

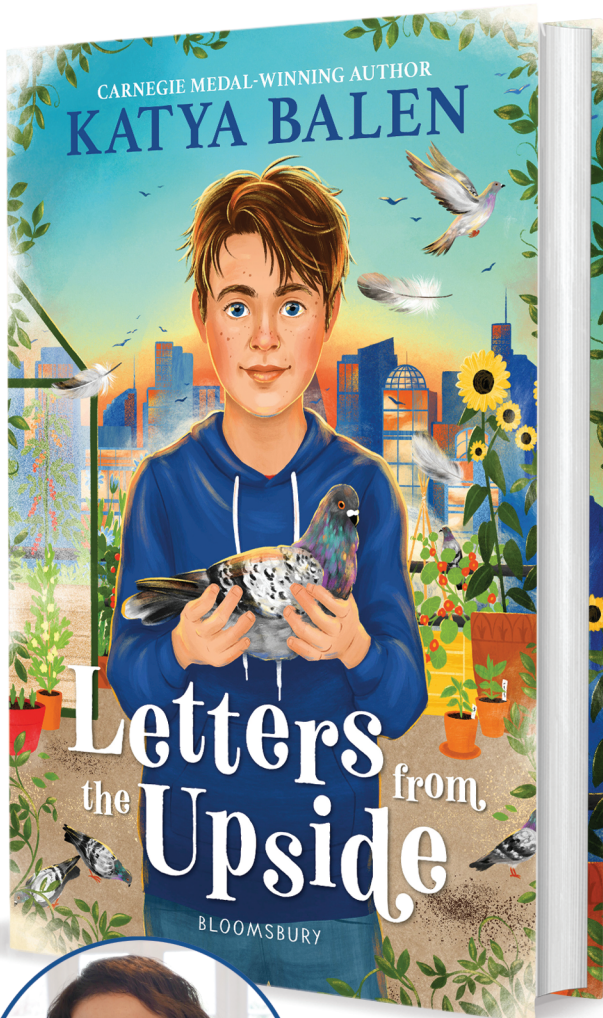
Letters from the Upside

KATYA BALEN

Educational resource pack



ABOUT THE BOOK



A captivating story about finding friendship and hope, and a place where you can spread your wings. From Carnegie Medal-winner Katya Balen.

Con has been angry ever since Dad left. He doesn't want to be. He wants to play FIFA with his best friend Kyron; to make his mum proud; to let people's words about his dad roll off him like water. Instead, rage builds inside him until he explodes. Now even Kyron is scared of him. And when Con gets suspended from school, he knows he's let everyone down. The good person he longs to be feels unreachable.

And then his neighbour, Mr Williams, lets him in on a secret.

Up on the roof of Con's building, Mr Williams keeps homing pigeons. Their feathers are the colour of pearls and storm clouds. Every day they fly out, carrying messages to people in other towns before finding their way home. Mr Williams wants Con's help looking after them. Con can't believe it. How could someone like him be trusted with these delicate creatures? But slowly, Con begins to believe that he can.

Then Mr Williams goes away for a few days. Con is left in charge, and he begins to wonder whether the pigeons might be able to bring home more than just messages. Perhaps they could find his dad.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katya Balen is an award-winning author of books for children. Her debut novel, *The Space We're In*, was highly commended for the Branford Boase Award, *October, October* won the Yoto Carnegie Medal and the UKLA Book Award, *The Light in Everything* was shortlisted for the Yoto Carnegie Medal and *Ghostlines* was crowned an Indie Book Awards 2025 winner. When she's not writing books, Katya likes to scroll through dog-rescue websites, bake and attempt to keep her house plants alive. She lives in London with her partner and their dog.



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Ages 9+ Notes for Teachers

Explore themes of: ✓ Family ✓ Hope ✓ Growth ✓ Acceptance ✓ Self-belief

Subject Checklist: ✓ English ✓ PSHE ✓ Art and design ✓ Drama

The activities included here are suitable for the classroom or library sessions.

CONTENTS

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Book Cover Prompts
2. Theme Circles

EXTRACT FOCUS 1 – CON’S ANGER

Activities: Write ‘Thought Balloons’ for Con when he feels angry.

Objectives: Step into Con’s shoes, explore his thoughts and feelings, and reflect on how he might manage his emotions in a difficult situation.

EXTRACT FOCUS 2 – THE UPSIDE

Activities: Design a special safe space.

