

## Teachers' Notes (Primary) by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

# Lara of Newtown

**Chris McKimmie**

**ISBN 9781760112325**

**Recommended for ages 4-8**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **STORY SUMMARY**

*Nana Banana called me Misty, until she couldn't look after me anymore.  
Noni Nice of Pymble called me Nigella, but I was only Nigella for a day.  
When the Kafoops family found me on the streets of Newtown they called me Lara.  
I knew I had found my home at last.*

*Lara of Newtown* is another witty, wise and wonderful story – this time about a homeless cat looking for love – written and illustrated by the one and only Chris McKimmie.

Chris's books appeal to children because of their wide-eyed appreciation of the world through a child's viewpoint. Like the eight previous books in Chris McKimmie's whimsical collection, *Brian Banana Duck Sunshine Yellow*, *Maisie Moo and Invisible Lucy*, *Special Kev*, *Two Peas in a Pod*, *Good Morning Mr Pancakes*, *Alex and the Watermelon Boat*, and *Scarlet and the Scratchy Moon*, and *Crikey and Cat*, this story is quietly endearing.

*Lara of Newtown* offers a lesson to children that pets need love and comfort, and that everyone needs a home in which they are cared for and nurtured. Its resolution is comforting in Lara's discovery of the perfect home – which is not so much 'perfect', but rather, is perfectly suited to Lara!

This is an obliquely suggestive written and visual text in which Chris McKimmie has created another work of inventive and emotionally resonant fine art. His books celebrate creativity – every line, every mark on the page, and every image show kids not only how art can be made, but also how it can express their feelings and ideas. It is both a triumph of picture book art, and a book which is bound to be immensely appealing to children.

### **THEMES**

There are several key ideas or themes which flow through this work:

- *Pets*
- *Homelessness*
- *Family*

These themes could be considered in conjunction with the following school curriculum areas.

### **CURRICULUM TOPICS**

1. Study of history, society and environment
2. English language and literacy
3. Visual literacy

4. Creative arts
5. Learning technologies
6. Mathematics

The notes which follow are designed to be used largely in pre-school and lower primary classrooms. Teachers should be able to adapt them to suit the demands of their particular curriculum.

## **STUDY OF HISTORY, SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT**

### **PETS**

- *Activity:* This story says as much about pet-owners as it does about pets. Why do we people become pet-owners? Why are some people not interested in having pets?
- *Discussion Point:* What pets do you have? Or what pet would you like to have?
- *Discussion Point:* What do you like doing with your pet?
- *Discussion Point:* Lara likes to sunbathe on the roof in order to escape the noise of Uncle McGreg's playing the bagpipes during his visits. Does your pet have any odd habits? Does your pet invite her/his friends over to visit?
- *Discussion Point:* Lara likes to eat Seafood Collection Crunchy Biscuits. What does your pet like to eat?
- *Activity:* Read other books about pets. eg *Rex* by Ursula Dubosarsky and David Mackintosh's (Viking, 2005) or Lisa Shanahan and Gus Gordon's *Big Pet Day* by (Hachette, 2014) or Bob Graham's *Let's Get a Pup!* (Walker Books, 2007) or Chris McKimmie's *Crikey and Cat* (Allen & Unwin, 2014) or Emily Gravett's *Matilda's Cat* (MacMillan, 2012) or Oliver Jeffers' *This Moose Belongs to Me* (Philomel Books, 2012) or Lynley Dodds' *Hairy Maclary* series.
- *Activity:* Have a pet 'show and tell' day, like that depicted in some of the books listed above.

### **FAMILY**

- *Discussion Point:* Lara stays first with the Nice family, who were not very nice to her! The Kafoops family, however, prove to be a perfect pet-owning family. They like to do things together like hunting for bargains. What makes a happy family?
- *Discussion Point:* Lara stays with three very different families. Nana Banana lives alone. (She is actually the character who appears in Chris's earlier book *Brian Banana Duck Sunshine Yellow*, So where is her husband 'Grumpy', who also appeared in that book, now?) Mr Clint Nice, Mrs Tegan Nice and Noni Nice share their home with baby Clint, a

pet dog named Diddums, and a budgerigar named Minnie Crumb who comes to an unfortunate end. The Kafoops are a quirky couple who appear to have no children. (Marilyn Kafoops first appeared in *Alex and the Watermelon Boat* up on the roof, escaping from the floods in Brisbane; in this latest book the removal van crossing the Sydney Harbour Bridge is her moving from Brisbane to Sydney.) Discuss different types of families.

