

# Teachers Notes by Janet Anderson

# Fox

**Margaret Wild**

**Illustrated by Ron Brooks**

ISBN hb 9781864484656, pb 9781864489330

Recommended for ages 8 up

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## **INTRODUCTION**

“As with most of my stories, it is the emotions in the text which interest me most.” Margaret Wild.

Children of all ages engage with *Fox*, as do adults. This brilliant narrative explores an intense emotional drama of love and belonging, temptation, risk and betrayal. The text and illustrations work together seamlessly to evoke a powerful and lasting response in the reader.

*Fox* is a modern classic: it has won many awards and been translated into numerous languages. Teachers and students may be interested to read the editor’s description of the process of preparing the text for publication and one of the early reviews of the book, discussing its visual features in particular. These can be found at the end of these teachers’ notes.

## **ACTIVITIES**

### **Introduction**

*Fox* is an excellent example of a narrative which is short enough to make dissection of structure possible and with enough depth to challenge more sophisticated readers. Its qualities make it an ideal example of a picture story book to be studied in secondary English or graphics classes, in addition to its use in the primary classroom. Teachers should pick and choose activities that suit the age level they are teaching.

The suggested activities are grouped as follows:

- expressing immediate responses to the story, the lettering, the pictures;
- extending visual literacy - composition and design;
- exploring the narrative structure.

The second and third are probably more appropriate for older students.

### **Immediate Responses**

Students could respond to initial readings of the book through discussion, art, drama, poetry and music.

If the students are interested, they could discuss more specific topics.

#### **FEELINGS EVOKED BY THE STORY**

1. Discuss how the characters feel about themselves. How do they feel about each other? Do these feelings change? How do you feel about the characters? Do you ever feel like this about yourself or someone else? Did your feelings change as you read the book?
2. Create tableaux in groups of four or five to communicate an emotion from the book. Present to the class. Have the audience ‘read’ the tableaux and guess the emotion communicated.

## FRIENDSHIP

1. Talk about what sort of friend each of the different characters would make. Are you like any of the characters? Would you like to be like a different character? Have you been hurt by a friend as Magpie was hurt by Fox or Dog was hurt by Magpie? Have you ever hurt a friend? How can Dog and Magpie be friends again? Do you need to do something to be friends again with someone?
2. Create a sound collage by combining a variety of sounds from untuned percussion instruments to express the changing relationships in the book. Work individually and perform for the class.
3. Create acrostic poems based upon the characters in the book: Magpie, Dog, and Fox.

## LETTERING

1. Talk about the lettering in the book. Is it like any other books you have read? How do you think the effect was achieved? Why does the direction of the lettering change in different parts of the book?
2. Experiment with painting the name of one of the animals in the book in a way which reflects its character. You could vary the colour, painting implement and direction you use. Then fill a page of art paper with the name of one of the characters from the story: Dog, Magpie, or Fox. Display.

## PICTURES - THE USE OF LINE AND COLOUR

1. Talk about the use of line and colour in Fox's coat. What does the colour red suggest? What does the energetic cross-hatching in the fine hair of the coat suggest?
2. Experiment using line and colour in a way which reflects the character of the different animals in the book. You could choose unusual or non-traditional colours for animals in order to reflect a character trait. Create a mask for one of the characters in the book. Display.

## Exploring the Narrative Structure

Students could respond to further readings of the book and explore the masterful use of narrative structure through writing, discussion, role play, drawing, drama and music. The table below shows which activities are most suited to each of the three key stages of the narrative.

Stage in Narrative Structure	Learning Activities
Orientation: This stage introduces the main characters in a setting of time and place. It 'alerts' the reader to what is to follow.	Reading Journal Prologue Sound Collage Written Diary Verb Tense

<p>Complication:</p> <p>In this stage, a problem or crisis arises which precipitates a sequence of events as it is worked through. These events are evaluated by the characters.</p>	<p>Reading Journal</p> <p>Written Diary</p> <p>Hot Seat</p> <p>Polarised Debate</p> <p>Literary Sociogram</p>
<p>Resolution:</p> <p>The problems of the complication are resolved. A pattern of normalcy is restored to the events in this stage, but the main character/s has changed as a consequence of the experience.</p>	<p>Reading Journal</p> <p>Written Diary</p> <p>Epilogue</p> <p>Soundscape</p> <p>Tableaux</p>

### READING JOURNAL

Have children keep a record of their responses to the text. Responses can be made at any time during the reading of the book and can include questions as well as statements, drawings, poems or pictures. The activity could be open-ended in that children simply make entries following the conclusion of class discussions. Alternatively, the following questions could be used to structure responses:

- How did you feel when you finished reading the book?
- Why do you think the book is called 'Fox' and not 'Dog' or 'Magpie'?
- Which characters do you like best? Why?
- Have you had any experiences like those in the story?
- Do you know anyone who is like someone in the story?
- Are there any characters, events or settings which remind you of parts of television programs or films you have seen? How are they similar?
- Do you think the characters deserve what happens to them?
- If you were telling this story, what would you change?
- Why do you think the author wanted the story to end as it does?
- What do you think is the most important message of the story?
- If you could speak to the author about the story, what comments would you make?