Objectives: Reflect on the idea of a special place (real or imagined) that helps students feel safe or hopeful.

FURTHER ACTIVITY IDEAS



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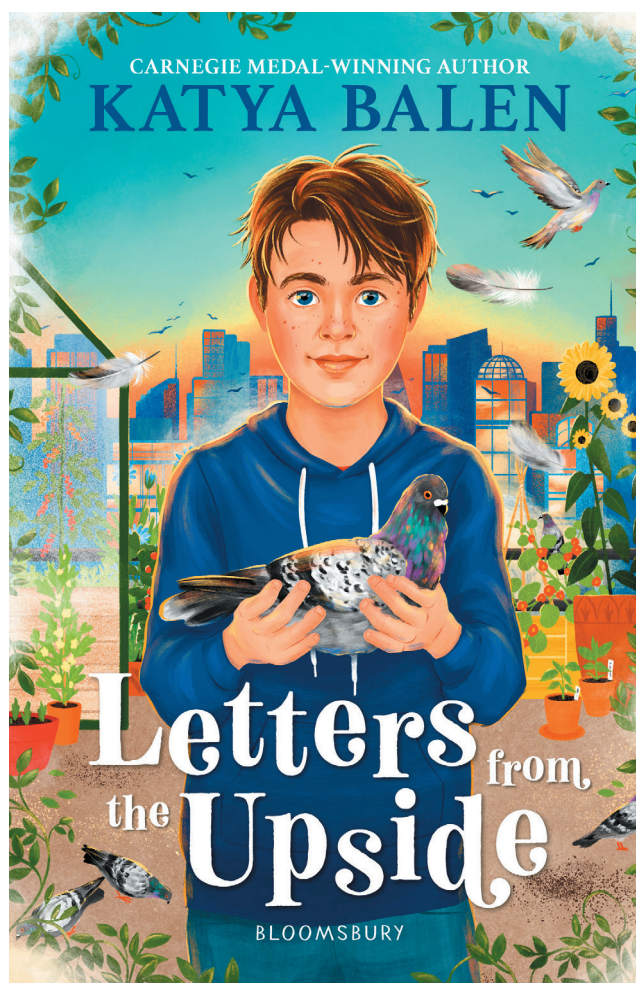
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PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

BOOK COVER PROMPTS



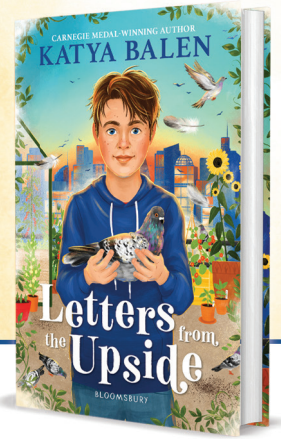
- What is your initial reaction to the cover? How does it make you feel?
- What do the various elements in this image or colours used suggest about the story or its themes?
- What mood does the cover convey? How might this reflect the story?
- Do you think the cover hints at the main characters or their emotions? How?
- Based on the cover, what kind of story do you expect (a big adventure or an emotional journey)?
- Can you connect anything on the cover to your own experiences or feelings?
- What questions does the cover make you want to ask about the story?



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THEME CIRCLES

Use the **theme-based discussion circles** below to have small-group conversations. Each circle has a theme that appears in the story, a 'big question', and some prompts to help you keep your discussion flowing.

- Put each theme on a card around the classroom and rotate in groups.
- Share ideas on each theme in a circle.
- Alternatively, use the circles as **writing prompts**: jot down your thoughts for 2–3 minutes before sharing your ideas.

Theme: Responsibility

Big Question:

How can responsibility change who we are?

- What different responsibilities can we have?
- What can we learn from taking responsibility?
- Have you ever had a responsibility that felt scary at first but made you proud later?

Theme: Family

Big Question:

What does family mean to you?

- Do you think family always has to mean the people we live with?
- Who do you consider to be your family?
- In what ways can family members support each other?

Theme: Anger

Big Question:

Is anger always a bad thing?

- What makes us angry?
- Can anger ever help us make positive changes?
- How do you deal with anger in a healthy way?

Theme: Trust

Big Question:

What does it mean to be trusted?

- Why is it important that we trust ourselves?
- How do people show trust in others?
- Can trust be earned back if it's broken?

Theme: Hope

Big Question:

Why is hope so important?

