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A FEATHER ON A WING

Maria Speyer



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

ISBN: 978 0 7022 6325 5/ AUS \$24.99

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SYNOPSIS

A timeless bedtime story, *A Feather on a Wing* is a lyrical dreamscape that reminds a little girl she is never alone. When she feels afraid of the dark, her older sister soothes her with imaginative adventures that offer a sense of togetherness and belonging.

The beautiful colour palette and illustrations complement this classic lullaby.

THEMES

- Bedtime Stories
- Belonging
- Comfort
- Adventure
- Lullabies

WRITING STYLE

A Feather on a Wing is written in first person (but with the effect of direct address through the older sister's use of 'you' referring to both the little sister and the reader), present tense. It is a gorgeous read-aloud told in rhyme, as well as a soothing lullaby complete with music score at the end of the book. Appealing to the imagination, the author uses a suite of metaphors to create a lyrical allegory. As a result, it has a timeless quality and is a text that will be read again and again. It is suited to younger readers.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading, use the cover and title of the book to discuss what it may be about. What might 'a feather on a wing' mean?
- The story begins with a quiet voice: '*Are you there? It's so lonely in the dark!*' Although these are the only words uttered by the little girl, it is evident through the illustrations what she is thinking. Use the visual clues to discuss how she responds to her sister's words of wisdom.
- Taking on the role of one of the sisters, write a diary entry exploring how you are feeling at the very beginning of the book.
- The text tells us that we 'are part of everything'. Explain what you think this means.
- On the 'daisy chain' page opening, how do we know the little sister trusts her older sister?
- With a partner, take on the roles of the two sisters. Write one of the 'stories we can tell' from the 'letter in the alphabet' page opening.
- On the 'scarf' page opening, why is the little sister glancing up at her teddy? What do you think is going through her mind?

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- Who are the other children in the ‘treetop’ page opening? What else do you see in this tree? Why are these things there? What does this tell us about belonging?
- What is the significance of the tree being ‘big and old’? How does this page opening explore the importance of others in our lives? Who else might be behind the tree?
- What advice would you give someone who is feeling alone or afraid?
- What does *A Feather on a Wing* share about being part of something bigger? How do the stones in the bridge help show this? Recreate this stone bridge as a classroom display. Place a photo of each class member on each stone, with kind words identifying their contributions to the classroom family.
- Compare the little girl on the first page opening to the end of the book. How has she grown? What has helped her to do so?
- How would you describe the mood of *A Feather on a Wing*? How is this achieved in the text, illustrations and colour palette?
- Have you ever shared a room with a sibling? What are the positives of sharing? If you have never shared a room, what do you think would be the advantages of sharing?
- Have you ever felt afraid of the dark, or of something else? How did you manage these feelings? Share in a reflection.
- Are you more like the little sister or the older sister? Why? Share with a friend.
- What can you learn from the older sister about courage and the value of togetherness?
- Which is your favourite page opening? Why?
- Using feathers, create a classroom display of a set of wings. Have students decorate a feather to represent themselves.
- Create a daisy chain for the classroom. Ask class members to write affirmations on the petals of each students’ daisy.
- How do we see the bond these sisters share in the illustrations and text? What has allowed their relationship to flourish in this way?
- Read the written text in its entirety in the music score at the back of the book. Take time to examine the rhyming pattern and rhythm. How do these devices help give this text a soothing and calming tone?
- Throughout the written text, metaphors are used to help communicate the powerful messages of *A Feather on a Wing*. Unpack these metaphors with the class, and try adding some of your own.
- Listen to the lullaby on the UQP website. Which instruments or type of music do you think would match each page opening?
- Consider asking a music teacher to teach the class this lullaby to perform at a school assembly.

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- Create your own page opening that could be included in *A Feather on a Wing*, illustrating it in a style like Maria Speyer's. Be sure to use a rhyming pattern in the written text.
- In a small group, recreate this story through a dramatisation.
- After finishing the book, look carefully at the girls' bedroom on the first page opening. What can you see that appears later in the story?
 - Sketch your bedroom, including the special objects in it. Create your own bedtime story that includes some of these objects.
- Discuss the importance of roots (the tree) and foundations (the bridge) in creating a sense of belonging within families, friendships and communities. How are such 'roots' and 'foundations' made?
- Write a letter to someone special in your life. Share with them how important they are to you, including the things you love doing with them.
- Consider doing some mindful colouring using the colours of *A Feather on a Wing*. A version of the big tree could be adapted for this purpose.
 - On a small notecard, write a message to yourself to remind you that you are never alone.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Kids are often encouraged to find strength inside themselves, to believe in themselves and to be resilient. However, I think we often forget to remind them (and perhaps ourselves) that resilience is equally the responsibility of the community, that relying on others is not a weakness, and that being there for others is so very important.

A Feather on a Wing began as a game I used to play with my daughters, where we would think of examples of interdependence and community in the world around us. We would look for things that alone were incomplete, like a petal on a flower, or a rung on a ladder, and talk about how that petal or that rung, although entities in themselves, are so much more when considered as a community. It seemed natural that this game became a lullaby, because it is in the darkness and in the night that we feel most alone and are most in need of reassurance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maria Speyer is a Danish-born artist, illustrator and author who lives with her husband and daughters in Sydney, where she draws, paints and writes in her studio at home. She has presented papers on imagistic thinking and the phenomenology of drawing and published and illustrated a number of Danish children's books. *A Feather on a Wing* is her first book in English.