

FIRE Jackie French & Bruce Whatley

TEACHERS NOTES

Synopsis

Fire is a 32-page picture book, written in rhyming verse by Jackie French and illustrated by Bruce Whatley. It can be used with students at all stages. Because it is in rhymed couplets, it seems more like a song or a hymn than a conventional picture book story.

The atmosphere is still and quiet and it is almost as if the land is waiting for the coming catastrophe. Just one spark wakes the fire and as it leaps across the paddocks, the people in its path spring into action. The drill is familiar: estimate how far off the fire is burning, check that fire hazards to property have been removed wherever possible, pack the car and be ready to drive to safety. The fire races onward like a monster, devouring all obstacles, and it is time to leave.

Escape is uncertain, though, with the smoke so thick that the headlights of the family ute prove useless. There are just two signs of hope: the speck of a helicopter approaching, and the team of firefighters whose courage and strength hold the fire back. The unnamed family's home and possessions have been destroyed, and it seems that all they are left with is grief. But the text suggests that what they have instead is a wealth of support and friendship, from both professional rescue crews and volunteers. And the future regrowth of green shoots in the bush is envisaged as a metaphor for the continuing spirit of life in the community.

About the writer

Jackie French is Australia's National Children's Laureate for 2014 and 2015. Well known as a television presenter and an organic farmer who loves wombats, Jackie is also an historian, an ecologist, a dyslexic, and a passionate worker for literacy, the right of all children to be able to read, and the power of books.

Jackie's writing career spans 25 years, 148 wombats, over 140 books, 36 languages, 3,721 bush rats, and over 60 awards in Australia and overseas.

Jackie is one of the few writers to win both literary and children's choice awards. *Hitler's Daughter* spent a decade on most of Australia's children's choice award shortlists; among other awards it won the 2000 CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers, the UK Wow! Award, a Semi Grand Prix Award in Japan and has been listed as a 'blue ribbon' book in the United States. Monkey Baa's production of *Hitler's Daughter: the play* won both the Helpmann and Drover's Awards and toured the United States in 2013. *Pete the Sheep; the musical*, will open in March 2014. The much loved *Diary of a Wombat* and its sequels, created with Bruce Whatley, are among Australia's most successful picture books.

About the artist

Bruce Whatley is one of Australia's best loved illustrators for young people. He spent the earlier part of his career in advertising as an art director and illustrator, but since 1992 he has written and/or illustrated over 60 children's picture books published both in Australia and overseas. The award winning titles include *The Ugliest Dog in the World*, *Looking for*

Crabs, Detective Donut and the Wild Goose Chase, Diary of a Wombat and Baby Wombat's Week, which won the Australian Book Industry Award in 2010.

Bruce's main inspiration has been his family, who feature in several of his earlier picture books, and he has collaborated on *Zoobots* and *Tin Toys* with his son Ben. Bruce uses a variety of illustration media, including gouache, pen and ink, pencil, oils, watercolour and more recently CGI software. He aims to entertain and surprise the reader with illustration styles that vary considerably, depending on the text and the age group of the audience.

Bruce's recent titles include *Monster*, written by Andrew Daddo, and *Queen Victoria's Underpants*, written by Jackie French. *Flood*, also written by Jackie, was shortlisted for Book of the Year in 2012 and *The Little Refugee*, written by Anh Do was shortlisted in the same year.

Like Jackie, Bruce amazes readers with his capacity for work and in 2008 he completed his PhD, which looked at image-making with the non-dominant hand. Bruce discovered that in most people the ability to draw lies in using the 'other' hand. Bruce says he is always looking for new ways to tell his visual narratives and that it's just an excuse not to grow up really!

Jackie French says:

Like the family in this book, I have seen the air around my home grow thick with ash, heard the fire winds scream around our house, seen the sky glow red and yellow in a day as dark as night. I will never know if my home might have burnt in the bad bushfire years here, if it hadn't been for the heroism and dedication of our bushfire brigades.

When I was young I fought bushfires. These days I watch, and try to understand our land, to learn what types of bush need burning and how and when. It is too simple to look at pictures of burnt gum trees growing and think: 'the bush needs fire.' Much of it doesn't, and if it burns we may lose those plants forever. We may even make the land more likely to burn, as only 'fire happy' plants grow back.

Bruce Whatley says:

Fire is my worst nightmare.

I am fortunate never to have experienced a major fire. I've witnessed falling ash and severe winds of a fire close by, and have been through towns only days after fire has destroyed them, but my safety, or my family's safety, was never an issue.

I cannot imagine the terror one must feel when trapped by flames, or the courage it takes to rush towards them to put the monster down. To run into a burning building or stand in the path of a raging forest fire takes a very special kind of courage. The kind I cannot comprehend, but one we are all so thankful for.

