



TREE

Written by CLAIRE SAXBY

Illustrated by JESS RACKLYEFT

RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 7–9 YEARS OLD (LOWER TO MIDDLE PRIMARY)

GENRE: Literary Non-fiction

THEMES: Natural environment, life cycles, ecosystems, trees, forests

CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:

- English: Literature, literacy and language
- Science
- Visual Art
- Cross-curriculum priority: Sustainability

NOTES WRITTEN BY: Jennifer Asha

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INTRODUCTION

'See the branches lean, so far above. Listen to the leaves bustle. Smell the forest air.'

Saxby, Pg. 4. *Tree*

Open this picture book and immerse yourself in the magnificent and ancient world of the mountain ash tree. Learn about the importance of one tree that is over 300 years old and the way it supports an extensive range of diverse flora and fauna.

Racklyeft's watercolour and mixed media illustrations take us on a tour of the emerald greens of the forest understory, teeming with insect, animal and bird life. Racklyeft's use of angle gives us a bird's eye view of the forest floor on one page before having us crane our neck to gaze up at the towering mountain ash contrasted against the moody sky. We see time passing as the illustrations show the tree against the clear sunrise, the dusty pink dusk and the eerie moonlight.

Saxby's lyrical text tells the story of a day in the life of the mighty mountain ash, encouraging us to *'close your eyes'* and experience the forest using figurative language that helps the reader experience the sights, sounds and smells of this beautiful natural setting. Rich descriptive language works hand in hand with the detailed illustrations to show the intricacies and interconnection of the forest ecosystem.

Racklyeft's illustrations and Saxby's prose encourage the audience to look closely, appreciate and be in awe of the mountain ash in the hope that readers will *'protect this tree – and others like it'* as *'an investment in the health of our world.'*

These teachers' notes have been formulated with early to middle primary grades in mind and are accompanied by Year 2 & 3 curriculum outcomes. However, the suggested activities could be adapted for different year levels. Careful teacher modelling and scaffolding could make activities appropriate for younger students. Through the provision of student choice of representational mode, more extended research opportunities or through more sustained writing expectations; the activities could be made more challenging for older students or those needing extension.

PLOT SUMMARY

Can you see the forest on this misty-morning mountain? Can you see where the tree stands? It is the tallest in this forest of tall trees. This tree is older than those who find it, younger than the land it grows from. Between sapwood and heartwood, water rises and energy flows. Listen to the leaves bustle. Smell the forest air. This is the world of the tree.

In the vein of *Iceberg* – marrying deep scientific research, lyrical language and stunning illustrations – multi-award-winning and highly acclaimed creators Claire Saxby and Jess Racklyeft return with a change in environment, from ocean to land. Their new collaboration follows a mighty tree, from the bottom of its roots up to the tips of its upper branches.

Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR: CLAIRE SAXBY

What is the theme of the book?

'*Tree* is about wonder. It is about the interconnectedness of plant and animal worlds. It's about the importance of our old trees – in this case a 350-year-old mountain ash that supports an entire ecosystem, over many generations of both animals and plants. This is a story of life cycles, of food webs, of forest magic. Mountain ash trees grow fast for fifty years, then slow down. They filter our water, absorb carbon dioxide, put oxygen into the air, hold soil to mountainsides. Our *Tree* is a superstar.'

What was the inspiration for the book?

'Jess and I met up one day outside a community garden and thought about the stories we'd like to make together. *Iceberg* was a story of the fascinating water-and-ice-world of the Antarctic, and the way we connect with it. Why not a forest – a world much more recognisable to young readers and equally fascinating.'

What sort of research did you undertake as part of the writing process?