### PROLOGUE

A prologue is a short prelude to the story that provides information about the events, setting or characters prior to the beginning of the story. The circumstances of Magpie having her wing burnt and being rescued by Dog could be explored. Alternatively, children could speculate about the circumstances of how Dog lost the sight in his eye and came to terms with his disability to the point where he can say 'life is still good'. The endpapers, title page and other pictures in the book prior to the beginning of the text provide some stimulus for this. This activity could be an individual writing activity or an activity in pairs. Alternatively, children could work in groups to construct a spoken prologue to be shared with the rest of the class.

## SOUND COLLAGE

A sound collage uses a variety of sounds to express an idea or feeling. The tumultuous events and emotions of the beginning of the story lend themselves to expression through this medium: Dog running through the charred forest with Magpie in his mouth; Magpie's rejection of Dog's help and retreat into blackness; her waking with a rush of grief; the sight of the strange new creature reflected in the water and the joy of running together. Try the activity initially with untuned percussion instruments. This activity could be extended to involve tuned instruments (percussion or otherwise) and children could write a score for the sound collage.

## WRITTEN DIARY

Have the children take on the role of either Magpie or Dog and make a diary entry about one or more of the following significant moments: Dog carrying Magpie in his mouth; seeing a strange new creature reflected in the water; running into the blueness. This activity can be repeated following other significant moments in the book: Fox's arrival; Dog and Magpie's conversation by the water; Fox's tempting Magpie away from Dog; Magpies defection; Fox's exit and scream; Magpie's despair; Magpie's resolution to begin the long journey back to Dog.

## VERB TENSE

Commonly, the action verbs in a narrative are in the past tense, but Margaret Wild uses present tense in *Fox*. Rewrite parts of the text with the action verbs in the past tense. Discuss the differences created for the reader's experience of the story and the possible reasons that Margaret Wild chose to use action verbs in the present tense.

Present Tense	Past Tense
Through the charred forest, over hot ash, <b>runs</b> Dog with a bird clamped in his big, gentle mouth. He <b>takes</b> her to his cave above the river, and there he <b>tries</b> to tend her burnt wing:	Through the charred forest, over hot ash, <b>ran</b> Dog with a bird clamped in his big, gentle mouth. He <b>took</b> her to his cave above, the river, and there he <b>tried</b> to tend to her burnt wing:
With Magpie clinging to his back, he <b>races</b> through the scrub, past stringy barks, past clumps of yellow box trees and into blueness. He <b>runs</b> so swiftly, it is almost as if he were flying.	

## HOT SEAT

Hot seat is an activity in which children take on the role of a character in the story to be interviewed by other children. The teacher takes a mediating role between the character and the class. The interview questions focus on why the character has carried out certain actions. Have children prepare questions in groups then swap between groups and brainstorm different answers as preparation for this activity. The use of a **mask** by the student taking on the role of a character provides a safe way of developing that character and talking in front of the class.

## POLARISED DEBATE

A polarised debate allows children to argue a viewpoint and modify that viewpoint as the debate proceeds. The debate requires a positive statement that can be argued for or against:

- *Dog should have prevented Magpie from going with Fox*
- *Fox's scream was a scream of triumph.*

Children begin seated in a horseshoe shape. Those who agree with the statement on the right and those who disagree on the left. Any who are undecided sit across the top thus forming the horseshoe. A speaker who agrees begins the debate, followed by a speaker who disagrees and then one who has yet to decide. Children may change positions around the horseshoe to reflect a change of opinion as the debate progresses.

### LITERARY SOCIOGRAM

A literary sociogram is a diagrammatic representation of the relationships between individuals. Children need to establish the role and nature of the three characters, identify the relationships between them and then construct a diagram to represent this information.

### EPILOGUE

An epilogue predicts outcomes beyond the end of the story. Have children explore what might happen when Magpie returns to Dog: what will they say to each other; who will speak first; will they be reconciled. In writing the epilogue children need to consider the style that the story is written in and emulate this. This activity could be taken one step further and children could publish and illustrate their epilogues employing the principles of text design explored in the visual literacy activities.

### SOUNDSCAPE

A soundscape is similar to a sound collage but has a narrative structure and could be used to retell the story of *Fox* using sounds and silence. Have groups within the class take responsibility for the different stages of the narrative: orientation, complication, resolution and then perform these in sequence.

