

Captain Congo and the Klondike Gold
Ruth Starke / Greg Holfeld

TEACHER NOTES
By Janet McLean

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Author: **Ruth Starke** is a full-time writer, with over 20 books published since she began writing in 1992. She also works part-time at the Flinders University of South Australia, and at Adelaide TAFE, teaching English and creative writing. Before becoming a writer Ruth worked in many different jobs - of which the most interesting, she says, were selling French perfume in Harrods, cooking on the radio, taking tourists to Kashmir, and interviewing Grand Prix drivers. Ruth's books include *NIPS XI* (an Honour Book (Younger Readers) in the 2001 CBC Awards), *Orphans of the Queen* (short-listed for both the 2005 NSW and Queensland Premiers' Awards, winner of an Aurealis award, and *Coming Out*, a CBC Notable Book (1998). This is the third in the Captain Congo graphic picture book series. The others are: *Captain Congo and the Crocodile King* (shortlisted for the 2009 CBC Picture Book of the Year), and *Captain Congo and the Maharaja's Monkey*.

Illustrator: **Greg Holfeld** was born in Canada and moved to Australia in 1991 after several years of travelling and country hopping. He has spent much of his career as an animator and cartoonist. In between directing and producing his own animated films, he works as a freelance animator with an Adelaide production house, and a book illustrator. He has illustrated several titles by Working Title Press including *The Perfect Pet*, *Wolf's Sunday Dinner* and *You Must be Joking!* And the first two of the Captain Congo series, *Captain Congo and the Crocodile King* (shortlisted for the 2009 CBC Picture Book of the Year), and *Captain Congo and the Maharaja's Monkey*. Greg has happy memories of being a "comic-crazy 8-year-old", and wants to share the pleasure with today's young readers.

SYNOPSIS This is the third book in the 'Captain Congo' series. In this story the heroes, Captain Congo and his trusty assistant, Pug, board the Yukon Express and travel deep into the great Canadian northwest. The Agency has sent them to Klondike Creek to investigate sightings of blue lights, ghosts and monsters. As always clever, brave Captain Congo uses his sharp wits, his strength, his shooting stick, and just a bit of luck to outwit and overpower the villains, and to find a lost goldmine.

WRITING STYLE

Captain Congo and the Klondike Gold is a comic picture book. Creating a comic book is very much a collaborative process between the writer and the illustrator, combining words and images in a very specific way. For a writer a comic book is not just about putting words into speech balloons. Ruth Starke has created an exciting adventure story with heroes and villains, danger and courage, humour and a satisfying ending. *Captain Congo and the Klondike Gold* is a sequential narrative incorporating an action-packed plot, compelling characters, and an exotic setting. Several comic techniques are used to relate the story. These include image panels, gutters, speech balloons and text boxes. Most of the language used in this book is carried in speech balloons indicating the conversation and thoughts of characters. In this way the reader gathers information about settings, personalities, feelings, what is happening, what may happen, and what has happened in the past. Text boxes provide space for captions that can show time shifts and transitions, and introduce new scenes. For example: *A few hours later... Later, on board... At Lake Bennett...*); these boxes are also used to provide additional information, to fill in some details and to explain unusual words. For example on page 26 we learn that Captain Congo is “three times winner of the Pan-African White Water Rafting Rally”; and on page 20 that “sourdough” is “the nickname for an old timer”.

ILLUSTRATIONS **Greg Holfeld** used a sable brush and a crowquill pen dipped in ink for the illustrations in this book. Colour was created afterwards with Photoshop. Each page is divided into a series of panels. Gutters separate the panels. Each panel frames an episode or incident from the story. The artist works through a number of stages to develop the drawings for each panel. First the pictures are sketched out roughly in pencil. The pencil lines are then drawn over with waterproof black ink. The final stage is to add the colour. Greg Holfeld used Photoshop, a digital imaging computer program to add the colour. The size, number and placement of panels on each page vary depending on the specific incidents that are being depicted and the pace of the story. Greg has used different techniques to guide the reader’s eye. For example: on page 15 there are five panels – two small panels in the top row, and three long panels in the bottom row. The first of the smaller panels shows one of the villains creeping up behind Captain Congo. The next top row panel is a close-up of Captain Congo, his face straight ahead, his eyes looking back, his hand reaching behind to grab the villain. In the three long panels Greg uses perspective to dramatically depict the confined space: first Captain Congo lifting the villain above his head, second, the arc of the villain’s fall, and third, Pug’s spectacular rescue, with the white lines representing the speeding train. Greg also uses a range of visual techniques to depict how the characters are feeling. For example on page 27

the fear of the miners is highlighted through the use of colour, fearful facial expressions and animated body language. At the top of page 40 Greg uses classic comic techniques to depict a fight – the yellow arc showing the wild swing of a pickaxe, the ‘splat’ at the point of impact, and the body flying through mid-air.

DISCUSSION POINTS AND FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

- This story is set in the great Canadian northwest. Find out more about the Klondike – the weather, the landscape, the seasons, the lifestyle of the people who live there. Are there still goldmines operating in the area?
- The map on the endpapers helps you pinpoint where the action is taking place. As you read through the book refer to the map to plot the heroes’ journey, from Skagway in Alaska, to Lake Bennett in Canada, then down the White Horse Rapids, to the Yukon Mines at Klondike Creek.
- Choose one character to follow through the story. You could choose Pug – how does he help Captain Congo? How does Captain Congo help him? Is he brave? You could choose one of the villains to follow from when they first appear through to the end of the story. What do you find out about the characters? Consider what the character says or thinks. Look carefully at the drawings. How does the body language and facial expressions add to your understanding of the character?
- Look at other examples of comics. graphic novels.
- Talk about and research the different graphic elements that are used in comic books
 - Speech balloons – different types are used to signify different kinds of language, e.g. speech, thoughts, screams, whispers.
 - Boxes for captions – what kind of information do these contain?
 - Panels – how does the artist use the layout, the size and the number of panels help to create the story
 - Gutters – these divide the panels
 - Lettering – different styles of lettering may be used for titles and sounds
 - Talk about how turning points in the story are often placed in the last panel on a page.
- Work alone or, like Ruth Starke and Greg Holfeld, work with another person to make a comic strip or comic book.
 - Write or plot out a story with characters, setting, and plot.
 - Remember to include heroic deeds, danger, and intrigue and, of course, humour.

- Decide which scenes should be included.
 - Choose a panel layout for each page.
 - Sketch the scenes into the panels.
 - When you are happy with the sketches, go over the pencil lines with a black ink line.
 - Add colour. Use watercolour, felt tip pens, crayons, or coloured pencils.
 - Don't forget to decide where the speech balloons, boxes, etc will be placed – leave room for them.
 - Finally write in the words – speech in solid line balloons, and thoughts in dotted line balloons, captions in boxes.
- Find examples in the story of how Captain Congo uses his wits, his amazing strength, and his shooting stick, to foil the villains and to get out of dangerous situations.
 - Investigate how comics can be created using computer programs
 - Find out more about the art of comic book writing and illustrating.
 - Talk about your own favourite comic book characters. Why do you like these characters?
 - Using the characters and dialogue in *Captain Congo and the Klondike Gold*, develop a classroom play
 - Develop classroom plays with your own stories.
 - Find out more about Ruth Starke and Greg Holfeld. Visit their websites:

Ruth Starke: <http://www.ruthstarke.itgo.com/>

Greg Holfeld: http://www.panicproductions.com.au/Panic_Productions/bio.html