

The Feather

TEACHERS NOTES

Written by Margaret Wild and Illustrated by Freya Blackwood

Published by Little Hare, February 2018

SYNOPSIS

'Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul' —Emily Dickinson

When a great feather drifts from the leaden sky, two children recognise its extraordinariness and take it to the village for its protection. The villagers, however, want to encase it, upon which the feather loses its radiance. The children take it home and care for it through the night. In the morning it is again radiant, and when they set it free it leaves signs of blue sky and colour.

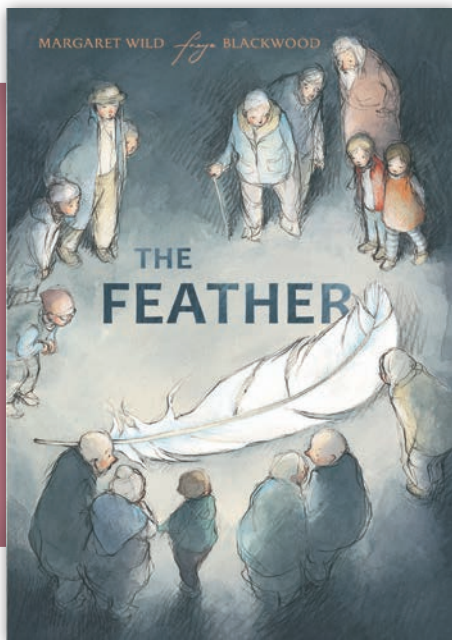
THEMES

The Feather is a book about freedom, hope and potential. When the feather floats to the ground, Maria and Nico recognise it immediately for what it is — something rare and precious. But when they try to share the gift with their village, the feather becomes burdened under the weight of the villagers' expectations, stifled by their desperate need to trap and keep it to themselves. Only through the unassuming safety provided by Maria and Nico does feather regain its colour and float to freedom.

Like the villagers, readers will discover many ways to interpret the meaning of the feather and its presence in the village. The following broad themes may make a good starting point for your discussions:

- Freedom
- Hope
- Potential
- Life and death
- Expectation
- Suffering





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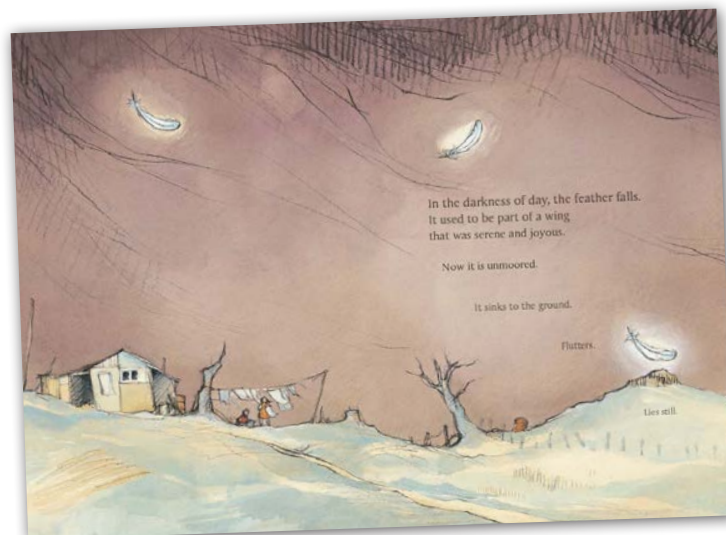
WRITING STYLE

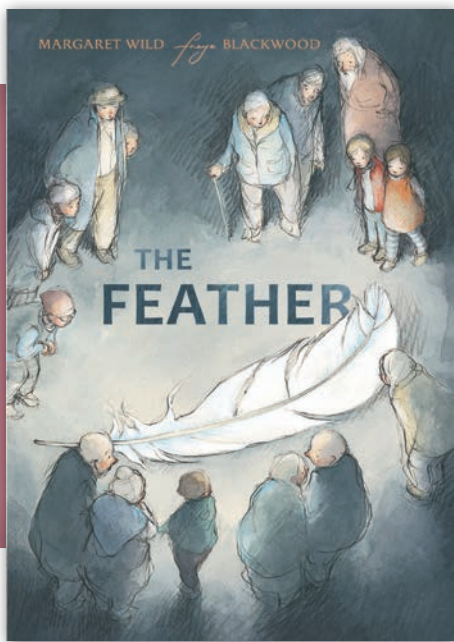
Margaret Wild uses traditional narrative prose as the basis for this story, but draws heavily on poetry and dialogue to engage the reader and create ambiguity.