### TABLEAUX/FREEZE FRAMES

Tableaux are still pictures created from human bodies and presented to an audience. Organise children into groups of four to six. Have one student nominated as the 'sculptor' who moves the other group members into position and gives them instructions on where/how to look. Tableaux can be used simply to communicate single ideas/ emotions from the story: love and belonging, unity, harmony, power, temptation, betrayal, despair, redemption.

A series of tableaux may also be performed as a series of Freeze Frames to depict episodes in the story. In this case the audience close their eyes while a group gets into position for the first tableaux. The audience then open their eyes for ten seconds and close them again while the group moves to the next tableaux. Groups may break the narrative into stages or take one stage of the narrative and break it into a series of episodes.

## Discussion of narrative stages

Orientation: We meet the characters and see their relationship develop to the point where "Dog runs, with Magpie on his back, every day, through Summer, through Winter."

- How do the main characters come to be together?
- What do these characters have in common?
- How does the relationship between them develop?
- How does the choice of words intensify the story? (For example: drags her body, melting into blackness, rush of grief, into blueness, rejoices)
- What tense is used for the action verbs? What effect does this create?
- What different emotions are encompassed in the Orientation?
- List some of the characteristics of the 'strange new creature' that Dog and Magpie form.

**Complication: The pattern of Dog and Magpie's lives is disrupted by the arrival of Fox. The harmony and unity between Dog and Magpie comes under threat as Magpie tries to warn Dog but he is unresponsive. Fox tempts Magpie to join him and she succumbs. He then abandons her.**

- Why does the arrival of Fox have the potential to interrupt the pattern of Dog and Magpie's life?
- What words are used to describe Fox's arrival? (haunted eyes, flicks through the trees like a tongue of fire). What atmosphere does this language create? Does this bode well for Dog and Magpie?
- What type of movement or activity does the circular shape of Fox's body suggest in the first image we see of him? Where is this shape repeated? What does this suggest?
- Why do you think Magpie trembles?
- Is Fox's comment that Dog and Magpie looked 'extraordinary' a compliment or is there something more?
- Compare the different reactions of Dog and Magpie to Fox's arrival.
- How does Fox shake Magpie's commitment to Dog?
- Is Magpie weak?
- Should Dog have listened to Magpie? Could he have prevented Magpie going with Fox?

**Resolution: Magpie finds strength to resist the temptation to die in the desert by thinking of Dog waking to find her gone. She begins the long journey home.**

- Was it Fox's plan to kill Magpie? How does Magpie find the strength to overcome her despair?
- Why would it be easier to die in the desert?
- Is thinking about Dog's needs a new thing for Magpie?
- How has Magpie changed as a result of her encounter with Fox?
- How are these changes reflected in the way Magpie is shown in the pictures?

## **Extending Visual Literacy - composition and design**

*Fox explores uncharted territory in the Australian picture book form. Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks have employed their years of experience to produce a masterwork that leaves no reader untouched, whatever their age (Linnet Hunter, *Magpies*, Volume 15 No. 2, May 2000).*

In picture books, there are two texts – the words and the images. As we read we put these two texts together to form a composite text. Meaning doesn't exist exclusively in one or other of the texts, but is formed as the reader combines the two. Have children respond to further readings of the book and explore its groundbreaking use of illustration through discussion, reading, role play, drawing, and drama.

### **LAYOUT – GIVEN AND NEW**

The organisation of visual elements in a layout of left and right segments reflects the pattern of written English: what is given occurs in the first part of the clause and what is new comes at the end of the clause. In the double-page spread in picture books, what is on the left is given or known and what is new is on the right. Introduce this convention to the children and work with them to chart the following pages in a table.

Given	New	Implications
<i>Dog runs with Magpie.</i>	<i>Fox comes into the bush and Magpie trembles.</i>	<i>Fox is dangerous. (Implications of 'haunted', 'fire' and 'flickers..like a tongue' = snake?)</i>
<i>Dog and Magpie at their pool, together.</i>	<i>Fox and Magpie together, without Dog</i>	<i>Magpie has a relationship with Fox that does not include Dog.</i>

**Refer to page opening four, double page spread: Text begins “And so Dog runs with Magpie”**

(Or view page at: [www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxA1.pdf](http://www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxA1.pdf) )

**Refer to page opening seven, double page spread: Text begins “Magpie tries to warn Dog about Fox.”**

(Or view page at: [www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxD.pdf](http://www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxD.pdf) )

Children can then work in groups and look for examples of this in other picture books. While you can work with whatever books are available, the following would prove rewarding in this activity: *Zoo* by Anthony Browne, *Gorilla* by Anthony Browne, *Granpa* by John Burningham and *Old Pig* by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks.

