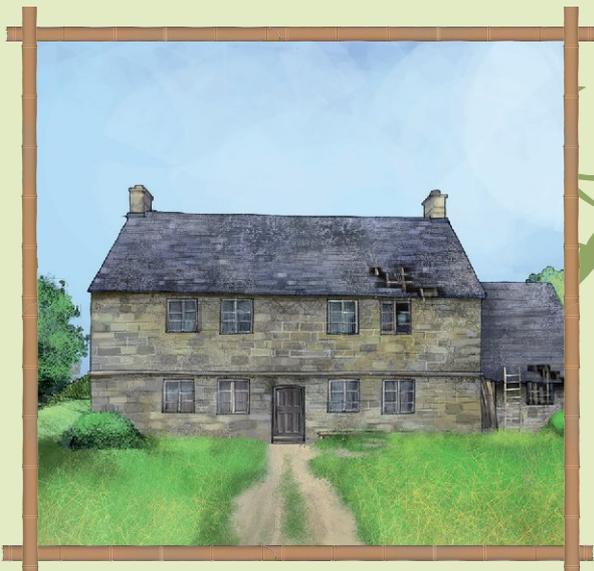




The Giant Panda Bear



Grannie



Albion's Dream

Reading Booklet



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The Giant Panda Bear

Panda bears are very popular animals, partly because of their unusual appearance and partly because there is something mysterious and fascinating about them. However, their numbers are falling. It is thought that only around 1600 giant pandas still survive in the wild.

Appearance

Giant pandas have the same type of body shape as other bears. They have thick black and white fur, which some scientists think may be to disguise them in the snowy and rocky surroundings where they live. An adult can grow up to 1.5 metres and weigh up to 150 kilograms. They might look cute but they have razor-like claws. They also have powerful jaws for crushing and grinding bamboo!

Habitat

Giant pandas in the wild live on mountainous slopes in western China. Their habitat is densely populated with fir trees and bamboo. It is the forests in these mountains that attract the panda as bamboo is their favourite food.

Diet

In the wild, their main diet is bamboo. To survive, they need to eat for most of the day. In fact, they eat 15 to 30 kilograms of food every day and spend 10 to 16 hours feeding. In zoos, they have a specially prepared diet of bamboo, eggs, fish and honey.

Cubs

Newborn cubs weigh around 150 grams (about the weight of an apple) and are all white at birth. The black spots develop after about a month. They begin eating bamboo at six months and weigh 31 to 36 kilograms at the end of the first year. Cubs stay with their mother for two to three years, reach maturity at five to seven years and live in the wild for about 25 years.

Other interesting facts

- Giant panda bears have to eat every day which means, unlike other bears, they cannot hibernate in the winter.
- Giant pandas' bodies are able to digest meat but they rarely eat it.
- Until recently, scientists thought that pandas spent most of their lives alone, but new studies show that small groups of pandas can share a large territory.

Why are people concerned about the giant panda?

Many people fear that giant pandas will become extinct as only a few are born in the wild each year and they do not always survive. Bamboo supplies are diminishing in panda habitats, cutting off a vital food supply. In addition, poaching and humans moving into the pandas' territory have also reduced their numbers.

There are very few pandas in zoos, although this is changing. Where there are pandas in captivity, important programmes are in place to try to increase their numbers and find out more about these puzzling creatures.

How can people help?

There are projects where people are invited to 'adopt a panda'. The money goes towards researching, protecting and monitoring them. It also goes towards supporting them in the wild.

What about the future?

In two of China's main research centres, 19 cubs have been born. There are now over 300 pandas in captivity and the next challenge is to return them to the wild. The Chinese government has created 50 panda reserves to continue the work.



Did you know?

In China, the panda is a symbol of peace.

The Chinese word for panda is 'Xiongmao' (giant cat bear) because a panda's eyes are shaped like a cat's. Over the centuries, pandas have also been called 'spotted bear' and 'black and white bear'.



Grannie

I stayed with her when I was six then went
To live elsewhere when I was eight years old.
For ages I remembered her faint scent
Of lavender, the way she'd never scold
No matter what I'd done, and most of all
The way her smile seemed, somehow, to enfold
My whole world like a warm, protective shawl.

