

Notes by Erin Wamala

An Anzac Tale

Written by Ruth Starke

Illustrated by Greg Holfeld

Synopsis:

*An Anzac Tale* is a beautiful graphic novel that introduces the events of the Gallipoli campaign to primary students (though this by no means excludes secondary readers). We open on a typical Australian farm in 1914 where our main characters, Wally and Roy, learn of Australia's involvement in the War in Europe. They are filled with excitement, dreaming of good pay and the chance to see the world. No one expects the war to last long and although Roy's parents disapprove, the two sign up immediately. It is not long before they are on a ship bound for Egypt, where they begin their training. The boys, for they are depicted as very young men, are not well educated and have not heard of most of the places they are to visit, but they are keen to make their families and their country proud. At first it all seems like a bit of fun but reality soon hits when they storm the beaches of Gallipoli and meet an enemy, not unskilled and small in numbers like they were led to believe, but well prepared and formidable. Over the coming months, thousands will die at the hands of the enemy and disease, in a campaign that is generally considered to have been a catastrophic failure. Wally and Roy represent the thousands of young men like them who gave their all to fight for the Empire, under conditions few of us could imagine. Their fight has become a legendary part of the Australian identity.

About the author:

Ruth Starke is one of SA's most successful children's writers, with over 20 titles published since she began writing in 1992. Many of them have won or been shortlisted for national awards, including the much acclaimed *NIPS XI* (CBC Honour Book), *Orphans of the Queen* (shortlisted for both the 2005 NSW and Queensland Premiers' Awards); *Stella by the Sea* (shortlisted for both the CBC Younger Book of the Year and the Queensland Premier's Award) and *Noodle Pie* (winner of the Book of the Year Award Speech Pathology Australia). Together with Greg Holfeld she has worked on the three graphic picture books in the *Captain Congo* series, including *Captain Congo and the Crocodile King*, which was shortlisted for the 2009 CBC Picture Book of the Year.

About the illustrator:

Greg Holfeld was born in Canada and moved to Adelaide in 1991 after several years of travelling and country-hopping. He has spent much of his career as an animator and cartoonist. In between directing and producing his own animated films, he works as a freelance animator with an Adelaide production house, and a book illustrator. He has illustrated several titles by Working Title Press including *The Perfect Pet*, *Wolf's Sunday Dinner*, *You Must Be Joking* and three of the popular *Captain Congo* series *Captain Congo and the Crocodile King*, *Captain Congo and the Maharaja's*

*Monkey and Captain Congo and the Klondike Gold*. This is his fourth graphic picture book with Ruth Starke.

#### Writing and Illustration Style:

Graphic Novel is an interesting format in which to present this story. It's relatively small amount of text and bold illustrations make it highly accessible, though still sophisticated. Starke and Holfeld entered the graphic novel genre with the *Captain Congo* series, but while *An Anzac Tale* is of a similar format, it differs in many ways. Starke has managed to use a minimal amount of text, the majority of which is dialogue, to present the thoughts and emotions of the characters clearly and also depict the historical events of which they are a part. This marries perfectly with Holfeld's illustrations, through which we see the action of war with very little violence depicted.

From the author:

"The idea for a graphic novel seemed to be a logical extension of the three Captain Congo books that Greg Holfeld and I had done together. And I think, too, that was how I came up with the idea of using animals instead of humans. When I approached Greg with the idea he showed me sketches he had done years ago, of animal soldiers - Canadian beavers, I think - in great coats and tin helmets, on the Western Front. We were obviously destined to do this book!

I found the research fascinating, even more so when I discovered that my paternal grandfather had been at Gallipoli with the 28th Infantry Battalion and I was able to read on-line his commander's war diaries. This brought the war home to me in an intensely personal way, and strengthened my conviction that in my text I had to place the emphasis on the experiences of ordinary soldiers, and to show the effects of war on the people left at home. In reality, few soldiers personally experienced the entire Gallipoli campaign, from the landing to the evacuation, but I felt it was important for our story to show this. I also left vague the question of which battalion the three mates were in, and from which particular Australian city they embarked; I wanted them to represent the archetypal Aussie digger.

I wrote three drafts of the text before I showed it to Greg in March 2011. He was enthusiastic, although he foresaw some "invigorating challenges" ahead. No doubt the scene of the soldiers swimming naked at Anzac Cove was one of them! I showed him a picture of an oil painting that had inspired me: by Lucy Bonnin, it's called "An Australian Family Portrait" and each family member - mum, dad, son and daughter - are kangaroos, all dressed up in their Sunday best. I think Greg has been fantastically successful in portraying various emotions in the faces of our kangaroo characters.