'We were able to take a trip through the misty Toolangi State Forest with a ranger to spend time with giant mountain ash trees. There we “met” the unofficially named Gwen (named by the ranger for her grandmother, I think), a mountain ash more than 300 years old. Our wonderful guide showed us so much, told us so much. There were ferns and wattles and a zillion other plants we tried to remember. There was leaf litter almost thigh-deep in places. We climbed inside other mountain ash trees, that continued to thrive, despite having 'mudguts' – a hollow centre. It was lucky that both Jess and I were there as it needed more than one brain to remember it all. At lunch back at the rangers' station, Jess and I scribbled furiously, building our information bank. We took so many photos too. There was rain and cold, mist and sunshine, and more than one leech. We drove home to Melbourne remembering and brainstorming, buzzing with ideas for this book. This became my inspiration and all the research that continued afterwards, built on the sounds, the smells, the sight of these incredible trees and the world they build around them.'

Q&A WITH THE ILLUSTRATOR: JESS RACKLYEFT

What is the essence of the book?

'Conservation and the beautiful world of a tree – its connection to the life around it, and to us.'

Tell us about your process and inspiration for illustrating this book?

'Claire and I both have such a love for nature and appreciation for the wilderness found not too far from Melbourne! I was so thrilled when I was told this book would be about the mountain ash, such a magical and rather rare species found in under two hours from the city. We spent a day with a forest ranger getting a greater insight into the ecosystems in Toolangi, getting to climb into a mountain ash, looking at the creeks nearby, and really building a library of images on my phone and mind to draw from for this book.'

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

BEFORE READING

- Review a range of literary non-fiction. These are books that are written on topics and phenomena that are true or real, but are written in the form of a recount or narrative. They aim to teach or inform the reader while also engaging or entertaining them.

These books are likely to use a range of visual and verbal features that are characteristic of storytelling and transmitting information, such as those included in the following table.

Literary texts	Non-fiction texts
Illustrations that use a wide range of media in an artistic way to visually engage the viewer.	Illustrations include accurate details or use elements of scientific diagrams such as cross sections or network diagrams to visually inform the viewer.
Figurative and descriptive language that allows the reader to build vivid mental images of character, setting and plot and use their senses to experience the setting.	Language that makes use of technical, field specific or scientific vocabulary or names of real people and places to make the information accurate and authoritative.
Includes participants/characters' thoughts, feelings and reactions to position the reader to empathise with or understand the characters.	Retells true events or processes in the order they occur/ed to correctly inform the reader.

Read aloud and share books such as *Iceberg* by Claire Saxby and Jess Racklyeft, *Big Red Kangaroo* by Claire Saxby and Graham Byrne, *Koala* by Claire Saxby and Julie Vivas, *Kookaburra* by Claire Saxby and Tannya Harricks, *Jeremy* by Chris Faille and Danny Snell, *Angel of Kokoda* by Mark Wilson or *Meet...Nellie Melba* by Janeen Brian and Claire Murphy or picture books published by the CSIRO such as *Exploring Soils: A hidden world underground* by Samantha Grover and Camille Heisler.

Share responses and observations. Compare and contrast the texts, looking for the characteristics that make these books examples of literary non-fiction. Discuss the way that different visual, verbal and structural choices of the stories help them to serve the dual purpose of both engaging and informing the reader.

AC9E2LA03 AC9E3LA03

- Ask students to name the different types of trees they know and where they have seen them. Discuss what is meant by native or introduced species of plant. Have students name the parts of a tree that they are familiar with and record the different vocabulary associated. Add to this list to include technical vocabulary, during the later reading of *Tree*. AC9E3LA10
- Share experiences of bush walking or hiking. Ask students to share the places they have been and their experiences while in the bush. Visit the different websites associated with different National Parks, State Forests or other natural environments. Share any photographs you or the students have of your bush walking experiences.