#### **VIEWER POSITIONING – DEMANDS**

Demands are images in which the gaze of a represented character is directed straight toward the viewer. This engages the viewer in a direct interpersonal exchange, provoking a high level of involvement at significant points. The cover uses a demand to draw viewers into this book. There are two further demands in *Fox*:

**Refer to page opening six, left hand page: Text begins “In the evenings, when the air is creamy with blossom...”**

(or view page at: [www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxC.pdf](http://www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxC.pdf))

**Refer to page opening eight, right hand page: Text on left begins “Fox says no more that night...”**

(or view page at: [www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxE.pdf](http://www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxE.pdf))

Discuss the type of atmosphere that these demands create and the type of involvement they elicit from the readers/viewers.

## **BODY LANGUAGE - EYE CONTACT**

Eye contact between characters is used as an indicator of the changing dynamics in the relationships between Dog, Magpie and Fox. Use outline sketches of suitable pages of the book. (These can be made with tracing paper or by using an overhead projector.) Have children draw lines to show eye contact in the images. Discuss how the changes in eye contact reflect what is happening in the relationships.

Explore the use of eye contact in the images in *Black Dog* by Pamela Allen.

## **EYE-TO-EYE TALKING**

Have children form pairs to talk about the following topics for one minute each to explore eye contact:

1. favourite music (stand back to back – no eye contact)
2. most embarrassing moment (stand facing each other and maintain unbroken eye contact)
3. enjoyable weekend activities. (stand facing each other and make eye contact as is comfortable)

Follow up with discussion about the differences between these experiences.

## **LETTERING**

“I took the cue from my six-year-old and did all the lettering with my left hand – with hand and heart connected, but the logical part of the brain turned off. So the treatment of the text is as confronting, maybe, as the writing itself.”  
Ron Brooks.

Discuss the effect of the naïve style of handwriting. Does it make the text more confronting? What medium do you think was used for the writing? What element of the story does this reflect?

## **READING PATH**

The elements of direction and texture contribute to visual aspects of the text. In the initial pages the text is presented as a collage of disjointed vertical and horizontal sections. Trace around the shapes created by the sections of text. Look for other parts of the book where this type of presentation of text is employed. How does this contribute to our understanding of the initial relationship between Dog and Magpie?

A metamorphosis occurs as Dog and Magpie change from two damaged individuals into a ‘strange new creature’ where each supplies what the other is lacking. How is the text presented at this point?

**Refer to page opening two, right hand page: Text begins “I see a strange new creature!” she says.’**  
(or view page at: [www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxE.pdf](http://www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxE.pdf))

**The text appears in two strips which are ‘mirror images’ of each other, down either side of the picture of Dog and Magpie looking at their image reflected in the water.**

Trace the shapes created by the characters and the text in the image below. What is communicated by the use of vertical text in this image?

**Refer to Page opening five, double page spread: Text begins “But Dog says, ‘Welcome...’”**  
(or view page at: [www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxB.pdf](http://www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxB.pdf))

**The vertical text separates Magpie from Fox and Dog—it pushes her down into the bottom right hand corner of the page spread.**

## FONT AND DIRECTION

Use a word processing program to explore the effect created by the use of different fonts and direction of text. Use a table function to create horizontal and vertical areas and select a No Borders option under Table Properties.

## Extension Activities

### SOCIAL DISTANCE

- Look at the element of close social distance which combines with demand to clearly construct the power that Fox has.

**Refer to page opening eight, picture only, on right hand side page:**

**Text on left begins “Fox says no more that night ...”**

(or view page at: [www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxE.pdf](http://www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxE.pdf))

- Fox’s power over Magpie is also communicated by the vertical angles created between the two of them. Fox looks down on Magpie as she looks up at him. Explore the development of this positioning throughout the illustrations.
- Explore the elements of demand and social distance by making a frame from cardboard and placing people within the frame at differing social distances from the viewer.
- Conduct first line/last line improvisations to explore this dynamic. Give each group the same first line and last line. They must begin with the first line and then improvise a scene which ends with the last line. Have different groups position the participants with different vertical angles between them: one standing looking down at the other; both seated at the same level; both seated with one at a higher level than the other. A suggestion for a first line and a last line “Do you have that book I asked for yesterday?” “I always try.”

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## WORKING ON *FOX*: THE EDITOR’S VIEW

When I first read the text of Margaret Wild’s *Fox*, back in late 1996, I was in no doubt that we should publish—here was a story that burnt into your mind. Clearly it wasn’t a text that everyone would feel comfortable with, so it wouldn’t necessarily be a best-seller, but for a publisher who valued imaginative sweep and integrity, it was a gift. I wrote, ‘Yes, let’s publish’ on my copy and gave it to children’s publisher, Rosalind Price. Driving home that night, I relived the story and in a surge of excitement thought, ‘I would really love to work on that project.’ Rosalind generously agreed, and that was the beginning of a three-year process. We sent the text to artist Ron Brooks, who wrote back, ‘I love it! I must do it. And it will be utterly unlike anything I’ve ever done, just you wait . . . I think it’s maybe the most powerful picture book text I’ve ever read. It is a great big, fat, juicy-great novel of wonderful writing—honed down to three gloriously transcendent pages! Amazing! Biblical! I am so grateful for the opportunity this affords me to really break some barriers, new ground.’ We were up and running.