The straightforward dialogue of the two children echoes the thoughts readers might have as they start to explore the meaning of the feather, and ignites imaginative responses to what the feather might mean. Their unassuming reactions to the feather when they first find it create a sense of whimsy and freedom: 'It doesn't belong between walls,' says Maria, before she suggests taking it to the village.

Maria and Nico are positioned in the story by their words, the language they use to describe the feather — soft, silky, bright — is basic but evokes a sense of colour and wonder, while the language of the villagers focuses not on the object, but on what they can use to trap its beauty — preserve it, display it, keep it. The dialogue offers two opposing positions for readers to explore hope and beauty: the villagers fixate on what the feather can offer them and how they can use it, while Maria and Nico appreciate the object for what it is, and acknowledge that their time with it might be fleeting.

The themes then, that are raised by this opposing dialogue, are reinforced by Wild's use of poetic narrative, for example when she first describes the feather falling to the ground: 'Now it is unmoored. It sinks to the ground. Flutters. Lies still.' Even here, in the opening lines of the book, Wild draws readers towards an object that is free, but falling, that has life, but is still. Before the dialogue even begins she invites us to wonder where the feather has come from, what it will become, and where it will end up.





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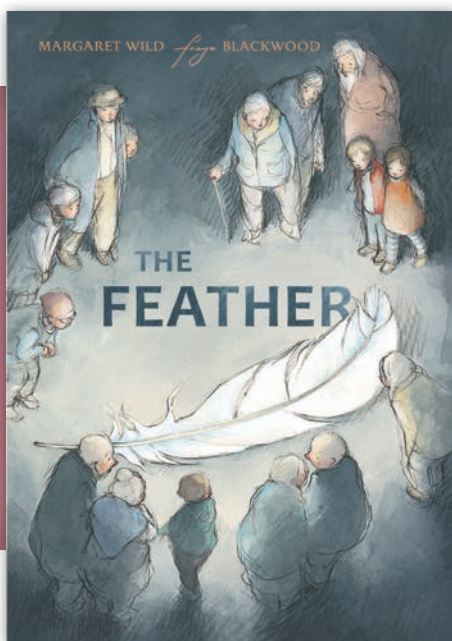
ILLUSTRATION STYLE

Freya Blackwood's illustrations support the themes created by Wild's text, but offer their own interpretations to be explored either in conjunction with the text, or independently.

She uses a faded colour palette throughout the book, and makes careful use of colour and light to signal those moments where there is hope, and potential for something to grow beyond its bounds. The feather itself, as it falls to the ground, starts small on the page, the size, perhaps, of a feather we might expect to see from any bird. But when Nico and Maria find it, Blackwood alters our perception, showing us that the feather is larger than the children, almost the size of a small boat. The size of the feather here is important, because it becomes symbolic of something larger than a familiar object (a bird) and so is infused with a sense of magic and possibility. The feather seems to grow almost bigger still, as it is surrounded by the villagers, and fills the space between them on the ground with its beauty and light, but withers and fades when they start discussing their plans to lock it up, away from the sky.

In this scene the feather, which brings light and colour to each page of the book until this moment, becomes overshadowed by the dull, muddy grey tones of the villagers and the village. It too, becomes 'muddy', 'dull' and 'dingy'. Maria and Nico are left alone with the now disappointing object, and the small dot of colour and light that surrounds them sets them apart again from the rest of the village. In the final pages, the small bubble of light that surrounds them grows bigger, as they snuggle against the feather, trying to make it feel safe again. There is a moment, at first where it seems that the shadows will overtake the children — their clothes take on the grey tones of the village as they lie down against the murky brown feather, and this is followed by a wordless two page spread, where only a small pocket of light peeks from the window of their hut. But it is matched on the following page, another wordless spread, that is as light as the clouds, and when the children wake the feather is clean again and both have dreamt of flying free.

The swirls of the feather flying free entwine with the poetic language of the last page, whipping the words out of line and carrying them up as the feather 'wobbles. Dips. Soars. Up, up, up, a streak of blue and white'. The images and text pull tightly together in the final phrase, where the 'long-ago summer sky' is reflected in both, leaving the reader behind, once more, to wonder at the meaning of what they have just seen.



