordchildrens.co.uk](http://www.oxfordchildrens.co.uk)



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