ENGLISH

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND LITERARY

- Read aloud *The Book of Australian Trees* by Inga Simpson and Alicia Rogerson or a similar traditional non-fiction text. Discuss the informative purpose of the text and the different structures (e.g. contents page, glossary, subheadings, captions, etc.), language features (technical language and botanical names) and visual techniques (close-up illustrations of leaves and flowers, no background to focus the reader on the trees, etc.). Display the front cover of *Tree* and support students in predicting the genre and purpose of the book, referring to both *The Book of Australian Trees* and *Iceberg* or other literary non-fiction read previously. Elicit predictions from students using questions such as:
 - What does the title and cover illustration lead us to predict might be the purpose of *Tree*?
 - Comparing *Tree* to other books we've read, do we think it will be a non-fiction or literary text?
 - The title is *Tree* rather than 'Trees'. What might this lead us to predict about the book? Is it likely to be a story or information?

- In *Iceberg*, the main character was an iceberg. What might this help us to predict about the main character of *Tree*?

AC9E2LA03 AC9E3LA03 AC9E2LY03 AC9E3LY03 AC9E2LY05

- Read aloud *Tree* and pause to look closely at and appreciate the illustrations. After reading, in small groups or pairs, ask students to share their responses to the book. Remind students of talking and listening conventions and ways to share their opinions respectfully. Pose scaffolding sentence starters to support purposeful student to student talk, for example:
 - My predictions about *Tree* were correct/incorrect because ...
 - The part I appreciated most about the book was ...
 - I most liked ... about the illustrations.
 - The words that helped me to enjoy the book were ... because ...
 - I think the author and illustrator want the reader to feel/think/respond ...

AC9E2LA02 AC9E3LA01 AC9E3LY05

- Conduct a close re-reading of the text and choose one or more of the following suggestions.
 - Point out the verbs attributed to trees, birds and animals throughout the book. E.g. '*Slaters curl, beetles burrow and centipedes scurry.*' Explain to students that these are action verbs and ask students to act them out. Experiment with changing the present tense to past tense by adding the suffix 'ed'. Explain the need to change the 'y' to 'i' before adding 'ed' in words ending in 'y' e.g. curl – curled, burrow – burrowed, scurry – scurried. Write sentences that creatively use a range of action verbs to recount parts of the story students recall. AC9E3LA07 AC9E3LA08 AC9E2LY12 AC9E3LY10
 - Explain and give examples of poetic or figurative language techniques used throughout the book, then ask students to listen carefully for examples of:
 - **Rhyme** e.g. flows & grows. Pg. 3
 - **Alliteration** e.g. mist, melt. Pg. 4
 - **Similes** e.g. fine as floss. Pg. 6
 - **Onomatopoeia** e.g. chitters pg. 8

Record discoveries on a large sheet of paper and save it for reference during future writing activities. AC9E2LE04 AC9E3LE04

- Play insect, animal and bird 'bingo' or 'I-spy' to encourage students to look closely at the creatures included in illustrations. Locate the names of the fauna in the written text and discuss the way that the illustrations help the reader to learn more about the creatures, what they look like, how they move, which part of the forest they frequent, etc. AC9E2LA08 AC9E3LA09

- Look closely at the fold out section of the book and notice the 'shot from below' angle of the illustration. Guide students to locate other illustrations throughout the book that use a similar 'shot from below' angle. Similarly, use page 5 to explain 'shot from above' or "bird's-eye view' angle. Use iPads or similar devices with cameras to take photographs of trees, plants or insects within the school environment to replicate the angles of the illustrations. Talk about the impact of these angles on the viewer and how this visual feature helps to meet the book's purpose of creating awe, wonder and appreciation for the tree and the flora and fauna it supports. AC9E2LA08 AC9E3LA09 AC9E3LE03
- Claire and Jess took inspiration from visiting a forest. Take students to visit a local natural setting or just have them lie on the school playground grass and look, listen and feel the elements and environment around them. Record what students see, hear and sense. Create alliterating or rhyming sentences to describe their experiences. Refer to the chart made during the previous close reading activity to support student writing. AC9E2LE05 AC9E3LE05 AC9E2LY06 AC9E3LY06
- Choose a tree or plant that is characteristic to your local area or serves as a type of landmark. As a class, jointly write an 'introduction' to help the audience 'meet' the tree. Innovate on the text from *Tree*. For example:
 - This tree is ...
 - Every day this tree ...
 - Listen to the tree ...
 - Smell the ... of the tree.
 - See ... perched on its branches.
 - Beneath the tree ...
 - During a storm the tree ...
 - A breeze ... the tree.
 - In the morning/late afternoon/evening/under the moonlight ...