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AUTHOR BACKGROUND

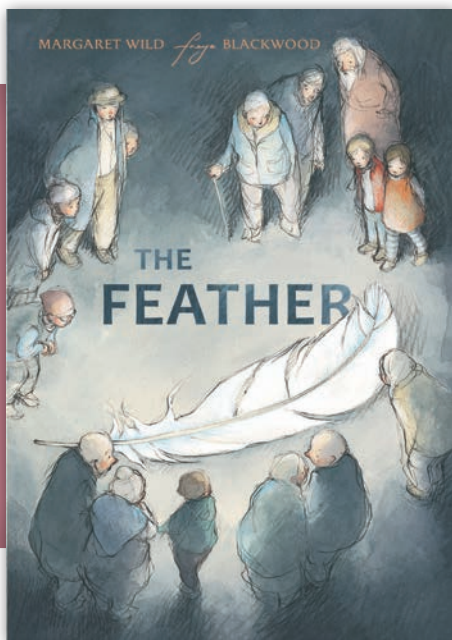
Margaret Wild was born in 1948 in Eschew, a small town in South Africa, and came to Australia in 1972. Before becoming a full-time writer, Margaret was a journalist for newspapers and magazines and then she worked for sixteen years as a book editor in children's publishing.

Margaret's books explore a diverse range of themes, but she is particularly noted for exploring issues of identity, trust, and death. Many of her books have appeared in foreign editions. All have been highly acclaimed. *Jenny Angel* (which was inspired by her brother's death at the age of seven), illustrated by Anne Spudvilas, *Fox*, illustrated by Ron Brooks, and *The Very Best of Friends*, illustrated by Julie Vivas are all winners of the CBCA Picture Book of the Year Award, while *Lucy Goosey* and *Little Humpty*, both illustrated by Ann James, were named honour books. Margaret latest picture books with Little Hare include *The Stone Lion* (illustrated by Ritva Voutila), *Itsy-Bitsy Babies* and *Itsy-Bitsy Animals*, (illustrated by Jan Ormerod), and *No More Kisses* (Nina Rycroft).



ILLUSTRATOR BACKGROUND

Freya Blackwood was born in Edinburgh and grew up in Orange in NSW, Australia where she now lives with her daughter Ivy. After graduating from UTS in Visual Communications, Freya worked in the film industry as a production assistant, runner and effects technician. She began illustrating picture books in 2002 and has since been shortlisted for, and won many prestigious awards, including the Kate Greenaway Medal in 2010. Award-winning titles include *Two Summers with John Heffernan* (2004 CBCA Chrichton Award winner) and *Amy & Louis* with Libby Gleeson (2007 CBCA Picture Book of the Year for Younger Readers) with Scholastic Press; Little Hare titles *Maudie and Bear* with the late Jan Ormerod (2011 CBCA Early Childhood Book of the Year); *Look, A Book!* with Libby Gleeson (2012 CBCA Picture Book of the Year); *Go To Sleep Jessie* with Libby Gleeson (2015 CBCA Early Childhood Book of the Year) and *My Two Blankets* with Irena Kobald (2015 CBCA Picture Book of the Year); and from Allen & Unwin *The Cleo Stories: The Necklace and The Present* with Libby Gleeson (CBCA Winner Book of the Year: Younger Readers). Freya works and creates in her backyard studio.