Themes

- The power of natural forces in Australia

- The extremes of fire and flood
- The causes of bushfire
- The management of fire by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians
- The 'stay or go' policy
- Fire and the life cycle of Australian flora
- The courage of firefighters
- The role of volunteers in Australian life
- Climate change
- Rhyming
- Illustration and book design

Shared reading

- Ask your class what they know about bushfires. Where are they likely to occur? When? Do they remember recent news stories? (Be sensitive to the possibility that individual students have experienced catastrophic fire at first hand, and may still be grieving the loss of possessions and even loss of family and friends. Allow them to express this grief if they choose, and follow up any distress after the lesson by speaking to parents and school counsellors.) The focus of *Fire* is on realistic but constructive approaches to the subject, so be open to the students' sense of both loss and continuity.
- Show your students the front cover of *Fire* and ask what they recognise and what sort of story they are expecting.
- (They may have read *Flood*, or they may have read other books by Jackie French and Bruce Whatley. Those books are mostly set in Australia, in country towns or the bush. They often feature wildlife. Many of them are funny, so the seriousness of this book might be a surprise, unless they have read *Flood*. Some students might be aware of Jackie's many books about ecology, and expect information – particularly about balance in nature and sustainability.)
- Ask what information the front cover images convey. (The fire is shooting in all directions. Even though it could perhaps fly above the flames, the cockatoo looks frightened, so the book might be about the danger to wildlife.)
- Read the back cover blurb and ask your students what they notice. (They may comment on the rhyming; if not, prompt them. Ask where we mostly hear rhyming. They may say in poems, songs, advertising. So maybe the story is in the form of a poem or song.)
- Read the first double spread. Discuss the use of metaphorical language in *Fire*. In what ways might a fire be like a black snake? For older readers point out that this is a simile – a comparison that uses 'like' or 'as' (Like a snake, fire changes direction

quickly, is dangerous to human life and wildlife, colour of burnt bush, the tracks the fire makes, the hissing sound of the fire)

- Ask older readers what personification is. (metaphorical language that gives human attributes to inanimate objects or phenomena). What is the effect of saying that the fire wakes? (It is always there, potentially, waiting to spring into action). Why might the fire be 'laughing'? (It is way more powerful than humans; maybe humans have done foolish things that have set the fire loose – building too close to the bush, not observing fire safety, lighting fires deliberately.)
- Ask how bushfires start. (lightning, electrical faults, sparks from machines or tools, tossing cigarettes out of car windows, lighting fires on high risk days, not putting out campfires or barbecues properly, leaving glass in the bush, arson)
- Why might there be a helicopter overhead? (news camera operators, rescue, traffic control, firefighting with water or chemicals)
- There are only a few images of humans in the book: what do they add to the story? (image of family hugging suggests the importance of community action; child's distress suggests the vulnerability of humans confronted by fire; image of firefighter's care for wildlife)
- Ask what images are there to suggest that even after a destructive weather event, life goes on? (The blackened stumps of ferns, which even seem to have ghostly faces in them, topped by green leaves; the peaceful scene of the house in the paddock and a clear sky at the end; the white bird with its head bowed almost looks like the dove in the Bible story of Noah's Ark; or for some readers it will look like the dove of peace – which comes from the same story, but is used in many non-religious contexts.)
- Ask finally what your students think is the most important theme in *Fire*. (Courage, the renewal of life, the vast power of nature and the need for humans to learn to live with it.)

With your students

- Make a list of rhymes in *Fire*. Now give students a list of ten words and ask them to find rhymes. (Show older students how to use a rhyming dictionary.) Ask them to suggest words that have few or no rhymes in English. (Two that are often cited are 'purple' and 'orange'.)
- Ask your students what medium Bruce Whatley has used in the illustrations. (watercolour – for older students you might like to point out the irony of using watercolour in a book about fire.)

- Read *Flood* with your students. Obviously the weather events are different, but ask whether there are similarities. Why do they think these books might have been published now? (Public awareness of climate change. Increasing frequency of catastrophic weather. Awareness by non-Indigenous Australians of the need to live in greater harmony with the natural environment.)
- Make a poster on living with fire: fire safety, building codes, what to do in the event of fire.
- Major weather events often result in memorable photography and film. Ask your students what particular images of bushfire they can remember. Research them on the internet and discuss the impact of the famous 2009 photograph of the firefighter and the koala that Bruce Whatley has illustrated in the book.
<http://www.theage.com.au/national/sam-the-koala-dies-20090806-ebif.html>

Also ask your students to discuss the 2013 image of firefighters resting.
<http://imgur.com/gallery/WtCcA1E>

Don't overwhelm the students with this research. Relate it back to the themes of courage, community and determination that are emphasised in *Fire*. Ask students to find examples of community action and co-operation.

- Read Dorothea Mackellar's famous poem 'My Country'. The first stanza indicates that the narrator is an Australian, addressing someone on the other side of the world: most likely in England, trying to explain the feelings Australia engenders. Older readers could also read John O'Brien's 'Said Hanrahan'. Both poems construct Australia as a land of climatic extremes. How would you describe the feelings towards Australia that are evoked by the extremes in each of these poems?
- Ask your students what they think a book designer does. (Helps put the words and pictures into the best positions. This is called the layout. The illustrator may have a plan in mind and ideas on what works best, and the writer can also give feedback, but the designer's job is to make the story flow smoothly and read clearly.) Suggest that they look at the imprint details opposite the title page and find out what font the typesetter has used. It is called 'Sunday Monday'. Look it up on the internet.
<http://www.myfonts.com/fonts/hanoded/sunday-monday/>
- Ask what this font adds to the story.

(It looks as though it has been handwritten in a hurry – maybe as if a fire was heading your way and you had to write the story down quickly. The spots of ink used in the design look like the soot from a fire. City children sometimes find black ashes on cars, clothes and beaches, hundreds of kilometres away from a bushfire.)