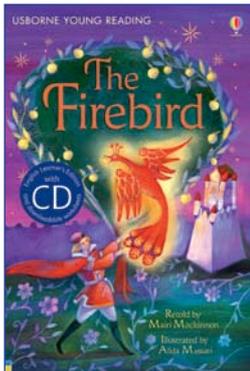


## The Firebird • Teacher's notes



**Author:** Traditional, retold by Mairi Mackinnon

**Reader level:** Advanced

**Word count:** 2390

**Lexile level:** 730L

**Text type:** Folk tale from Russia

### About the story

A king takes great pride in his magical orchard, in which the most precious tree grows golden apples. One morning, the king discovers that an apple is missing. Even though the orchard is well guarded, one more apple disappears each night. The king's sons try to catch the thief, but the two elder sons fall asleep, and it is the youngest, Prince Ivan, who sees the Firebird swooping down to take an apple. He tries to catch the bird, but only manages to keep a single feather.

When the King hears about the Firebird, he wants to have it, and each son in turn goes in search of it. After his brothers come back empty-handed, Ivan sets out but is attacked in the forest by a silver wolf who kills his horse. However, Silver Wolf is able to help Ivan by flying through the air to King Dalmat's palace where the Firebird is. Discovered by Dalmat's guards, Ivan is sent to King Afron's palace to capture the Horse of Power; King Afron then sends him to the sorcerer Koshchey's castle to rescue his daughter.

Ivan tries to rescue the princess while the sorcerer is sleeping, but he is discovered by Koshchey who tries to turn him to stone. The Firebird's feather falls onto Ivan's feet and reverses the spell, and while Silver Wolf distracts Koshchey, Ivan finds the iron-bound box where the sorcerer's soul is hidden inside a golden egg. Ivan smashes the egg, destroying the sorcerer and his castle and setting free the city buried beneath. He returns home with the princess as his bride, and the King his father lets the Firebird go free.

### About the author

Mairi Mackinnon has lived in Scotland, France, Italy and Spain, and worked as a teacher, translator, musician, bookseller, nanny, cook and bus driver before settling down in London, where she has written over forty books for children. She has always loved Russian folk tales, and spent some months trying to learn Russian, without ever entirely mastering the past tense – a disadvantage in storytelling. She has three children of her own, five or six violins, a beautiful old piano and a house full of other people's books.

### Words and phrases of interest, and unfamiliar words

Help your students to develop strategies for unfamiliar words, so that you don't have to interrupt the flow of the story often to explain vocabulary. You might suggest they make a quick note of words as they read, or mark their place on the page with removable sticky notes or index tabs. Encourage them to deduce meanings: are they familiar with any part of the word (e.g. "king" in "kingdom")? Can they guess from the context (e.g. "jingled" in "jingled like tiny bells" must describe a sound)? You could look at different strategies for learning new vocabulary, such as making word clouds or thematic lists.

p3 orchard	p16 empty-	p28 crept	p42 fountain	p51 gleaming
p6 astonished	handed	p30 a common	p43 overjoyed	p52 unearthed
p7 determined	p19 bitterly cold	thief	p44 defiance	p54 exclaimed
p11 horrified	p20 peering	p33 bridle	p45 hideous	p55 crumbled
p12 shrugged	p22 broke down	p37 put his head	p46 demons	p56 glittering
p13 unbearably	and cried	in his hands	p47 soul	p59 celebrated
sleepy	p23 murmured	p38 sorcerer	p48 numbness	p60 settled their
p15 scorching	p26 soared	p40 teeming	p50 struggled	quarrel

# The Firebird • Teacher's notes

## Before reading

You may like to search in advance for some pictures of mythical beasts such as: dragon, sphinx, griffon, unicorn, phoenix, sea monster. (A firebird is similar to a phoenix, although isn't associated with the same regeneration legend.) If you are able to play music or soundfiles, you could look for recordings or clips of the Stravinsky ballet suite to play as students are settling in their places.

Write the heading MYTHICAL ZOO on the board. Encourage students to suggest creatures they would expect to find in it. What do they know about the creatures and their qualities? You might even like to map the zoo on the board, and think of the animals' different needs (e.g. a lake for the sea monster, a covered enclosure with plenty of grass for the unicorns.) See if one of the students suggests a phoenix, or introduce the idea yourself.

Show students the cover of the book. Ask if they think a firebird is the same as a phoenix. Interestingly, there are phoenix or firebird legends across North Africa, Europe and Asia, from Ancient Egypt and Greece through Arabic, Indian and Persian mythology to China and Japan. This one is taken from one of the best-loved stories in Russia.

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## Reading or listening

You can listen to the story on CD or read it aloud to the students, take turns to read or read together silently. Each double page spread in the book is one track on the CD, so that you can pause between tracks or repeat tracks if your students need it. The first reading is in a British English accent, and it is followed by an American English reading. The words are exactly the same.

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## During reading: you might like to ask some of these questions.

- |     |  |        |  |
|-----|--|--------|--|
| p5  | Can you guess what is going to happen? [i.e. what can you predict from the mentions of high wall, locked gate and guards?]         |        | but they might well guess that the king is going to ask him to bring something back.]  |
| p9  | "The thief hadn't left so much as a footprint..." How is that possible?  | p43    | "Just like the others..." Look at the statues on p42. Can you guess what they were trying to do?                                 |
| p16 | What is the difference between the two elder princes and Prince Ivan? Why do they think he will fail? Do <i>you</i> think he will? | p48    | What do you think is inside the box?   |
| p20 | Which path would you choose?   | p54-55 | Can you pick out all the words on these two pages that have to do with sounds? [e.g. silence, cracking, murmuring, exclaimed...] |
| p27 | Do you think Ivan will listen to Silver Wolf's advice?   | p59    | Why does it mention that "Silver Wolf thought he could never be hungry again"? [Remember how Ivan met Silver Wolf.]              |
| p32 | What three things can Silver Wolf do that show he is a magical creature? [Speak, fly through the air, read Ivan's mind.]           | p61    | How do you think Ivan's brothers felt when he came home?   |
| p33 | What do you guess is going to happen now?  | p62    | How has the King changed since he first heard about the Firebird? What do you think made him change?                             |
| p37 | What do you think King Afron will ask Ivan to do? [Students needn't be too specific,   |        |  |

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## After reading

Look at the note on p64. Are any students familiar with the ballet? It is based on a shorter version of the story, without the characters of Silver Wolf or the kings. You may be able to search for pictures of the ballet costumes, which can be spectacular, and you may find movie clips to watch, too.

Ask students if they noticed a number pattern in the story – things happening a number of times. Which number? [Three: three brothers, three kings, three tasks...] Go back through the book and see how many threes you can spot. Three is often a special, significant number in myths and legends, fairy tales and folk tales – can you think of any other examples?