Ron, Rosalind and I pooled thoughts on the text and sent combined comments to Margaret, who in her usual accommodating way solved nearly all the issues. One item remained—how to describe Fox’s eyes when he first appears in the story. We spent the next two years, on and off, looking for the perfect word—there’s a pile of correspondence centimetres thick on this. In the MS she sent us first, Margaret had, ‘After the rains, when saplings are springing up everywhere, a fox comes into the bush; Fox with his dead eyes and rich red coat. He flickers through the trees like a tongue of fire, and Magpie quails.’ It’s a very powerful juxtaposition, ‘dead/rich, red’, one that really makes you look again – but we felt ‘dead eyes’ was too closed, it gave Fox no possibility of redemption . . . We began the search for a word that would suggest hurt and damage without taking away from Fox’s charisma and power. We tried ‘cold’, ‘hard’, ‘bleak’, ‘empty’, ‘hungry’, ‘piercing’, ‘haunting’, ‘haunted’, ‘glittering’, ‘restless’, ‘wild’, ‘searching’, ‘yearning’, ‘wretched’, ‘desolate’, ‘knowing’ and dozens of others. The first four we didn’t like

because they indicate cruelty and alienation without any suggestion of the pain that might have been behind that; 'hungry' could be taken literally and like 'yearning' and 'wretched' made Fox too much of a supplicant, robbed him of pride and dignity; words like 'glittering' and 'restless' are too much on the surface and don't suggest emotional depth. We tried a few combinations, like 'cold, beautiful' or 'haunted, piercing', but we didn't like the sound of these followed by another adjective pair ('rich, red')—the rhythm immediately became more lumpy, and Margaret was unhappy with the mental dislocation involved in assimilating two radically unlike words in 'haunted, piercing'. 'Haunting' seemed a possibility, confirming the powerful effect Fox had on others and suggesting something important under the surface, but it didn't suggest anything about the past. We wondered if seeing Ron's pictures would help, and left the matter to brew.

About 18 months after we signed the contracts, Ron came to feel there was something missing in the passage that shows Fox abandoning Magpie in the desert. He felt it made Magpie too weak and passive, and Fox too uncompromisingly and deliberately cruel; did we want to show children such a bleak view of humanity? This was reinforced by reactions from some overseas publishers, who were in certain cases puzzled by the story, or reluctant to accept the bleak view of life they saw encapsulated in it. Then began another textual saga, running alongside the one about Fox's eyes. (Eventually we settled on 'haunted' eyes.) Margaret was at first willing to compromise and accepted a version that had Magpie changing her mind and deciding to go back to Dog before Fox dumps her, but later she felt this violated the integrity of her original vision, which was of an act of premeditated cruelty. Faxes flew once more, and phone bills soared. No solution seemed to work—at one stage we had eight alternatives running, and no agreement in sight.

Meanwhile Ron was struggling to complete the pictures—taking on this project became a personal torment for him, although he was determined to do it. Nothing worked, nothing was good enough. Before he produced the first picture, we were on tenterhooks. Fortunately, it was magnificent—rich, textured and compelling, with the presence of a Middle Eastern/mediaeval icon painting—and Fox's eyes, looking straight at you and seemingly boring into you, held you riveted. No chance of describing them as 'yearning'! But now there was another thing to think about—Ron had hand-lettered the first page of the text in spiky capitals, with some passages running vertically and numbers 1 to 4 to show the order of paragraphs. Then, as later, he wanted to announce that this was not an ordinary book, that in fact it was one that would challenge, subvert, possibly make uncomfortable its readers; and he wanted to emphasis that the book was a made, crafted thing. We agreed with these principles but felt the way he'd done it was distracting for the reader, and actually might present a hurdle—and some people were already finding the content of the story difficult to accept. We asked another artist to hand-write a sample so we could see what a softer, more approachable text might look like, and sent it to Ron to consider.

Months later we saw the cover picture and two others; months later again, Ron arrived with a large black folio and showed Margaret, Rosalind and I what he had created. It was a tense moment, for we knew what the personal costs of the project had been for him, and how important it was to him to feel he'd broken new ground; and we had still not reached agreement on the words! We were close to speechless as he showed the pictures—he was probably disappointed—but afterwards I said to him, 'It's like having a bundle of TNT in the office—those paintings pack in so much power'. He had redone the text lettering, using his left hand (the intuitive part of his psyche), and although there were still some sideways passages, it seemed just right, irregular and uneven, like a young child's writing, but very purposeful; some words looked effortful and tense, the angularity of the black charcoal-like pencil echoing the spiky, fragmented/scratchy lines in the paintings. Seeing the paintings helped bring the book together, for it was at that meeting, in quite a short time—maybe 20 minutes—and in great harmony, that we finally agreed on the wording of the contentious page.

