GOLD FEVER



The search for gold spans many centuries, cultures and lands

John Parsons

Nelson Literacy Directions

GOLD Fever

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Dear Reader

At some time or another, everyone dreams about becoming wealthy. Imagine how fantastic it would feel if you were lucky enough to discover a giant nugget of precious gold, for example!

> **MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, THEIR DREAMS OF WEALTH CAME TO NOTHING.**

Throughout history, the same dream has inspired countless thousands of people to seek their fortunes in gold rushes around the world. A few lucky gold prospectors did find giant nuggets of precious gold. But more often than not, people's dreams of wealth came to nothing. The legacy that they left behind, however, has changed countries, cultures and societies.

I hope you enjoy this book – and, who knows? Maybe by reading it, you might catch gold fever, too!

John Parsons

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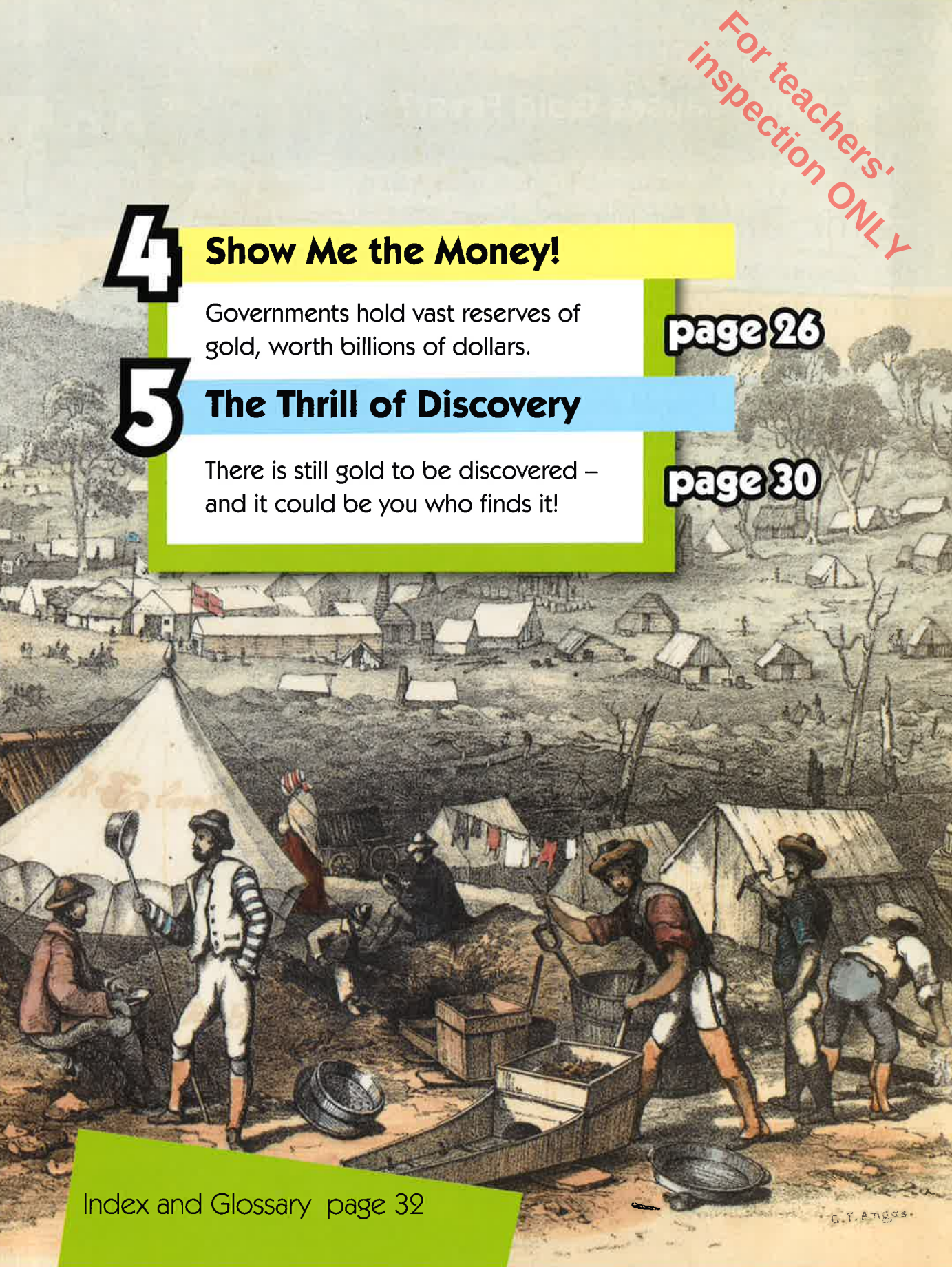
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1 What Causes Gold Fever?