## HOMELESSNESS

- *Question:* Nana Banana leaves Misty at the door of an institution called CARE4CATS. What would you do if you could no longer look after a pet?
- *Discussion Point:* What would it be like to be homeless?
- *Activity:* There are several people in the pictures who are begging, or appear to be living on the streets. Identify them in the images in the book. Write a story from the perspective of a homeless person.
- *Discussion Point:* How can a society assist people or pets who are homeless?
- *Discussion Point:* The RSPCA mission is to prevent cruelty to animals. They also care for pets which have been lost or abandoned. Their slogan is 'For all creatures great & small'. Find out more about their services. <http://rspca.org.au/>
- *Activity:* Visit an RSPCA shelter with the class; or visit a pet shop.

[See also [Creative Arts](#) below.]

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

- 1)** The **language** in this book is extremely spare and suggestive. For example, 'The sun was setting and the sky was a pretty prawn pink. It was all as lovely as a snow dome.'
  - *Activity:* Create a description like this one, making it as original as possible.
- 2)** This book follows the **traditional structure of folk tale in a narrative journey** as Misty/Lara searches for a home and eventually finds just what she wants.
  - *Activity:* Write a simple story using this sort of rising and falling tension in the narrative, followed by a resolution.
- 3) Humour** is a hallmark of Chris McKimmie's books.
  - *Discussion Point:* e.g. In the opening double page spread, a plane flies overhead with the words *BUSH TURKEY AIRLINES* painted on its side. A restaurant is called '*NEWTAIN THAI*' (a play on the suburb name, Newtown). On the second double page spread, a man

in a Santa suit is begging with a sign: *HELP! REINDEER TO SUPPORT*. Later in the book another sign reads '*ENTHAILY THAI*'. What did you find funny in this book?

**4)** The **Conclusion** of a story should cement its themes.

- *Discussion Point:* How did this story end? What might have happened next?

## VISUAL LITERACY

**1)** Chris McKimmie's **images** of Lara of Newtown are gorgeously **child-like**, and in the back of the book, he acknowledges his granddaughter Scarlett's drawing, as the inspiration for how he drew Lara.

- *Activity:* Invite students to create an image of Lara. Scan the images and create an online gallery of them. [See also [Blackline Master 1](#) below.]

**2)** The **Typography and lettering** is hand-lettered like a child's.

- *Activity:* Invite students to write a caption and create their own typography for the image they've drawn above.

**3)** **Medium** is described on the back page: "COLOUR PENCILS, pencils, Pen & ink, oil Pastels, Water Colours, MASKING Tape, Pastels, acrylic, Gouache, Biro, Charcoal, Christmas hat, jacaranda flower, paper bag, newspaper, lace, collage, wood, rubber stamp, bath towel". Chris also lists his grandchildren's contributions in drawings included throughout the book. This sort of eclectic use of medium distinguishes his recent picture books.

*Activity:* Collage a scene, in any combination of the media mentioned here, depicting any scene in this book.

**4)** **Emotions** are conveyed in the images in this book, too.

- *Question:* What feelings are conveyed in the picture of Lara on the cover? Compare her facial expression to her face when she is left in a basket at CARE4CATS?
- *Question:* The text: 'Then they all went quiet. Way too quiet.' is written on a black painted page, with a feather floating on the right hand corner. What feeling does this image give the reader?

**5)** Chris McKimmie's books frequently include **intertextual references** and visual jokes. E.g. on the fourth double page spread, 'We will have to call her Nigella.' Or on the seventh double page spread, a poster with 'Johnny Farmland Last Farewell Tour December Only' written on it.

- *Question:* What other 'sub-texts' did you discover in the images in this book?

- *Question:* Who are the passengers visible in the aeroplane windows in the fourteenth double page spread featuring Lara sunbathing on the roof?

**6) Colour** in Chris McKimmie’s images varies from bright and vibrant, to dark and sombre. This denotes the changes in mood and emotion as the story unfolds.