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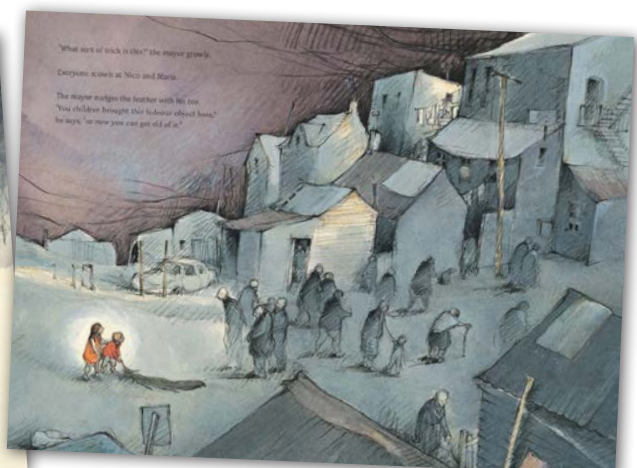
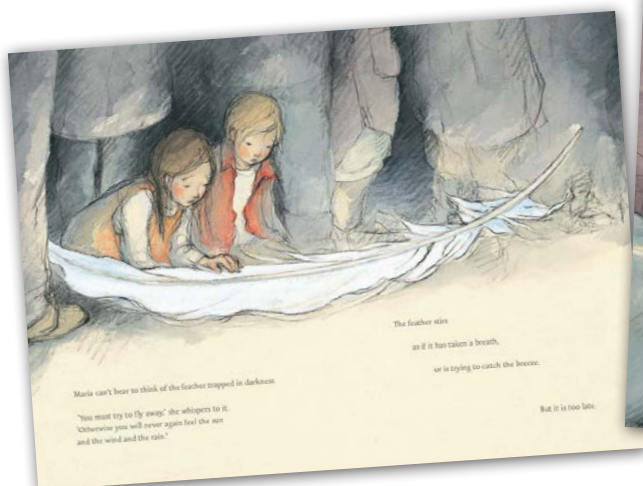
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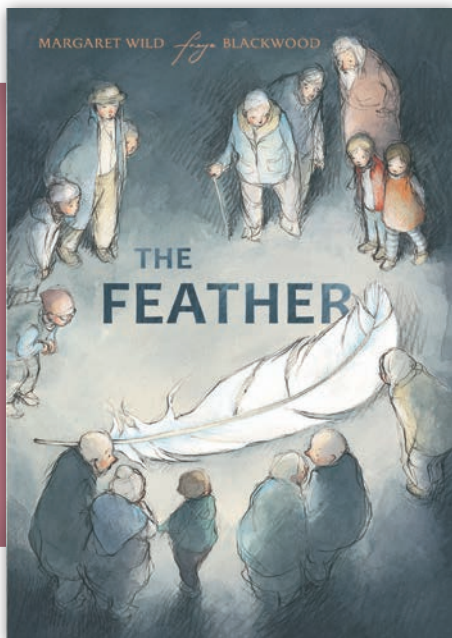
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STUDY NOTES

1. How can the two wordless spreads towards the end of the book be read as two different endings? How would your interpretation of the ending change if the book ended on the first spread, where the only light comes from the window? How would it change if this spread wasn't included in the book at all?
2. Consider the line 'That night, as always, there is no moon, no stars.' What do you think the author means when she writes 'as always'? How does this line reflect the memories of the villagers, when they remember what it was like to 'open the curtains to let in the light', and 'when the cloud shadows raced across the fields, and the sky was such a brilliant blue it hurt your eyes'? What does it tell you that these are presented as memories rather than spoken about in present tense?
3. Why do you think the children's clothes are colourful, while the villagers and the rest of the village are shaded in muted tones of grey? When do you see the colours of Maria and Nico's clothes take on some of these grey shades? What does this suggest about their position in the village?
4. Margaret Wild doesn't write explicitly about hope, freedom or death, but these themes are clear in the text. How does the language she uses invite an exploration of these themes? How does each theme lead to a slightly different interpretation of the text? Which interpretation do you feel most strongly? Why do you think this is?
5. What is the difference between the way the adults in the book see the feather and the way the children see it? How does this reflect the way they respond to the world and to each other? How is this supported both by the text and by the illustrations?





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ACTIVITY NOTES

1. Margaret Wild uses poetic language to show the movement of the feather. Think about the way that movement is shown by the words themselves and also by their placement on the page. Choose an object to write about and write a short piece using poetic prose and the placement of text on the page to show the way it moves.
2. The feather symbolises many different things to different characters in the book. Make a list of the different ways each of the characters talks about the feather. How do they describe it? What does it remind them of? How does it make them feel? What does it mean to you? Look at the colour, shape and size of the feather. Choose one of the feather illustrations and describe it in your own words, trying to replicate the way that Margaret Wild has used other things, like washing on the line, to bring about an emotional response from the reader. In class, talk about how metaphors and similes can be used to make a reader feel a particular way.
3. Think about the way that Freya Blackwood explores the themes of the text in her shading, her careful use of colour, and the sketchy line outlines of her characters. Discuss as a class how these elements can be used to evoke an emotional response in readers. Make a list of all the things the book made you feel. Using the story as inspiration, create your own illustration that uses colour, shading, light and line to show one of these emotions.
4. The conflict in the text comes from the difference in the way that the adults see the feather versus the way Maria and Nico see it. How do your own interpretations of things differ from the way adults in your life interpret those things? Choose an object and describe it. Use the book as inspiration for this, try to describe it using simple basic language, using metaphor and using verse — whatever you think works best for the object you have chosen. Show your chosen object to an adult in your life and ask them to describe it to you. Write down their response and compare it to your own. Discuss in class the way we see things differently as we grow up. Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Why can it be useful to try to see something from a different point of view?