In July 2012 Peter Stanley, an historian with the Australian Museum, kindly offered to read the "final" draft of the text and advise. His comments and criticisms were taken on board, which led to another "final" draft in September 2012. It was thrilling to see the story and characters come alive, and I was immensely moved by the final pages, which almost reduced me to tears. When writing *An Anzac Tale*, I always thought of my characters as intensely human, and I think readers will too as they immerse themselves in the story."

Greg Holfeld's illustrations bring new life to well-known events though his use of animals in place of humans. Much like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (not suitable for primary students), Holfeld has given his

animals human-like qualities and personality through which to tell this story. The majority of characters, including Roy and Wally, are represented as kangaroos – large and strapping with somewhat human musculature – while wombats, emus and koalas also make an appearance. Holfeld has chosen a muted pallet that changes throughout the novel as the characters move from Australia to Turkey, summer to winter and of course, peace time to the heart of war.

Holfeld was awarded an Australia Council Grant and assistance from the May Gibbs foundation in order to spend over a year working on the illustrations for *An Anzac Tale*. Several research trips to the War Memorial in Canberra were undertaken in order to capture the Gallipoli aspects. It was also important to accurately represent the correct physiology and anatomy of the animals, which was done through observations and sketches at Cleland Wildlife Park, while also being able to provide the right amount of “human” balance.

It was important to Holfeld that *An Anzac Tale* had a very different look to the *Captain Congo* series, so he therefore chose the medium of pen and ink wash with a soft palette (pale browns, blues, reds and yellows).

Themes:

### **Duty**

From the very beginning of the story, the characters show a great sense of duty towards their country and The Empire (Britain), ‘*Gotta stand shoulder to shoulder with the Mother Country*’ (p6). Roy’s parents, however, feel that his duty is to his family and looking after the farm.

- What are Roy and Wally’s reasons for signing up to go to war?
- Why do they feel such a strong sense of duty to The Empire? Were Britain to go to war today, would Australian’s feel the same?
- Which do you think should be greater – a sense of duty to The Empire or to your family?
- Do the characters still feel this same sense of duty at the end of the story? How have their attitudes changed?
- In the end, many people felt that The Empire failed the soldiers by placing them in an unwinnable situation, yet Australia still supported Britain throughout WWI and WWII. Why? Do we have a choice? On p24 we see that although the Anzacs recommend an evacuation, the British still insist that the soldiers remain, somewhat in denial about the situation, ‘*No evacuation. You’ve got through the difficult business*’.

### **Bravery**

The Anzac legend is one often told with reference to the bravery shown by soldiers. Roy and Wally are shown time and again running into the heart of battle, despite their fears and reservations. On page 21, for example, after landing on the beach at Gallipoli and losing hundreds of soldiers already, Wally, Roy and their fellow soldiers continue up the ridge despite being in grave danger.

- How do you think the soldiers must have been feeling behind their bravado?
- Do you think you could have shown such bravery?
- Is there any shame in wanting to turn around and go home?
- Did the soldiers have any choice but to be brave?

- On p43, Roy is clearly ill and in need of the hospital yet he continues to fight. Why? Do you consider this to be brave?

### **The War at Home**

Throughout the story, we are given intermittent views of life at home while the soldiers are fighting a world away. Reports in the papers were somewhat different from the reality of war (p26).

- Why might this be?
- Would it have been right to misrepresent the situation in order to give the families at home some positive news?
- Could it be that no-one, not even the reporters, knew the reality of the situation?
- In this day and age of social media, how would the reports be different? Could the public be misled?

### **Attitudes to War**

The attitude to war has changed dramatically over the last century. Many people attribute this to Vietnam, the first war to be seen on television. During WWI and WWII young men seemed keen to sign up and fight for their country, some men even fought in both.

- P2 Wally and Roy are excited by the prospect of war. Why might this be? People were celebrating in the streets and ringing the church bells. Knowing what we know now, how could they be excited?
- How do their attitudes to the war change over the course of the story? Consider the first page and then the last, what is the difference?
- Wally and Roy's parents are sad to see their boys leave, but proud of them all the same. How would your parents react if you were to join the army?

### **The Enemy**

The soldiers knew very little about the enemy (in this case, the Turkish) when they went into battle. For much of the battle, the enemy were a faceless mass shooting from above. However, there are several instances where the Anzacs and the Turkish must come face to face.