- When do we need hope?
- How can hope help people in real life when things feel difficult?
- Do you think hope makes us stronger or more vulnerable?

Theme: Healing

Big Question:

What helps us to heal?

- What role do friends and neighbours play in healing?
- How do small acts of kindness make a difference?
- What else helps us to heal?

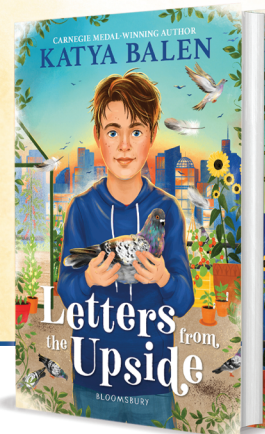
Challenge: Revisit the Theme Circles when you have finished reading *Letters from the Upside*. What new ideas do you have? What else would you like to discuss?



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EXTRACT FOCUS ONE: CON'S ANGER

Read the extract below taken from pages 23–34.

Mickey walked past. He wanted to play Connect4. Not with me though. *Not with that maggotty loser* he hissed. He leaned towards me and whispered across the desk *Where's your dad, eh, maggotty loser? You don't even know, do you? Yeah, I wouldn't leave a number either.* And as soon as his words floated towards me I wanted to do it. I couldn't stop myself doing it. There was a burning in my bones and a fire was licking and gnawing and spreading and it was running like lava through my blood. It took over. Like it always does. Mrs Kennedy says I have a short fuse. Always seconds away from an explosion. *Kaboom.*

I curled up my fist and I pulled back my arm and I hit him in the face. There was a crunch like biting down on too many crisps all at once and it made me feel sick. I could feel the raw burn of my knuckles and I saw all the blood and I was surprised even though that's stupid. Of course there was going to be blood. I'd hit him. Hard. But it was so red it didn't even look real. It was shining and plasticky. It was like my Connect4 counters had melted into a bright puddle. It was like something from a cartoon and for a second I thought *This must be a dream.* A fake. I hadn't really done this. But then my hand throbbed and the blood from Mickey's face sprayed and speckled the desk between us and we both just blinked at it. Everything had stopped. Except the blood. That kept coming. Endless ribbons and spots and streams of it.

Then Mickey started screaming.

Everyone else looked over and they saw the blood on the desk and on my hands and on Mickey's face and they started screaming too. Blood pools. Maya said she was going to be sick and then Tomos actually was sick and then there was even more screaming and the noise rose and rolled all around me until all I could see was blood and all I could hear was screams. The Connect4 stand was knocked over and the counters clattered to the floor. *Click click click.* Red and yellow puddles. Mr Townsend ran over and he didn't say a single word for a second and there was just this moment when it felt like everything was frozen. Like I could maybe rewind. Unclench my fist and pull back time and turn away from Mickey and let his words bounce off me like I was made of rubber. Put my thoughts into balloons and let them float off into the sky, just like Mrs Kennedy is always telling me. Think before I act. Use words. Keep calm. Stay on my cloud. Keep floating in the sky.

But I couldn't do any of that.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are your first thoughts when you read this part of the story? How do you feel about Con? Do your feelings change as you think more about what happens?
2. What does Mickey do or say that makes Con so upset?
3. How does Katya Balen show us what Con's anger feels like inside his body? Which words or phrases help you imagine it most clearly?
4. Sometimes the writing feels a bit like a dream, compared to what is really happening. Do you agree? Can you find an example of where this happens?
5. Why do you think the author keeps mentioning the Connect4 game? What might it mean?
6. How do other people in the story react to Con?
7. How does Con feel when he realises what he has done? What does he wish had happened instead?
8. Why do you think Con loses control? Do you understand why he acted this way, or do you think he was wrong? Why?

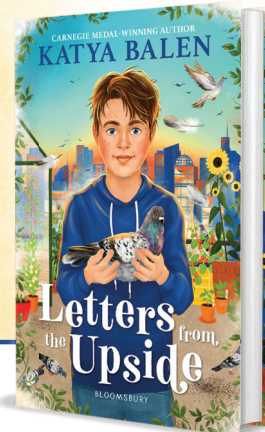




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ACTIVITY: THOUGHT BALLOONS

Step 1: Freeze Frame – Stepping into Con’s Shoes

In this part of the story, Con has a choice about how to react to what Mickey says.

Work in groups of three to explore this moment.