AC9E2LE05 AC9E3LE05 AC9E2LY06 AC9E3LY06

ASSESSMENT IDEAS:

- Assess students' comprehension of the picture book using questions such as the following after reading the story.
 - **LITERAL COMPREHENSION**
 - What was the main character of the story?
 - Where was *Tree* located?
 - What were some of the animals, insects, birds or reptiles included in the book?
 - **INFERENTIAL COMPREHENSION**
 - What was special about *Tree*?
 - Why were the range of animals, insects, birds and reptiles included in the story?
 - How did the illustrations show the passing of time?
 - How was reading the book a bit like going for a bushwalk?
 - **INTERPRETIVE COMPREHENSION**
 - Why might Claire and Jess have decided to create a book about an old tree? (Possible answer: They found it inspiring and wanted other people to be inspired by it too.)
 - How do Claire and Jess feel about forests and other natural environments? (Possible answer: They value nature and want to protect it.)
 - How do Claire and Jess intend for the audience to respond to the text? (Possible answer: They want people to love the natural environment and fight for its protection.)
 - Why is it important to write books like this, now? (Possible answer: Current world environmental issues such as climate change, plant and animal extinction and threats to bee populations mean people need to be encouraged to protect the natural environment.)
 - What have you learned or how has your understanding changed as a result of reading and viewing *Tree*?
- Collect students' photographs of trees and plants and ask the students to describe the angle they have used to take the photograph and what they were aiming to achieve through their choice of angle. Listen to students' explanations and make note of the following:
 - Use of angle when taking photographs
 - Use of metalanguage ('shot from above', 'shot from below', 'angle', etc.) when explaining their choice of angle.
 - Understanding of the way a 'shot from below' angle inspires awe from the viewer or 'shot from above' helps to show the viewer details.

- Collect students' writing samples and assess them for use of the literary features learned about during the activities. Use or adapt the following rubric to assist with assessment of writing.

Feature	Working towards	Achieving	Working beyond
<i>Action verbs</i>	A few action verbs used with inconsistent tense	A range of action verbs used with consistent tense	A wide range of interesting action verbs with consistent tense
<i>Poetic devices</i>	An attempt to include rhyme or alliteration	Inclusion of rhyme and alliteration	Creative use of rhyme and alliteration
<i>Figurative language</i>	Onomatopoeia or simile attempted	Onomatopoeia and simile included	Onomatopoeia and simile included effectively
<i>Imagery</i>	Attempt at describing sounds, sights or smells	Description of sounds, sights and smells.	Sounds, sights and smells well described.

SCIENCE

Science Inquiry: Processing, Modelling and Analysing

Sort and order data and information and represent patterns, including with provided tables and visual or physical models AC9S2I04

Science Inquiry: Communicating

Write and create texts to communicate observations, findings and ideas, using everyday and scientific vocabulary AC9S2I06

Write and create texts to communicate findings and ideas for identified purposes and audiences, using scientific vocabulary and digital tools as appropriate AC9S3I06

Science Understanding: Biological Sciences

Compare characteristics of living and non-living things and examine the differences between the life cycles of plants and animals AC9S3U01

- Draw the life cycle of a tree using the description of Tree's life in the picture book. Research using other print-based or digital resources to include additional detail.
- Use the flora and fauna in the picture book as the focus of a food chain or food web to show the interdependence of different living organisms.
- Conduct a survey of the different plants and animals observed in the school playground or surrounding environment.

- Draw diagrams of trees to show the different parts and how trees use water, air and sunlight to grow. Label diagrams with appropriate technical vocabulary.
- Use technology such as the BirdLife app or website to identify the birds in the illustrations and then watch out for them in the playground.