- *Activity:* Examine the image of the night sky when Lara is ‘sleeping rough’. What does colour convey in this picture?

**7) Design encompasses every aspect of a picture book’s construction**, and includes the front and back cover image, the endpapers, a dedication page, a title page, 16 double page spreads, and a final imprint or publication details page. The juxtaposition of images and words on each page contributes to meaning in this and in other books.

- *Activity:* Choose a page and discuss how it is designed and how that contributes to meaning.
- *Question:* The **front endpaper** depicts squares of paper taped together; **the back endpaper** depicts a heart sitting on a velour background (perhaps a towel?). How do they relate to the text of the book?
- *Activity:* Examine the front and back cover of the book. What meaning do you make from the images? Read the blurb on the back cover. Then write your own blurb for the book.

## CREATIVE ARTS

This text will encourage students to explore various other creative arts.

### DRAMA

- *Activity:* Invite students to act out Lara’s journey.

### MUSIC

- *Activity:* Music consists of noises made by instruments including voices. This book includes street sounds such as ‘tippy tap tap Tap HONK HONK BEEP BEEP’. Create a ‘soundscape’ for the book by having everyone in class make sounds suggested by text and images in this book.

### CRAFT AND DESIGN

- *Activity:* Draw an image of Lara on cartridge paper and decorate the image. Cut out your cats and have a display of them in the classroom. [See also [Blackline Master 1](#) below.] Or use collage to create a whole menagerie of the class’s favourite animals.

## LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

This book might be used as a tool for investigations on the Internet.

- *Activity:* Explore website links to related topics such as:

### **Animals-in-Need**

<http://www.animals-in-need.com.au/>

### **Pet Rescue**

<http://www.petrescue.com.au/groups/10249>

### **Animals Australia**

[http://www.animalsaustralia.org/issues/companion\\_animals.php](http://www.animalsaustralia.org/issues/companion_animals.php)

### **RSPCA**

<http://rspca.org.au/>

### **Drawing Animals**

'Category: Drawing Animals' *WikiHow*

<http://www.wikihow.com/Category:Drawing-Animals>

'How to Draw Animals' *How Stuff Works*

<http://home.howstuffworks.com/how-to-draw-animals.htm>

### **Pets – Crafts**

'Pet Animals Crafts and Activities for Kids' DLTK's Crafts for Kids

<http://www.dltk-kids.com/animals/pets.html>

## MATHEMATICS

Students will find many objects, animals and people to count in this book.

- *Question:* In the opening double page spread, how many sunflowers is the lady carrying? [*Answer. Seven.*]
- *Question:* On the fifth double page spread how many carriages of the toy train can you see? [*Answer: Five.*]
- *Question:* How many aeroplanes appear in the book? (*Answer: Four.*)
- *Question:* How many chillis are hanging in the window of the ENTHAILY THAI Restaurant? (*Answer: Five.*)

## CONCLUSION

This work is a warm, sometimes funny, and often touching account of a lonely pet finding a home. A hallmark of Chris McKimmie's books is their warm appreciation of what it means to be human – even if you happen to be a cat! Love and friendship is central to each of them: and this latest work is an absolute gem.

## ABOUT THE WRITERS

### CHRIS MCKIMMIE

**Chris McKimmie** is a writer, illustrator, and artist. He was the convenor and originator of the illustration program at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. He wrote, illustrated and designed a series of 8 children's books in the 70s, and has designed many covers for the University of Queensland Press. Represented in the *Graphis Annual*, he has worked as a graphic designer and publications designer for the ABC, the National Parks and Wildlife Services and the University of WA Press. He was production designer for the award-winning short film 'Stations' and the feature-length film 'Australian Dream', and wrote the lyrics for the songs in both films. His previous books with Allen and Unwin are *Brian Banana Duck Sunshine Yellow* (2006), shortlisted for the 2007 CBCA Awards, *Maisie Moo and Invisible Lucy* (2007), *Special Kev* (2008), shortlisted for the 2009 CBCA Awards, *Two Peas in a Pod* (2010), shortlisted for the 2011 CBCA Awards, *Good Morning, Mr Pancakes* (2011), *Alex and the Watermelon Boat* (2012), *Scarlett and the Scratchy Moon* (2013) and *Crikey and Cat* (2014). He has worked as a lecturer, a graphic designer, a film production designer, a cleaner, a dad, a pot-plant painter, a public servant, a musician, a factory hand and a granddad. He regularly exhibits his paintings and drawings.