## **Audience & publisher responsibility**

One of the many issues that came up in our myriad conversations about this book was the audience. Some adult readers said 'But you can't give that to little children!', feeling that Fox's cruelty might upset them—a rerun of the old Grimm's fairy tales argument. We felt that this was based on a misapprehension about the way children read—it's not clear that they generalise from one incident to a complete world picture, or that they take fiction so much to heart. I would contend a) that children are tougher and more resilient than that, b) that they can make a separation

between fiction and reality, and c) that to focus so exclusively on what Fox does and ignore what Magpie and Dog do and say is to distort radically the story. Fox represents part, but only part, of what we humans are capable of. However, we certainly did not want to publish a book that might be destructive, so we test-read it to some Prep and Grade 1 children and teachers. Their response was encouraging, but we agreed that upper primary children would have a better chance of exploring fully the riches the book had to offer than the littlies. We were also clear that it could travel—the growing acceptance of certain picture books in secondary schools gave us good hope of interesting adolescents in *Fox*, and our own intense engagement with the story over many months assured us that adults could find much in it as well. We've found that some people see loyalty and betrayal as the most salient themes, others focus on jealousy, or disability, or risk; the story contains and dramatizes them all.

## How the text works

The text is deceptively simple; I'd like to say just a couple of things about the way it works. First of all, the particular choice of words—take 'into blueness' for example:

'With Magpie clinging to his back, Dog races through the scrub, past stringybarks, past yellow box trees, and into blueness.' The softer, more open sound of 'into blueness' is liberating after the brusqueness of 'past', 'stringybark' and 'box trees'; and the abstract, 'blueness', gives the sense of a state of being as well as a colour. On the other hand, the urgent rhythm and energetic verbs on page 26 ('streak', 'rip', 'pelt') have a very physical effect.

Sometimes an unusual juxtaposition of words gives the story richness and power. For example, in the first sentence 'clamped' suggests purposefulness and possible aggression – it looks as though Dog is going to eat Magpie – but then we get 'big gentle mouth'. This subversion of expectation gives a kick of excitement; we begin to sit up and take notice. Similarly with Fox's appearance: 'rich red coat . . . tongue of fire' on its own is pleasing but not absolutely noteworthy – it's the pairing with 'haunted eyes' that challenges us to ask, 'What's going on here?' It's clear this isn't just about the arrival of a charismatic but dyed-in-the-wool villain on the scene, it's about mixed, painful, real/human experience.

Second, the rhythm of the sentences makes the words flow, or bump into each other, or hang in silence, so that we are carried along in exultation, or shocked, or made to pay attention. It's a great text to read aloud. For instance, the repetition in 'flying. Truly flying' (and later, 'Nothing like flying. Nothing!') gives Magpie's experience an urgency it wouldn't otherwise have. Similarly, the litany 'I am Dog's missing eye and he is my wings' builds to intensity with repetition. The rhythms in 'And so Dog runs, with Magpie on his back, every day, through summer, through winter' echo the regularity and continuity of a settled friendship, and at the same time suggest Dog's dependable nature. The starkness of the two short phrases, 'Neither moves, neither speaks', crystallizes the tension and drama of the moment out there in the desert, the dreadful hiatus that's opened up between Fox and Magpie now that the 'high' is over. There's a poet's ear at work here. Teachers probably won't want to analyse language in this way with children; I'm just making the point that every word, and the placing of every word, carries great meaning in this book, so it absolutely repays close, slow, repeated reading.

## How the pictures work

Similarly, the colours and composition of individual pictures, and the interplay between them, repay careful looking. For example, it's not an accident that Magpie is nearly always unbalanced and in a corner, until right near the end. Look at how Fox takes over space and blocks others; compare his stances with Dog's uprightness. Look at the way red is used throughout the book. Take in the vigour of the lines and the cross-hatching, the intensity of colour in sun and desert, the charred effect of the scene where Fox abandons Magpie, the brilliance of the blue sky as they race away. Absorb the richness of the cave shadow, the solidity of the rocks and trees around the cave. Consider the pairing of the endpapers. All of these things create character, dynamics, relationship, feeling and power. The existential dilemma that the story poses is there, in force, in the pictures. Not everyone likes this book or is comfortable with it, but no-one has a pallid reaction to *Fox*.

