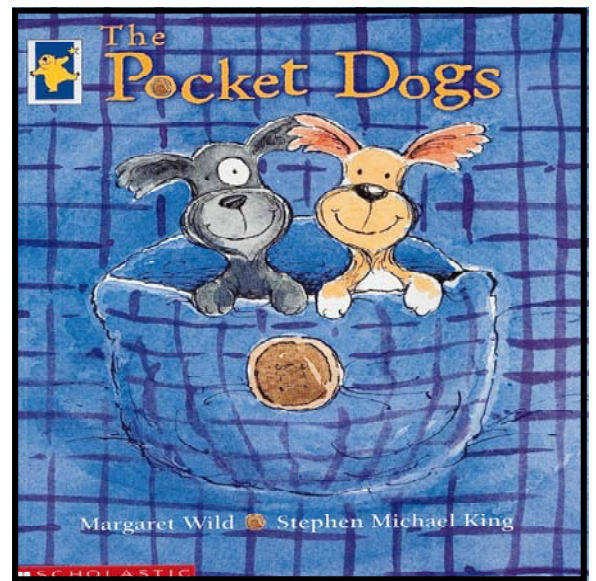


TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

The Pocket Dogs

Written by Margaret Wild
Illustrated by Stephen Michael King



The author: Margaret Wild

Margaret Wild was born in 1948 at Eshowe in South Africa, but grew up mainly in Johannesburg. After leaving school she worked as a reporter on local newspapers; and in 1974 she came to Australia to live. She wrote feature articles for *Dolly* magazine before graduating with a BA from the Australian National University, then in 1980 she moved to Sydney and worked as a freelance journalist while raising her children, Daniel and Karen.

Margaret's first picture books, *One Shoe On* and *There's a Sea in My Bedroom*, were both published in 1984, the year in which she began her career as an editor of children's books. She now works as commissioning editor for the children's book department of ABC Books in Sydney.

Margaret is frequently rated as one of the best writers of picture books in Australia. She has been spectacularly successful, with a number of CBCA shortlistings for the Picture Book of the Year Award (*There's a Sea in My Bedroom*—also shortlisted for the UK's Kate Greenaway Award—in 1985, *Creatures in the Beard* in 1987, *Mr Nick's Knitting* in 1989, *Let the Celebrations Begin!* in 1992, *Toby* in 1994, *Old Pig* in 1996, *The Midnight Gang* in 1997 and *Jenny Angel* in 2000). *The Very Best of Friends*, illustrated by Julie Vivas, won the Award in 1990.

Margaret's flexibility and inventiveness as a writer are shown in the great diversity of her books. Her subjects range from death (*Toby* and *Jenny Angel*) and the Holocaust (*Let the Celebrations Begin!*) to robust, child-oriented humour (*The Slumber Party* and *The Midnight Gang*); from beginning school (*First Day*) to old age memory loss (*Remember Me*). Not all her characters are people. They include pigs (*Old Pig*), a family of hares (*Rosie and Tortoise*), a dinosaur whose mate has disappeared

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

The author cont...

(*My Dearest Dinosaur*) and, in *Fox*, a dingo, a fox and a magpie. Margaret looks for unusual angles, surprising conjunctions. All her books reveal something of the human condition, often pointing to aspects of our lives that are painful, or things we prefer not to dwell on. In the simplest language, and within the structure of a perfectly constructed storyline, she evokes worlds of resonating emotions. The lightness of her touch belies the power in her best work. The truth of her vision, and her ability to home in on raw emotion, make her books intensely moving.

Margaret writes largely from inspiration. An idea comes to her, and she can't wait to put it on paper. She says: 'When I write ... what I set out to do [is] to tell a good story. I do not set out to thrash an issue or draw a moral. They might be there, and that is OK, but it is not the burning purpose of the writing. The story is.'

The illustrator: Stephen Michael King

Stephen Michael King was born in Sydney in 1963, the child of a bank manager and a schoolteacher. He 'grew up in a house filled with books'. As a child he loved books with pictures in them, and when he was older he read biographies about his favourite artists: Picasso, Chagall, Maurice Sendak, and others. He worked for three years as a children's library assistant, and for two years with Walt Disney before becoming an illustrator/designer with Scholastic Australia. For the last two years he has been a freelance illustrator. He is married, with two young children, and still lives in Sydney.