VISUAL ARTS

Developing Practices and Skills

Experiment and play with visual conventions, visual arts processes and materials

AC9AVA2D01

Experiment with a range of ways to use visual conventions, visual arts processes and materials AC9AVA4D01

- Look closely at the endpapers of the picture book and experiment with replicating Jess Racklyeft's style of illustrating using watercolour and mixed media to trace, draw, paint and print leaves or parts of plants brought in by students or found around the school environment.
- Observe Jess's use of cool colours to represent the atmosphere of the forest. Provide students with a range of mediums and allow them to experiment with cool colours to represent different moods and feelings.
- Take students outside and have them draw trees and plants from different distances and angles.

Display all of the students' artworks to create a gallery of trees, plants and leaves. Invite another class to visit your gallery and play the sounds of the Australian bush in the background while students are visiting and viewing the artworks. Students could be asked to conduct artist talks to explain their processes and choices to their peers from another class. Visiting students could be asked to write a review of the exhibition and share how their visit to the gallery helped them to view their natural environment with greater appreciation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CLAIRE SAXBY was born in Melbourne, moved to Newcastle as a toddler and to Bougainville Island in PNG when she was ten. She attended many schools around Australia before studying in Melbourne to become a podiatrist. For several years Claire worked in community health while simultaneously writing for children. Her books fall into three main categories: our wonderful world, history and humour. Claire's work has won several awards including CBCA Picture Book of the Year, CBCA Honour Book, a NSW Premier's Literary Award, a SCBWI Crystal Kite Award, an Environment Award for Children's Literature, an Educational Publishing Award and the Whitley Award multiple times. She is widely curious about just about everything and passionate about encouraging curiosity and wonder. <http://www.claresaxby.com>



ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

JESS RACKLYEFT creates a variety of illustrated things – picture books, paintings, prints, pins and cards – mainly in watercolours. She works from her Melbourne home studio with her cat and dog at her feet, and occasionally one of her kids joins in too. Her art often combines collage – either on paper or digitally assembled – experimentation and lots of watercolour. Jess worked in publishing sales for almost a decade before making the leap to full-time illustration, and since then has won several illustration accolades including CBCA Picture Book of the Year for *Iceberg* (written by Claire Saxby). Her work can now be found in bookshops and libraries across Australia, and her days are happily spent in a messy studio or on school visits. <http://www.jessesmess.com>



ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE NOTES

JENNIFER ASHA is a lover of children's literature. Picture books are her absolute favourite. When she is not immersed in a good book, Jennifer is an academic at the Australian Catholic University where she enjoys sharing her passion for literature, language and literacy with her Initial Teacher Education students. Jennifer is also an experienced primary school teacher who has taught in the classroom and in the library, across all grades. Jennifer has worked with teachers in schools to improve their practice for teaching literacy, conducted classroom-based research, and published articles and books that encourage teachers to teach literacy and language using rich literature resources. Her areas of special interest include the teaching of grammar, multimodal texts and visual literacy.

CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

(In alphabetical order of authors)

Iceberg written by Claire Saxby, illustrated by Jess Racklyeft (Allen & Unwin, 2021)

Kookaburra written by Claire Saxby, illustrated by Tannya Harricks (Walker Books, 2020)

Secrets of the Saltmarsh written by Claire Saxby, illustrated by Alicia Rogerson (CSIRO Publishing, 2023)

The Book of Australian Trees written by Inga Simpson, illustrated by Alicia Rogerson (Hachette, 2021)

ONLINE LINKS IN FULL

Toolangi State Park was Claire and Jess's inspiration for *Tree*. Visit the website of the State Park:

<https://www.visityarravalley.com.au/products/toolangi-state-park>

Learn more about the Forest Giant: Mountain Ash on the following Parks Victoria government website:

<https://www.parks.vic.gov.au/news/2022/07/26/00/42/the-forest-giant>