

Teacher notes: *The Silver Sea*, by Alison Lester and Jane Godwin, with the children of The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne

SYNOPSIS

Created by Alison Lester and Jane Godwin in collaboration with the children of The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, *The Silver Sea* follows two children on an adventure under the ocean. It explores the hidden treasures beneath the waves and shows some of the beautiful creatures that live there. The gentle rhyming text celebrates the joy and freedom of exploring a new world, and how nice it is to come home at the end.

Jane and Alison spent over a year visiting The Royal Children's Hospital and running workshops in different styles of painting and drawing. Working with many children over quite a long time led to the decision to write a simple story about the sea so that everyone would be able to contribute their wonderful artwork. Each page is a collage of the kids' creations as well as Alison's character sketches and backgrounds. This project is a true joint effort and the profits will go back to The Royal Children's Hospital.

THEMES IN THE BOOK

The Silver Sea celebrates the joy of exploration and adventure. The story features two characters who go on a journey and discover all kinds of new things about the world under the sea. It highlights the excitement of the new experiences that happen when you step outside your comfort zone. Another theme is the return to reality after an adventure.

The book showcases the sense of freedom and comfort that can be found by connecting with nature. The children in this story – and the children who helped to create it – find happiness by embracing nature – both the scary and beautiful aspects.

The story behind the book reminds readers of the value of working together. Students can see the way different illustrations complement one another and understand that bringing different people together can make a project both richer and more exciting.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading the book, discuss the story behind it. Ask the students what kind of illustrations they would expect from children stuck in hospital.
- Invite students to examine the illustrations and ask if they can pick the different styles and materials used. How do these illustrations work together to tell a story?
- As a class, discuss what it would be like to be in hospital, and any similar experiences the kids might have had. Would it be scary? How do you handle feeling scared? What would you like to draw if you were stuck inside?

- Break into groups and have students attempt to create their own picture book, each taking on different roles: writing, illustrating, creating the cover. How hard is it to work together? Do they think they create better things together or apart?
- Ask the students to write about an adventure they have been on. This could be anything from a trip to the shops to a holiday overseas. What were the good things about this adventure? What were the bad things? Were there times that were scary, and how did the students handle this fear? What did it feel like to return home at the end?
- The children in this story have a wonderful time on their adventure, but are also happy to return to the surface at the end. Where do the students return to after an adventure? What is their home like? Who would be there waiting for them to return?
- In what ways can the students explore the world in their everyday life? Plan an expedition to the backyard/school ground. Write down the kind of things they might find. What kind of creatures might they see?
- There are many marine animals in the story. Ask the students to identify their favourite animal from the story and write down everything they know about that animal: habitat, noises, origin, movement, diet.
- Ask the students to write a story about their favourite animal. Have them study the illustrations in *The Silver Sea* and use them as inspiration for their own illustrations to accompany their own story.
- These children have such a great time on their adventure because they have each other. Who would they take on an adventure? Ask the children to draw their ultimate adventure buddy.
- This book is full of lovely rhymes about the ocean. Discuss the way the rhymes work and encourage the students to write their own rhyme celebrating what they love about the ocean.
- Ask the students to draw their favourite place to go outside. Do they have a favourite park, or do they love to go to the beach? Invite them to write a description of what it is they like about this place and how it feels to be in nature.

ALISON AND JANE'S INSPIRATION

Alison and Jane thought that the idea of splashing in the ocean would be an energizing image to the kids stuck in the hospital, and they wanted to provide that same escape through their workshops and through this story. It was also important that there were no adults in this story, and that the characters had power in a way that the children might not feel they do in the hospital setting.

Both Alison and Jane wanted this story to reflect the journey of a child visiting the hospital – there are aspects that might be frightening but ultimately it is a very reassuring journey. They hope that many children will enjoy this book, and that the children who helped create it will feel very proud of what they've achieved.

ALISON LESTER'S BIO

Alison Lester's picture books mix imaginary worlds with everyday life, encouraging children to believe in themselves and celebrate the differences that make them special. In a career spanning decades, Alison Lester has written many books, and won several prestigious awards including the 2005 Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Picture Book of the Year Award for *Are We There Yet?* and the 2012 CBCA Eve Pownall Book of the Year Award for *One Small Island*. Alison was Australia's Inaugural Children's Laureate from 2011 to 2013.

JANE GODWIN'S BIO

Jane Godwin is an Australian children's book publisher, and also the highly acclaimed author of over twenty books for young people, across all styles and ages. Her work is published internationally and she has received many commendations, including the Queensland Premier's Award, the Aurealis Award and the Animal Welfare Award, and shortlistings in the CBC Book of the Year Awards. Jane often works in schools and the community, running various literature and writing programs, making books and encouraging students in their own creative ventures.

EDITORIAL COMMENT

This was an incredible project to work on, with many varied and interesting moving parts. Once Jane and Alison had run workshops with the children, they had literally hundreds of pieces of artwork that needed to be cut out and sorted. Alison created very large watercolour backgrounds in different shades (about 1 x 1.5 metres), and then she and Jane assembled the collages that became each page, matching the sea creatures in each to those in the text. The result is a riot of colour, pattern and line, which gives a sense of the glorious chaos that is the wonder of the sea. The text itself is an exploration of going to a dark, unfamiliar place and then returning – a gentle metaphor for going through illness and trauma, and facing mortality. It is masterful how lightly the authors deal with these themes, while celebrating the joys and healing qualities of nature.