1. **Assign roles** – one person is Mickey, one is Con and one is a classmate. Take turns so everyone tries each role.
2. **Act it out** – Mickey walks past Con and says something unkind or provocative.
3. **Use your voice** – Practise saying Mickey’s lines in a deliberately unkind or provoking way.
4. **Freeze the moment** – At the point where Con decides how to react, hold a freeze frame.
5. **Reflect together** – Discuss how it felt to be in each role. How did it feel to be Con? Mickey? The classmate watching?

Step 2: Thought Balloons – What’s on Con’s Mind?

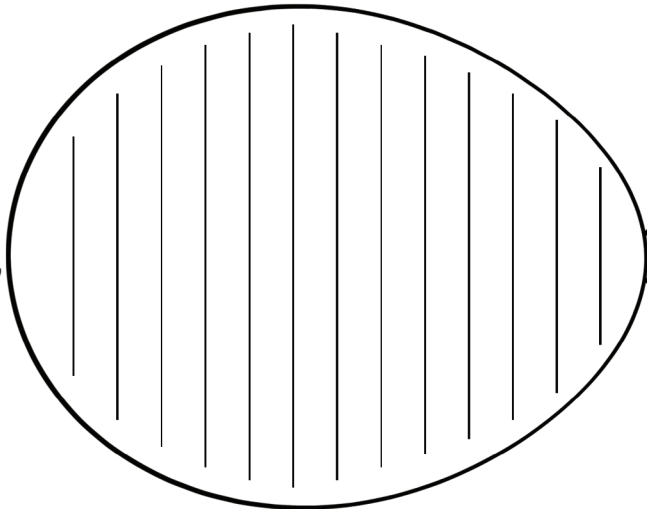
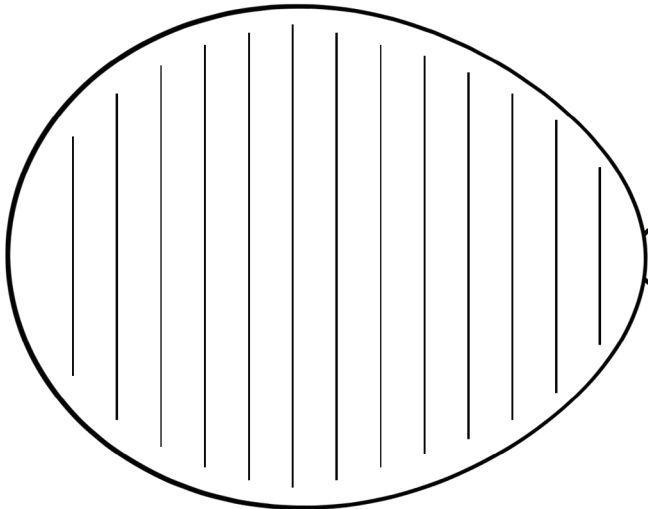
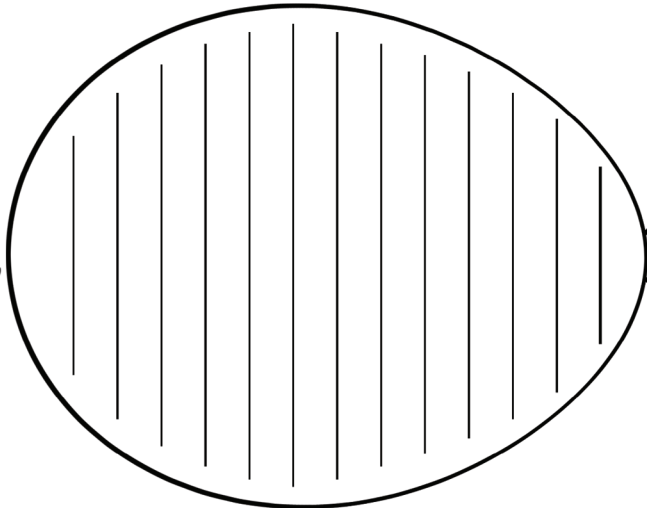
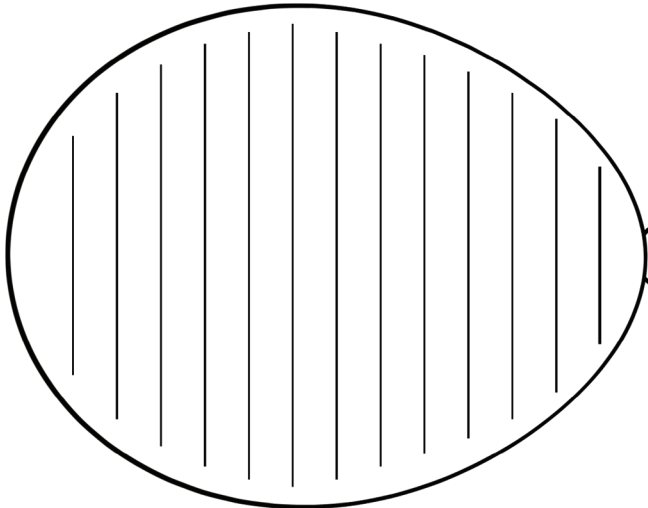
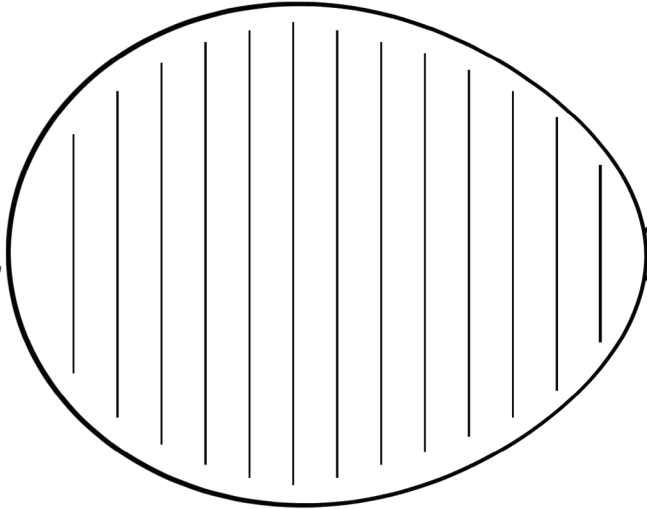
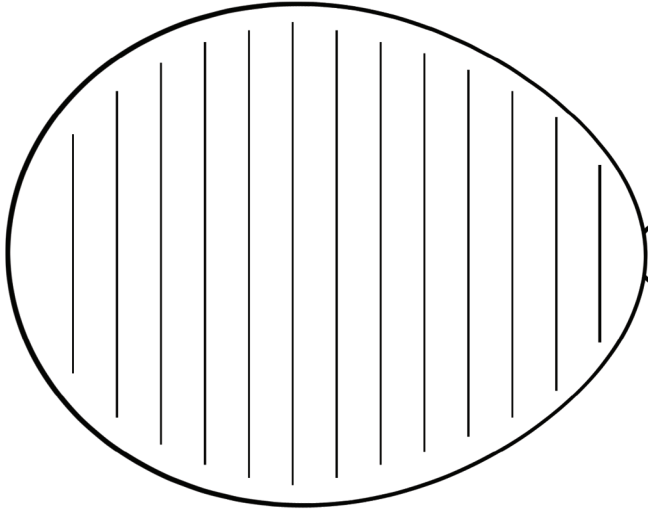
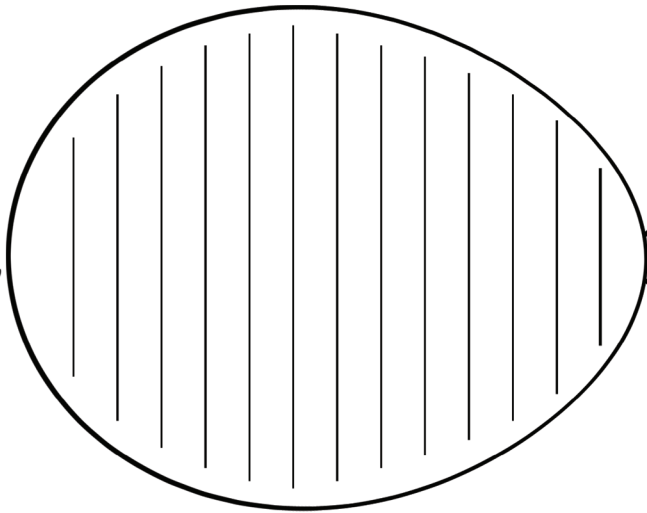
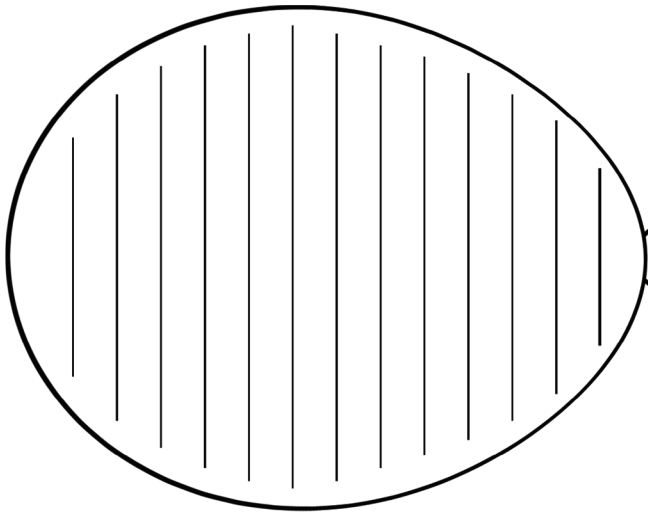
Mrs Kennedy suggests that Con should ‘put [his] thoughts into balloons and let them float off into the sky’.