I knew that I was safe when she was near,
She was so tall, so wide, so large, she would
Stand mountainous between me and my fear,
Yet oh, so gentle, and she understood
Every hope and dream I ever had.
She praised me lavishly when I was good,
But never punished me when I was bad.

Years later war broke out and I became
A soldier and was wounded while in France.
Back home in hospital, still very lame,
I realised suddenly that circumstance
Had brought me close to that small town where she
Was living still. And so I seized the chance
To write and ask if she could visit me.

She came. And I still vividly recall
The shock that I received when she appeared
That dark cold day. Huge grannie was so small!
A tiny, frail, old lady. It was weird.
She hobbled through the ward to where I lay
And drew quite close and, hesitating, peered.
And then she smiled: and love lit up the day.

**The test continues on the next page.
Turn over to read the next text.**

In this text, Edward describes a strange incident that happened to him in an old farmhouse owned and inhabited by his Uncle Jack.

Albion's Dream



There were rooms in the old farmhouse which I never saw used and which smelt of a past that held extraordinary fascination for me: little windows where unknown ancestors had sat on autumn evenings; old leather-lined bookcases with books that no one had handled for fifty years; dust that no one had bothered to remove; piles of candle wax in unlikely corners; huge chamber pots and cracked basins, and everywhere a great generosity of space.

Outside there was a big lawn hardly walked on, flowerbeds hardly looked at, a vegetable garden which always produced too much, a vast horse chestnut with enough conkers to satisfy the needs of a whole village of boys, a second lawn that nobody ever sat on, and the poignant smells of animals and harvests of a bygone age.

There also lived with Jack an elderly spinster called Em Sharp who was the true guardian of the place and of the memories of the family. The farmhouse never got any cleaner under her care, but it never got any dirtier either. In fact, she was determined that nothing should change, and nothing did.

There were times, as I grew older, when I went to stay with Jack on my own. I followed him on his work around the farm, or explored the empty rooms of the farmhouse. One day – I was twelve years old – it was raining and Jack had taken the car on business. Left to my own devices, I visited the dogs and young chicks, watched Em Sharp for a while as she prepared lunch, then made my way upstairs into the largest and most remote of the empty rooms, where one of the big bookcases had attracted my curiosity.

I pulled out some of the books, glancing idly at the contents, and then, as I went to return one of them to its place, my eye was caught by something in the dark recesses of the shelf. I reached in and drew it out. It was a large red dice, but like no other dice I had ever seen.

I took it to the window to inspect it. Each face had a symbol: a tower, a sword, a broken circle, something that looked like a pillar of stone. It was obvious that the dice had been fashioned by hand, for I could even make out the tiny blade marks, and none of the faces was precisely even.

As I sat and puzzled over the symbols, it dawned on me that the dice ought to belong to a game of some kind. So I returned to the bookcase to make a thorough search.

I looked behind every book and even used my hand to sweep out the shallow gap under the bottom shelf. There must have been ten years' worth of assorted debris under there. Finally I began to edge the entire bookcase away from the wall. It was extremely heavy and it took me some time to get it out far enough to look behind. There was a thick network of cobwebs and dust. I thought for a moment and plunged my hand in the gap.

There was something there, a flat box. It was covered with grime and falling apart. Opening it, I found a board, counters, cards, and a number of little figures. I wiped away the dirt from the lid and made out the title. *Albion's Dream* it said.

At that moment I heard Em Sharp's voice coming up the stairs.

“Edward. EDWARD!” she called. “What on Earth are you up to in there?”

The door opened.

It took her a few seconds to work out what I was doing; then she leapt towards me.



“Give me that immediately, Edward.” I drew back cautiously. “That box is mine. It’s nothing to do with you. It belongs to me.” She came forward with frightening intensity, her hand reaching out for the box. I hesitated. If it really was hers, I had no right... But a stronger sense of justice broke out in me. I had found it by my own efforts. For the time being, at least, it should be mine.

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Author: Vernon Scannell.

Albion's Dream: Taken from *Albion's Dream*, Faber & Faber, 1992. Author: Roger Norman.

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