Stephen's first book, *The Man Who Loved Boxes*, was published in 1997. An immediate success, it was nominated for the Crichton Award (a CBC of Victoria award for a new illustrator), won the inaugural Family Award, and has been published in seven countries. Two of his books (*Beetle Soup* in 1997, and *The Little Blue Parcel* in 1999) were shortlisted for the Book of the Year (Younger Readers) Award, and *Henry and Amy* was shortlisted for the Picture Book of the Year Award in 1999. Stephen frequently writes his own texts: in *The Man Who Loved Boxes*, *Henry and Amy*, and another book, *Patricia*, he is both author and illustrator. His latest title, *Amelia Ellicott's Garden*, was released earlier this year.

Of his approach to illustrating *The Pocket Dogs*, Stephen says: 'I don't think about it. I just draw and it happens. I'm more interested in emotion rather than perfect rendering or the execution of fine detail. If I over-intellectualise, the emotion suffers.' His style for this book was 'to add a bit of whimsy and make it look childlike.'

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

The illustrator cont...

Of the elements that go to make a successful picture book, he says: 'For me, it's the balance between text and illustrations so they dance together and the text makes you want to look at the illustrations.'

The Pocket Dogs

Perhaps *The Pocket Dogs* is the perfect story for Stephen Michael King, because it's all about emotions—feelings of love and belonging, feelings of loss and abandonment, feelings of who we are.

The story tells of two tiny dogs, Biff and Buff, who ride in the big pockets of their owner's coat: Biff in the right pocket and Buff in the left pocket. All is well until a hole appears in the right pocket. Both Biff and Buff try to tell Mr Pockets about the hole, but Mr Pockets doesn't understand. One day, when Mr Pockets and his dogs are out shopping, Biff falls out, 'On to the ground. On to his head.'

Biff is lost. Three people try to rescue him: a woman with a shopping basket, a little girl with a toy pram, and a man with a shopping trolley. Biff doesn't want their help. He wants only Mr Pockets. At last Mr Pockets finds him. The hole in the pocket is sewn up, and Biff knows he is safe at last. He also knows how much he loves Mr Pockets, and how much he is loved in return.

Themes

Like all Margaret Wild's picture books, *The Pocket Dogs* works on different levels. On the one level it is a very simple, very straightforward story about a little dog who is lost and then found. But on a deeper reading, it is about many other things.

Families

Biff and Buff are in a sense Mr Pockets' children, and they have their allotted places in his pocket (Biff always in the right, Buff always in the left) just as children have their own 'place' within the family. From this unchanging structure comes a sense of familiarity (think about what that word means!) and security. Mr Pocket's routine behaviour—his questions to the dogs ('Are you ready? Are you happy?'), and his regular shopping expeditions with them—is part of the certainty of their lives together. If Mr Pockets is a parent figure, Buff is Biff's trusted sibling, the one he can talk to and express his fears to. Buff empathises with Biff, but (again, as is so often the case in a human family) he can do nothing to save him from his likely fate.

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

vulnerability

For many children, the worst thing that can happen to them is to have their security threatened. Biff is very unsettled by the knowledge that the hole in his pocket makes it no longer a safe place for him to be. He becomes frightened and withdrawn, and doesn't want to go out with Mr Pockets. He fears the worst -- that he will be lost. In spite of his best efforts to stay safe, an unguarded moment catches him unaware, and his greatest fear comes true.

vulnerability

For many children, the worst thing that can happen to them is to have their security threatened. Biff is very unsettled by the knowledge that the hole in his pocket makes it no longer a safe place for him to be. He becomes frightened and withdrawn, and doesn't want to go out with Mr Pockets. He fears the worst -- that he will be lost. In spite of his best efforts to stay safe, an unguarded moment catches him unaware, and his greatest fear comes true.