1. Using the Thought Balloon templates, write down what Con might be thinking and feeling in this moment.
 - o What is going through his mind?
 - o How is he feeling in his body?
 - o Why are Mickey’s words so hard for him to ignore?
2. Share some of your Thought Balloons as a group. Do you all think Con would be feeling the same things, or do you have different ideas?
3. As a group, try a ‘creative release activity’. Release Con’s Thought Balloons by either:
 - o Pinning them to the board and then gently taking them down.
 - o Throwing them upwards and letting them fall (symbolising letting go). You could even use real balloons to complete this part.

Extension/Challenge: Create a **positive** Thought Balloon for Con, which includes a calmer or more positive thought that might help him make a better choice (e.g. something Mrs Kennedy would remind him of).

Reflection Questions:

- What have you learned about anger?
- How has this activity helped you to reflect on managing your own emotions in certain situations?





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EXTRACT FOCUS TWO: THE UPSIDE

Read the extract below taken from pages 41–44.

It's another world.

And it's brilliant.

There is a huge wire-front wooden box in one corner.

A row of sheds. Painted all different colours. Candy pink and baby blue and sea green. Deckchairs, the striped kind you see in pictures of the beach. A huge yellow umbrella throwing shadows across the ground. A few low wooden tables. A concrete seaside. The roll and burr of the traffic below sounds a bit like waves.

Tall wooden troughs filled with dark earth and bright flowers. Loads of them. Some of them are chest-height and some of them only reach my knees. All arranged neatly so you can walk through and have nothing but petals and colours all around you. Like a maze. Paths leading this way and that. A garden but with no grass. Right up here in the sky. I walk through. All careful and silent because somehow that seems right. This isn't the kind of place where you rush and shout and make a racket. I know that even though no one has told me. You just work it out in some places, don't you? Like the air is talking to you. Telling you what to do. I rub my fingers on a plant that looks like it's covered in purple seeds and my skin is suddenly scented with perfume. There are bees humming quietly. Butterflies shivering from flower to flower. Wings like silk. The air smells like syrup. There's a wooden bench tucked into a quiet corner. Just right for watching the bees dance and the flowers sway.

One of those funny glass shed things. A greenhouse? For growing stuff. I can see pots and soil and tiny green shoots inside. The whole thing shines like it's made of ice and sky. Like a magical palace in the clouds.

The daylight is starting to turn grey and orange. I see the city spread out and fading against the sky. I am above everything and it all looks so tiny. Tinier than from my window. I am so far away. The sounds of the city are smaller here. It's quiet. Soft.

I feel something inside me lift. Like my bones have always been too heavy for my body and now they are filled with air and light. Like I could lift up my arms and fly off into the orange-glow clouds. I am on top of the world and the world is suddenly huge and unexpected and new and bright and amazing. I forget about needing to pee. I forget about everything except this new incredible, wonderful, brilliant space all around me. I spread my arms out wide and I whoop.