Sarah Brenan  
March 2000

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*The following review of Fox, which appeared in Magpies Volume 15 No. 2 May 2000 demonstrates the power it has over adults and children alike. Teachers may be interested in the analysis of a double-page spread, which echoes many of the activities included in the notes above.*

## **FOX: LINNET HUNTER LOOKS AT A PUBLISHING LANDMARK**

*For the past month, adult visitors to our house have, each and every one, looked past me and asked, What's that? Drawn by the passion and fire inherent in the bitter-flame coat and tawny eyes which gaze from the over of Fox, they would beg to just have a look. And none of their responses were mild. Magnetic, powerful, compelling, Fox explores uncharted territory in the Australian picture book form. Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks have employed their years of experience to produce a masterwork that leaves no reader untouched, whatever their age.*

For this is not a picture book told, as some are, at one remove, in distanced and managed tones. It is alive and immediate, pulsing with the emotions that are its lifeblood, heart-strong with the impulses and talents of its creators. Child readers, too, are engrossed and riveted from the moment Dog runs down the slope carrying a charred bundle of black and white feathers in his mouth. He runs away from the bushfire toward the sanctuary of his cave by the water, watched by the lithe curve of Fox. And all this occurs before a word has been printed!

Although the use of three characters with generic names, Fox, Dog and Magpie, may forge connections with the fable form of story, this is not a simple morality tale, nor a satirical observation of human mores. Indeed it works on so many layers, that adults are quick to ask if it is a children's book, seeing as they do, themes of betrayal inherent in its framework. But children, especially from the age of nine and up who adore this book, find schoolyard connections of loyalty and friendship, and respond to that level.

When Magpie is rescued by Dog from the bushfire and is carried to the safety of his cave, she can no longer see a point to life. She has lost the use of one wing and can not fly. But Dog shows her their reflection in the tannin waters of the nearby pool. In a reversed illustration, where the mirrored image is greater than the 'reality', Magpie sees that, although Dog has only one eye, and she only one wing, they form a strange new creature. When Dog runs with her upon his back, she feels she is flying, and rejoices:

*Fly Dog fly! I will be your missing eye and you will be my wings.*

Thus they live in harmony as two seasons pass, until Fox, the outsider, comes like the snake into paradise, to tempt Magpie with her secret desires.

This bare plot summation hardly does justice to the emotional layers of the tale. It is in essence a story of love and loyalty and choice, told without judgement. In observing her characters so acutely and bringing their various characteristics to the fore in such a spare, almost Biblical text, Wild has accomplished a tour de force.

Powerful though the written narrative is—told as it is in formal, almost archaic language using the immediacy of the present tense—it is the illustrations that make a lasting impact. Brooks has extended the story through the landscape without losing the strong focus on the actions of the three who enact their tale within it. He has used the archetypal symbols of forest, water, cave and desert in a distinctly Australian way. Past and present associations—which incorporate the influences of other great Australian artists such as Boyd, Olsen, Fairweather—are melded and establish this book as part of the Australian artistic tradition. The alchemy produced forges an immediate connection between viewer, artist and story. Brooks will tell you that he has only responded to the impact of the story Wild has written, but both he and Wild have taken risks and we are the privileged recipients of their vision.

In all the book, until the very last, shockingly white page, there is no unmarked section of paper. Brooks has used impasto, amongst other techniques, to help the reader feel the layers of the story. Stippled, mottled and marbled in a range of pigments which seem drawn from the earth itself—sun-dried bronze, rust, shredded bark, heat-dusted white, glazed turquoise, dusty sage, mottled galah pink, drought-parched red—the landscapes signify passion, tension or healing.

Brooks explains . . . *rather than the traditional tools of pen and ink, pencil, charcoal sticks, watercolour, I used just about anything I could lay my hands on—collage, oil paint, acrylic, watercolour, shellac, oil sticks; and instead of drawing, I gouged, scratched and scraped my way through all this stuff to find my lines, using kitchen forks, bits of wire, dental tools, bits of tin, etc, then worked the oil sticks into them, rubbing them off, glazing over the top, gouging back in again, varnishing—so every image is a conglomerate of layers and levels of materials (sometimes clashing materials).*

It would be easy to lose control or to over-work the page; but Brooks has kept each image simple. There are no animals portrayed except the ones in the story, and the backgrounds owe their tactile feel to the depth of the medium, though if you look into corners or the foreground you may find the delicate imprint of wavering grass heads, as if finely etched.

The layout of the book uses the energy of the movement and stillness to accentuate the relationships between Dog and Magpie, Fox and Dog, Fox and Magpie. Their eyes, posture and position on the page, rather than facial expressions, are employed to invoke the tensions between them.

The shapes are made up of many energetic lines that cross and recross into the fine hair of Fox, or the wavering outline of a distant tree. Colours overlap and blend, sometimes merging or blushing from sunrise to ochre, clouding into a matted fringe and then sliding effortlessly into the weathered patina of a weighty aged rock, adding mystery and timelessness.