- P15 *'You'll be landing on an open plain, facing an inferior enemy'*. Compare this line to the one on p37, *'Johnny Turk's not so bad though. They're good clean fighters. And it is their country after all'*. How has the attitude to the enemy changed? Why? Do you think there is a new found respect? Did the Turkish not have a right to defend their country?
- On p49, the soldiers come face to face with the enemy in the close quarters of the trenches. Why might this make it more difficult to fight? Is it easier to fight a faceless enemy?
- On p36 we see the Australians trading with the Turkish. How is it possible to be fighting one day, and trading amiably the next?
- The reality is that today, many of the Turkish and Anzac soldiers are buried together.

## Conditions of War

Conditions in the trenches were disgraceful with many, many soldiers dying of disease and cold (see end notes).

- See what you can find out about the conditions endured by soldiers in other parts of the war, France and Germany for example. How did the conditions compare?
- Can we expect our soldiers to fight at their best when they are living in conditions such as these? Is there any way to avoid it?

Food rations for the soldiers were minimal and not particularly nutritious (see endnotes for a description).

- Find out what today's Australian soldiers receive in their ration packs. How is it different? What improvements have been made?
- Compare the amount of food and water you consume in a day to what the soldiers received during WWI. Do you think you could survive?

## The Lasting Legacy

At the end of the story, Roy can't understand why anyone in the future would want to go back to Gallipoli. However, every year, thousands of young Australians and New Zealanders commemorate the battle on the anniversary of the Gallipoli landing.

- Why do you think this is?
- Why is the Gallipoli campaign still so important to Australians?
- Do you think people will still be visiting on Anzac Day in 100 years to come? Why/why not?

Characters:

## The "Typical" Aussie Soldier

Wally and Roy represent the "typical Aussie soldier", the everyday young man who signed up to go to war. They are straight-talking lads, with little education and a longing for adventure.

- How might these men have been changed by war? Would they have come home so carefree, should they have come home at all?
- Many of the young men who signed up had little or no world knowledge and were excited about traveling to exotic places. They also had the opportunity to earn a decent wage, more than they would earn at home (see end notes). Is this not something to be excited about? Is it worth the risk?
- A typical Australian man is often described as a "larrikin". The Oxford English Dictionary defines a "larrikin" as '*a boisterous, often badly behaved young man*', yet it is often a term used with affection. Do you think Wally and Roy fit this description?
- How do Wally and Roy compare to young men today? How might their lives be different?

## The Enemy

- Though we see little of them, how are the enemy represented throughout the story?

- Would you consider the Turkish soldiers to be bad people? Consider the story from their perspective.

### Women at Home

Throughout Australia's war history, women have played important roles. During WWI, their role was mainly at home, supporting the soldiers on farms, in the workforce and through charity efforts.

- Roy's younger sister is desperate to join the war effort as a nurse, yet she is at home knitting socks (p27). Would it have been possible for women to join the war at this time?
- In what other ways did women help during the war effort? Read Diane Wolfer's *The Lighthouse Girl* for a different perspective.
- Ellie is also seen collecting white feathers to give to men who did not join the war effort (p56). What did the white feathers mean? Was this fair?

### Activities:

- Find images of WWI propaganda posters. How are the enemy represented (frightening, almost like inhuman monsters)? How are British and Australian soldiers represented (brave, strong, the protectors)? How are young men convinced to sign up and go to war? Now consider the current drive to recruit people into the Australian Defence Force, <http://www.youtube.com/user/defencejobsaustralia>. How have things changed? Create your own poster for today, how would you convince your classmates to sign up?
- Consider the point of view of the Turkish soldiers. Pretend you are a Turkish soldier. Write a letter home to your family detailing the battle you are involved in. What are your thoughts on the Australian soldiers?
- Use <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper?q> to find newspaper articles about the Gallipoli landing. What is being reported? Follow the reports over the next 12 months, do they change?
- Write your own newspaper article based on the information you gather from the book.
- Consider how Holfeld, as the illustrator, has represented the story. How has he used colour? Does the palette change throughout the story? For example, compare the first and last scenes? What are the differences between the representation of Australia and of Turkey? Pay particular attention to pages 50-51. How do they stand out? Holfeld has used very deliberate images, lines and colours. What is he drawing your attention to? Why do you think he has chosen these particular images? How does he represent the violence of war with very little gore throughout the story?
- View George Lambert's painting *Anzac: The Landing* on the National Gallery of Australia's website, <http://nga.gov.au/Exhibition/Lambert/Detail.cfm?IRN=144768>. How has Holfeld used this to help him capture the essence of Gallipoli? Can you find the panel within the story that references this painting? What are the similarities?
- Using all you have learned about the Gallipoli campaign and the soldiers, find 5 or 6 images, from newspapers, paintings, posters etc., that represent your feelings about the story. You may also like to create your own images.