#### Previous books by Chris McKimmie:

*apple to zoo* Hicks Smith 1975  
*Two friends* Hicks Smith 1975  
*The shape I'm in* Methuen 1977  
*The caught bird* Methuen 1977  
*The painted bird* Hicks Smith 1975  
*One day* Hicks Smith 1975  
*One rainy day* Methuen 1977  
*The magic day* Methuen 1977

*Brian Banana Duck Sunshine Yellow* 2006  
*Maisie Moo and Invisible Lucy* 2007  
*Special Kev* 2008  
*Two Peas in a Pod* 2010  
*Good Morning Mr Pancakes* 2011  
*Alex and the Watermelon Boat* 2012  
*Scarlet and the Scratchy Moon* 2013  
*Crikey and Cat* 2014

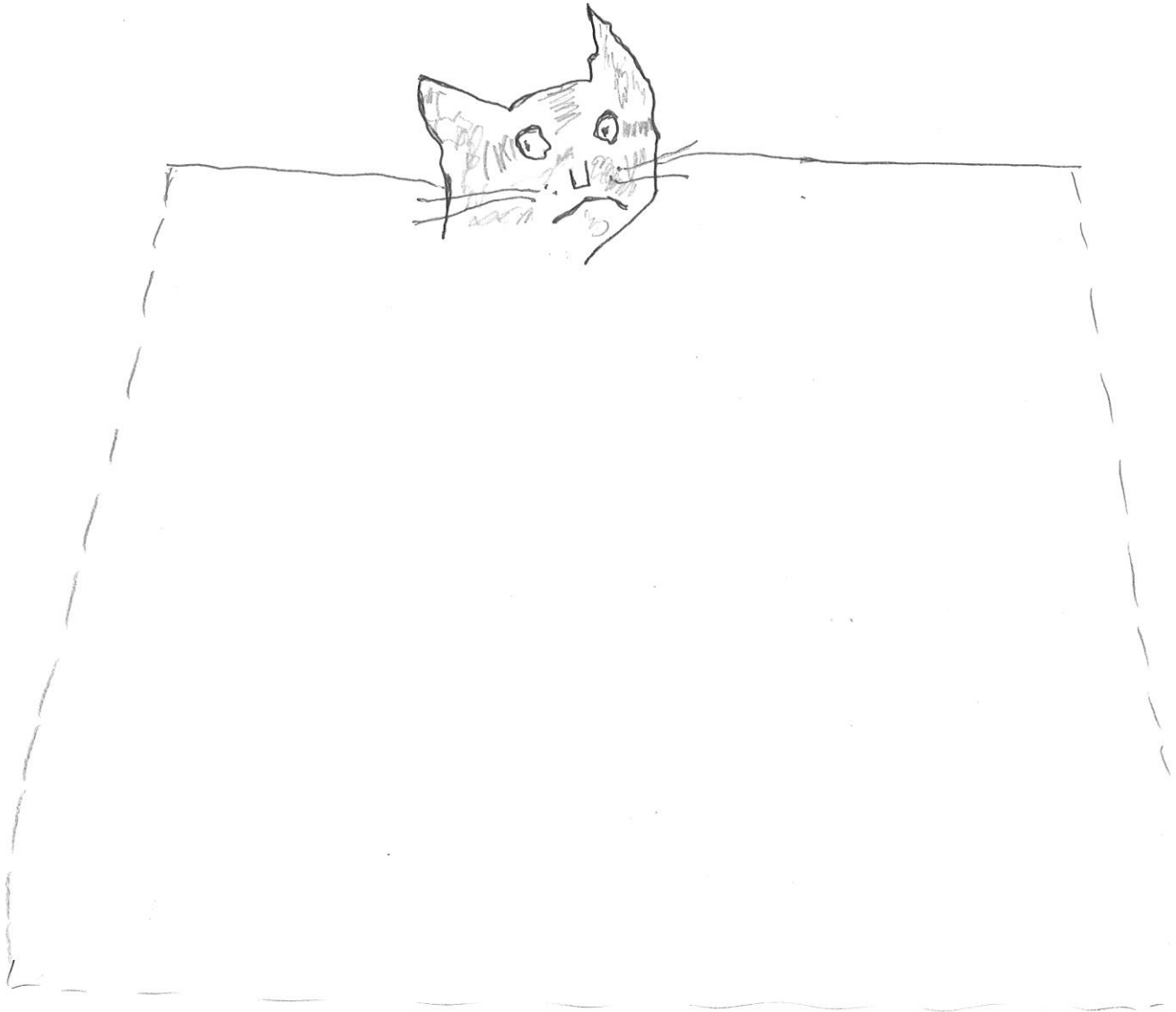
### ROBYN SHEAHAN-BRIGHT

**Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright** operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and publishes regularly on children's literature, Australian fiction, and publishing history. She was inaugural director of and is a Life Member of the Queensland Writers Centre, and was co-founder of Jam Roll Press. Her publications include *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia (1946-2005)* (2006) co-edited with Craig Munro and *Hot Iron Corrugated Sky: 100 Years of Queensland Writing* (2002) co-edited with Stuart Glover. In 2012 she was recipient of the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature. In 2014 she received the Queensland Writers' Centre's Johnno Award.



## BLM 1: CREATE A COLLAGE PICTURE OF LARA

Using the rough outline below, of Lara in her 'raggedy bed', create your own image using collage techniques. Cut out pictures from magazines, collect lace, newspaper, lolly rappers, glitter, buttons, or any other material which appeals to you, in order to create a totally original interpretation of this picture.



## BLM 2: LARA'S LANDMARKS

Match these landmarks or business names with an associated word or phrase.  