What is this? I say to Mr Williams. He's opening the sea-green shed. *What is this place?*

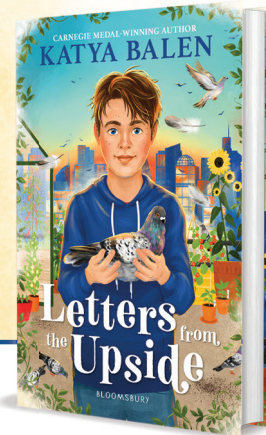
Peace, he says and he laughs. *This, young Con, is the Upside.*



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Where is Con in this extract, and what can he see around him?
2. How does Con feel about being in this place? Find key words or phrases that reveal his emotions.
3. Which image or piece of description is your favourite, and why?
4. How does the author use sensory details to help you experience what Con sees? Choose your favourite examples.
5. What do you think Con means when he says: *'You just work it out in some places, don't you?'* Do you agree with him?
6. In what ways does the writing suggest that the Upside is a magical or dreamlike place?
7. Is Con surprised by anything he discovers in the extract? Explain your answer.





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ACTIVITY: CREATE YOUR OWN UPSIDE

Step 1: Discovering the Upside

- Talk together about the Upside in the book:
 - How is it a **real place** as well as a **symbolic space** (where Con begins to trust, heal and hope)?
- Reflect on this question: Do you have a place – real or imaginary – that makes you feel calm, safe, happy or hopeful?

Step 2: Designing your Upside

Consider how you would like to represent your own Upside:

1. **Drawing/Collage** – Create a picture of your Upside (it could be a treehouse, a beach, a football pitch or a totally imaginary world).
2. **Writing** – Write a short description of your Upside. Encourage sensory detail: *What can you see, hear, smell, touch and feel there?*
3. **Symbol Design** – Just like the pigeons symbolise hope and healing for Con, design a symbol or object that represents your Upside. (e.g. a star for hope, a shell for calm, a flame for courage).
4. **Class display** – Create a display called 'Our Upsides' with drawings, writing and symbols. You could even create an 'Upside Map' showing all the different special places everyone has imagined.

Extension/Challenge: Con's Upside is both a physical and symbolic place. Compare your own Upside with Con's. Write a short paragraph or create a Venn diagram showing what is the same and what is different.

Reflection Questions:

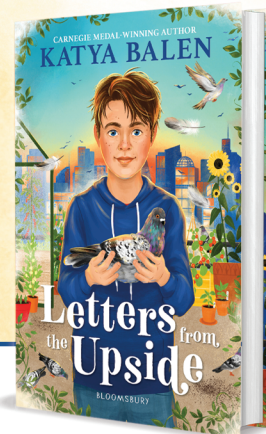
- How does your Upside make you feel?
- What do you do there?
- How is it similar to or different from Con's Upside?



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FURTHER ACTIVITY IDEAS

- Create a character profile for Con. Include things that have happened to him, his character traits, worries and hopes.
- Plot Con's emotions in the story: Where does his anger start? How does it build? When does it reach its peak? How does it change afterwards? Present this as a graph, storyboard or emotion timeline.
- Draw a web or mind-map of Con's connections and relationships. Who is part of his life? How does he feel about each person? How do they help him or not help him? Add a short sentence to show how these relationships affect him.
- Pigeons are a powerful symbol of hope and healing in the story. Research other animals or objects that are used as symbols in literature (e.g. owls for wisdom, lions for courage) or create your own.
- Think about the theme of self-control. Create a poster for Con (and for yourself) that shows three positive strategies for staying calm when angry or upset. Illustrate it with images, slogans or advice.
- Con changes a lot throughout the story. Draw a large pigeon wing on your page. At the base of the wing, write the experiences from Con's past that shaped him. On each feather, write a new quality, skill or strength that is growing in him as the story progresses. Colour your wing to make it vibrant, showing how Con's growth lifts him towards hope and healing.
- Imagine Con could write a letter to his future self. What hopes and promises might he write about how he wants to grow? Write your own letters too.
- In the story, Con has people who believe in him, like Mr Williams. Think about someone in your life (a friend, teacher or family member) who believes in you or encourages you. Draw a large star on a sheet of paper. On each point of the star, write or draw the ways this person supports you, encourages you or helps you grow.
- Imagine you have the chance to meet Katya Balen, the author of the story. What would you like to ask her? Come up with 5–10 questions. Think about:
 - **Characters:** 'Who inspired you to create the character of Con?'
 - **Plot:** 'How did you decide what would happen to him?'
 - **Themes:** 'Why did you choose the title: *Letters from the Upside*?'
 - **Writing process:** 'How do you come up with ideas for your books?'