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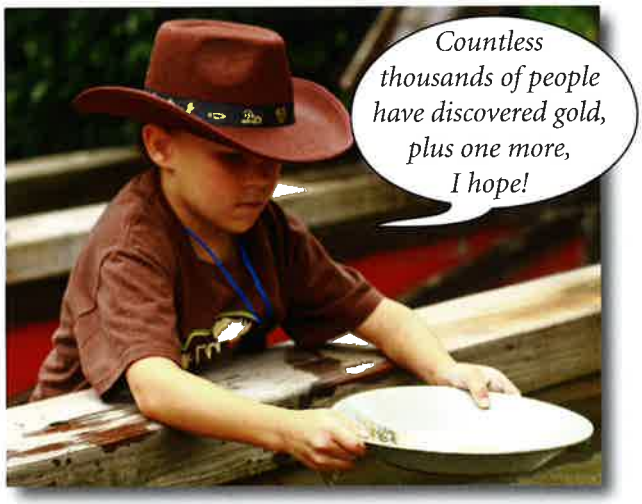
The **Thrill** of Discovery

Imagine a cube that is around 20 metres wide, deep and tall. Now, imagine it filled with gold. That cube would weigh around 165 000 tonnes and be worth over five trillion dollars. Over the entire period of human history, that cube would represent nearly all the gold that humans have ever mined and collected. It would also represent the thrill and excitement of the countless thousands of people who discovered every tiny speck, grain and nugget of gold in that cube.



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Gold is the only yellow metal found on Earth. It is mostly found in the form of nuggets, or in quartz as grains. Gold is one of the softest, densest metals that exist. For this reason, it can be moulded easily into different shapes.



Its softness also enables it to be mixed with other metals to make it stronger. Gold does not rust and lasts a long time.

Although gold can be found in most countries, it is rare. For this reason, it is treated as extremely precious and desirable by most people.



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Gold has been used for many things, including money, jewellery, medicine and – most of all – to demonstrate the wealth and the power of those people who can afford to own it.





Golden masks such as that of Tutankhamun (left) demonstrated the power and wealth of the Egyptian pharaohs. Massive golden statues of Buddha (right) show how much people respect and revere their religious leaders.

AZTEC GOLD

The Aztec civilisation, which thrived between 1300–1500 in central Mexico, North America, used gold for decoration – but cacao beans and cotton cloth had more value and were used for money. The Spanish, believing the Aztecs had huge stores of gold, defeated the Aztecs in 1521, and destroyed their civilisation.

This painting of Popocatepetl (left) and Iztaccihuatl, an Aztec prince and princess, shows them wearing ceremonial gold to demonstrate their status.

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For every gold miner who strikes it lucky, there may be a thousand who end up with nothing. The great outbreaks of gold fever in Australia, New Zealand and the USA made a few people extremely wealthy and left tens of thousands disappointed – but they also resulted in the growth of those developing countries. Gold fever has left a legacy that we can still see today, in the buildings and the diverse cultures that call these areas home.

For a long time, gold has been of huge economic, cultural, social and political significance around the world. Many people's lives have been affected by gold. As it becomes increasingly rare, it will continue to influence people's lives.

Maybe so, Mr Shakespeare, but this sure looks attractive to me!

A FAMOUS SAYING

"All that glitters is not gold."



This saying from William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is still used today. It means that not everything that looks attractive has real value.

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2 A Rare and Precious Metal

What Is Gold?

Gold is a chemical element that occurs as a metal, like iron, copper and lead. But its rarity, compared to other metals, has meant that people have always considered it more valuable.

The arrangement of the atoms inside gold means that, unlike most other metals, which are grey or silvery, it reflects yellow light. This "golden" colouring makes it attractive for jewellery and decoration.

SYMBOL FOR GOLD

The chemical symbol for gold is "Au", which comes from *aurum*, the Latin word for gold.

ALCHEMY

Alchemy was a process by which people hoped to turn cheap metals, such as lead, into valuable metals, such as gold. Until the 1600s, people thought a mythical substance called the "philosopher's stone" could help them do this. Although alchemy never worked, it did help people start to understand chemistry, which became a proper science towards the end of the 1600s.



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WORTH ITS WEIGHT IN GOLD!

Because of its chemical and physical structure, gold does not react easily with many other chemicals. It does not rust when it is exposed to air and water, and it does not corrode when it comes into contact with many acids. It is also very heavy. A cubic metre of aluminium weighs 2.7 tonnes. The same volume of gold weighs 19.3 tonnes.

NUGGETS AND GRAINS

As it does not react with other chemicals, gold is almost always found naturally as a metal – either as large lumps, called nuggets, or as grains inside other rocks. The largest gold nugget ever found was discovered in Victoria, Australia, in 1869. It weighed an incredible 78 kilograms, which at today's value would be worth about $A 1.8 million. Two miners, John Deason and Richard Oates, found the nugget, which they named the "Welcome Stranger", lying less than 10 centimetres underground, near the roots of a tree.



a replica of the "Welcome Stranger" (above) and the monument marking its place of discovery at Moliagul, Victoria (right)