(They each appear in the book.)

1.	Sydney	
2.	Enmore	
3.	NEWTHAIN	
4.	Sydney	
5.	Magdalena's	
6.	Charming	
7.	END	
8.	CARE	
9.	ENTHAILY	
10.	The Comedy	

### BLM 3: LARA'S QUIZ

#### Questions:



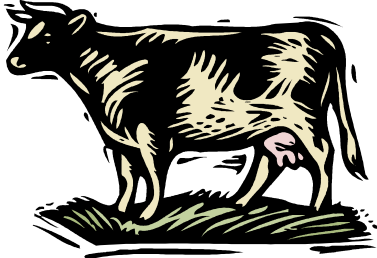







1. In what city is this story set?
2. What is Lara holding on the title page?
3. What was Lara's name when she lived with Nana Banana?
4. In what suburb does Noni Nice live?
5. What feast day were the Nice family celebrating when Lara lived with them?
6. What food does Lara steal from the Nice family's feasting table?
7. What sort of pet is Minnie Crumb?
8. 'She dumped me in the middle of nowhere.' Where was Lara dumped?
9. What shop were the Kafoops standing in front of when they spotted Lara?
10. What does Lara sleep on at the Kafoops house?



## BLM 4: LARA'S THINGS

Images of each of these things appear in the book, some more than once. Try to find them in the book.

Write the name beneath the picture on this sheet, too.

		
1. Basket	2.	3.
		
4. Piano accordion	5.	6.
		
7.	8.	9. Ferry
		
10.	11.	12.

## ANSWERS TO BLACKLINE MASTER QUESTIONS

### BLM 2 Answers:

1. Sydney Harbour Bridge
2. Enmore Theatre
3. NEWTHAIN THAI
4. Sydney Opera House
5. Magdalena's Spanish Tap Dancing School
6. Charming World Super-Mart
7. END OF THE LINE 2<sup>ND</sup> HAND STORE
8. CARE4 CATS
9. ENTHAILY THAI
10. The Comedy Festival.

### BLM 3 Answers:

1. Sydney
2. A knife and fork
3. Misty
4. Pymble
5. Christmas
6. Custard and Crackling
7. A budgerigar
8. Enmore
9. End of the Line 2nd hand store
10. 'A stack of warm, fluffed-up towels'.

### BLM 4 Answers:

Basket	Sunflowers	Cow
Piano accordion	Fish	Stroller
Bicycle	Sydney Harbour Bridge	Ferry
Record player	Aeroplane	Bagpipes