There is so much to discern and explore in this book that perhaps the best way to give its flavour is to look closely at one particular illustration. Two tightly framed poses exemplify the choice Magpie has to make between Dog and Fox on page opening seven.

**Refer to page opening seven (double page spread): Text begins 'Magpie tries to warn Dog about Fox'** (or view pages at: [www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxD.pdf](http://www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxD.pdf))

Another vital connection between word and picture is the lettering of the text. Printed unevenly and blackly as though using a claw dipped in tar, the letters sprawl and march across and sideways on the page, sometimes coming between the characters, but always slowing down the reading of the words to create a certain pace, and tying the energy of the linework in the illustrations to the words. Confronting it certainly is, but its necessity to the overall creation is even more evident if you are able to contrast it with an English edition, where the publishers chose not to challenge their readers. They altered the design by typesetting the script, to, what I believe to be, the great detriment of the book.

Luckily, in this country, we have editors who have faith in our discrimination and open-mindedness. Don't let them down. Take your time with this book, do not judge it hastily; read it to anyone who will listen (i.e. everyone) and applaud the efforts and daring of those who dedicated themselves to making sure that every aspect of this book from weight of paper, to shape, to placing the barcode, was inherently at one with the intention of the narrative. The final endpaper, endlessly peaceful in cerulean blues, with jade trees shading the still waters leaves us with hope for reunion and forgiveness. When you have read this book, share it with a friend, or your class, and you will still be pondering it and talking it over for at least the time it takes to hop across a stony heat-filled desert to reclaim the treasure of a loving friendship.

**Refer to page opening seven (double page spread): Text begins 'Magpie tries to warn Dog about Fox'** (or view pages at: [www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxD.pdf](http://www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/FoxD.pdf))

On the left-hand page, Dog drinks at the pool before his cave, while Magpie perches on the outer slippery curve of a boulder to his left. She is above him, trying to warn him about Fox. *He belongs nowhere*, she says. *He loves no one*. There is the sense that her words fall into the water and are lost. Dog is not looking at her, and his blind eye is turned toward the viewer . . . is he blind to what is before him? His mouth, open to lap, seems to grin, revealing his trusty and trustworthy nature, and his tan and clay coat is of the same hue as the boulder, emphasising his connection to the landscape. The pearly irradiance of dusk stains event he water with luminescent pinks, linking this page to an earlier one lit by distant flames.

In a mirror study on the opposite page, balanced by the rounded form of another boulder to the right, Fox speaks softly to Magpie. *I can run faster than Dog . . . Leave Dog and come with me*.

Magpie is on the ground here, a little lower down the page than Fox, which emphasises her vulnerability. Fox's eyes, so soft and so piercing, which were a framed centrepiece of the previous page opening, seem to look deep into Magpie's soul and see her frailty. He is coiled, as if he might suddenly spring, and his coat, bright as the burning orange desert sun by day, muted by night still has a rusty mantle. Yet, he is not evil. His beauty is clear and his motives are questionable but he is portrayed with compassion for his lack of ability to love.

The dark background where the vertical outlines of trees lean slightly adds to the unease, and prepares the reader for the later illustration where Fox deserts Magpie in the wasteland, and the landscape turns to ashes and (is) soot inscribed with sharp, sudden hieroglyphics. Meanwhile, the two creatures are portrayed balancing one another and Magpie must choose between them. These two still, almost meditative moments contrast with the brilliance of Fox's leaps across a later double-page spread and maintain the rhythm of the narrative.

***Linnet Hunter***

***Magpies Volume 15 No. 2 May 2000***

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## **MEET THE PEOPLE**

### **MARGARET WILD**

Margaret Wild lives in Sydney. She is the author of many acclaimed picture books, including *The Very Best of Friends*, *First Day*, *Tom Goes to Kindergarten*, *Old Pig* and *Rosie and Tortoise*. Margaret has also written novels for older children and teenagers, most recently the verse novels *Jinx* and *One Night*.

### **RON BROOKS**

Ron Brooks lives in Huonville, Tasmania. He has illustrated many memorable books for children, including *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek*, *John Brown*, *Rose and the Midnight Cat*, *Motor Bill* and *the Lovely Caroline*, *Henry's Bed* and *Henry's Bath*, *Old Pig* and *Rosie and Tortoise*.

### **JANET ANDERSON**

Janet's career in education grew out of her time with a repertory theatre company that worked with groups as diverse as preschoolers in India to Marines in the United States. A love of drama and communication from the stage has communicated to a love of literacy development in the classroom. Janet has had a career in Independent Schooling in NSW as both a classroom teacher and member of school executive. She holds a Masters Degree in Education specialising in teaching and learning.