Restoration

Nothing is more joyful than the experience of being found after having been lost. In the aftermath of being found, Biff is comforted by the thought that he wasn't abandoned: Mr Pockets and Buff were anxious about him and kept searching for him. In other words, they cared. When Biff is found, Buff licks his ear 'to show he [is] sorry'

Identity

This links strongly with the idea of family (above). Who we are is very important to us, and this is particularly so when we are at our most vulnerable. Even though Biff is helped by kindly, well-meaning strangers, he knows that, at the deepest level of belonging, he cannot throw in his lot with them. He is a pocket dog, 'Mr Pockets' pocket dog'. Mr Pockets and Buff are his family, and he wants no other.

Courage

When he falls out of the pocket, Biff is afraid, but he still has the courage to make his own decisions about what is to happen to him. Three times he refuses to be helped by others, and his courage in sticking to his guns allows Mr Pockets to find him at last. (How might the story have ended if Biff had chosen to be 'rescued' by a stranger?)

Love

Ultimately the story is all about different kinds of love, because it is love that makes us function. Love of family gives us security. Pride in who we are gives us our identity. The unconditional reciprocal love of a child and its parent is expressed in the final image of The Pocket Dogs: Biff, who was lost and is now found, wriggling into the shirt of his beloved Mr Pockets and lying 'against his heart'.

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

The illustrations

Stephen Michael King's artwork perfectly captures the spirit of the story. Note the following:

The use of colour: In scenes centring on Mr Pockets and his dogs, a clear, vivid blue predominates, indicating security and calmness. In the supermarket, when Biff is lost, the colours become bright and garish. More muted blue tones also indicates Biff's state of mind: depressed or anxious when he fears falling out of the pocket; despairing when he gives up hope of being found by Mr Pockets. Bright pastel colours are used for the carefree outdoor scenes when Mr Pockets and his dogs go walking.

Characterisation: Biff and Buff are very different characters. The more up-beat Buff is brown and cheerful looking, with pricked ears. Buff's anxieties are reflected in his dark grey colouring, his drooping ears, and a look of wide-eyed apprehension (accentuated by the patch of white around one eye). The tiny size of the dogs is underlined by showing them in comparison to (say) a slipper, or a ball of wool.

Detail: Stephen Michael King adds all sorts of tiny details to be discovered in his illustrations. Look through the artwork for birds (unconventionally bright red in this real-but-fantastical world), a mouse, and interesting domestic details like photographs. Although not written into the text, the bird and the mouse take part in the action by helping to make the hole in Mr Pockets' pocket bigger and bigger! In the first double-page spread, when Mr Pockets and his dogs are taking 'the long, interesting way to the shops', the illustration shows that the trip is interesting: the landscape is crammed with fascinating things, including a whale and a helicopter. The illustrator has recognised that *The Pocket Dogs* is both a book for children to read, and a book for parents to read aloud, and he has included much of this kind of detail so that very young children can make happy discoveries in the illustrations while listening to the text.

Body Language: Stephen Michael King says that as an illustrator he is more interested in 'emotion' than in the accurate depiction of detail. Nowhere is this more evident than in his assured indication of feelings and relationships, particularly the affection that exists between Mr Pockets and his dogs. His graphic rendering of emotion adds a subtle further dimension to the text as we *see* Mr Pockets looking tenderly down at his dogs, and the dogs looking up at him; Biff cradled in Mr Pockets' hands; the expressive use of ears and tails (for the dogs!); and so on. Biff (particularly) and Buff are frequently shown looking upwards, a pose that emphasises their small size and vulnerability.

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

For an evocation of sheer despair, look at the illustration of Biff in the supermarket, just before Mr Pockets finds him: he is so dark and crouched that he seems to have completely lost his identity, but at the same time the illuminated space around his huddled figure makes him the dramatic focus of the illustration and suggests that although he *feels* invisible, he will be very visible to Mr Pockets and Buff.

Some topics for discussion

- Are our families more important to us than other people? If so, can you say why?
- Who do you love best in the world? Why?
- What traditions does your family have? What is the purpose of traditions like these?
- Biff says, 'I am a pocket dog. Mr Pockets' pocket dog.' What makes us who we are? How do you see yourself? How do you think others see you?
- Have you ever been lost? How did you feel? How did it feel to be found again?
- What things are most children afraid of? Make a list of these, and put them in order of most to least frightening.