

TEACHER'S NOTES FOR *THE VERY CRANKY BEAR*

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NICK BLAND was born in Victoria in 1973 and lived on a farm until he was five. He spent his early days climbing haystacks and sneaking into his father's painting studio. When Nick's family moved to the bush he found a whole new world to draw and explore. He wanted to be a cartoonist or a storyteller. After he finished school, he moved to the city and eventually got a job in a bookshop. The picture books in the shop inspired him and he realised he 'wanted all my words and all my pictures out of my head and onto the shelf.'

Now Nick lives in Darwin. He had a job as a four-wheel drive tour guide in Kakadu National Park while he worked on his first book, *A Monster Wrote Me a Letter*. This book was a Children's Book Council of Australia Notable Book. He has also illustrated Colin Buchanan's *Aussie Jingle Bells* and Trudie Trewin's *I've Lost My Kisses* and in 2008 published his book *When Henry Caught Imaginitis*. Several overseas publishers have picked up his books. Now he works full time as a writer and illustrator, working on the weekends as a guardian for aboriginal boys from around Northern Australia who board in Darwin.

SYNOPSIS

In the Jingle Jangle Jungle, four friends go into a cave to get out of the rain. Unfortunately, there is already a very cranky bear in the cave and he chases them out again. Zebra, Lion and Moose decide to cheer the cranky bear up by giving him the things they have that make them happy – stripes, a golden mane and a pair of antlers. Plain Sheep isn't at all sure about this and waits outside in the cold. Sure enough, a strange and still very cranky bear chases Zebra, Lion and Moose out again. He roars at Sheep that all he wants is somewhere quiet to sleep. Thoughtful Sheep clips off half her wool and stuffs it in a bag to make Bear a pillow. Bear's bad mood goes away. Now as Bear sleeps peacefully, the four friends can shelter in the cave.

THEMES

When we see someone else with a problem, we often assume that the best way for them to solve it is the way we would. When confronted with a very cranky bear, this is how Zebra, Lion and Moose respond to him. They assume Bear would want what makes them happy.

Sheep, on the other hand, waits and watches, and listens to Bear. Then she offers a solution that really fits the problem, and everyone is happy.

WRITING AND ILLUSTRATING *THE VERY CRANKY BEAR*

Nick Bland gets ideas for stories and books a lot. He jots them down on paper that he keeps in a pile near his workspace. These jotted down ideas be as small as a nice line or image that can be used to give a story a bit of a boost, or be a complete idea that just needs to be worked into a story. He never forces his ideas, saying that if something ‘is too laboured or not quite working, I discard it, knowing that something better will show up before too long.’

The Very Cranky Bear is a fusion of two such fragmentary ideas. Nick thought the idea of a ‘decorated’ bear was very funny. When he related his basic idea to his editor and publisher, they encouraged him to build it into a story. While writing it, ‘the Jingle Jangle Jungle’, a phrase that he’d thought of some time before, came into his mind. Now that these two ideas were linked, they grew into the story of a cranky bear in a jungle who becomes even crankier when other animals dress him up. Nick tried several different animals until he came up with the four he thought would decorate the bear in a way that would look funniest in the illustrations.

Nick wrote the first draft of the story in prose. This allowed him to get an overall feel for it and to work out the plot. This first draft contained a number of rhyming words and he decided to try and ‘convert’ it to verse using rhyming couplets, plenty of alliteration (such as the ‘Jingle Jangle Jungle’ and ‘a perfect place to play’) and some well placed roars. During this second draft, a bouncy rhythm began emerging, which convinced him that writing in verse was the right thing to do.

Nick says he has a big advantage when he writes in verse because the information he can’t make fit into the verse can be carried by the illustrations. For example, information in the pictures such as the expression on the bear’s face when he emerges from the cave in his finery and the game of cards the other animals play is never mentioned in the words. ‘The pictures don’t need to rhyme, so with a picture book, I’m half way there.’

Nick feels that the expressions on the characters’ faces were one of the most important elements in the illustrations as, ‘the whole story is about the animals’ personalities’. He found that, as with the cow characters in his book *I’ve Lost My Kisses* (written by Trudie Trewin),

anthropomorphising animals presented unusual challenges. He had to work out how much of their behaviour and appearance should be like a human's and make decisions such as 'How many fingers does a hooven hand have?' It took him a considerable amount of time making roughs and sketches to get each of the characters looking just right.

The illustrations for this book are made with water-based acrylic paints. This medium allowed Nick to build up the textures in the illustrations. The setting has large background areas rather than being full of detail, so strong textures were important to prevent the illustrations from becoming flat. The acrylics were also ideal for building the texture of the animals' fur, wool and skin so they would stand out against this often dark background. Sweeping brushwork, such as that used for the lion's mane, also creates movement that makes the illustrations lively.

The illustrations and verse combine to form a picture book that is full of humour but also carries a message about caring for others in a thoughtful way. Nick feels that any message in a story has to be delivered subtly. 'I make fun the main focus and hide the morality somewhere behind that. I really hope that children reading my books, or just looking at the pictures, find something that he or she feels quite certain has never been found by anyone else ever before.'

DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Look at the covers. What might the bear be cranky about? Why might the other animals be running away? Read the blurb and ask the students what the story could be about.
2. Read the story out aloud without going too fast, so the children can hear all of the words and see the pictures.
3. Problem solving. What is the problem that Sheep, Lion, Zebra and Moose have? How to the three fancy looking animals try to solve the problem? Why doesn't their solution work? How does Sheep approach the problem differently? Why does her solution work?
4. Talk about why it can be good to look at things from another person's (or animal's!) point of view before trying to help them.
5. In the story, the four friends are playing cards. What games are fun to play indoors on a rainy day? Can a rainy day spent indoors be fun?

6. Do the animals look and act like real animals? How are they different to real animals? How are they the same? In what ways are people and animals really alike? Why might the illustrator/writer have made them a bit like people? Can the students think of other books, movies or television shows where the animals are a bit like people?
7. Find some words in the book that sound the same – explain that they rhyme. Find some words that start with the same sound.
8. Word brainstorming. Write out some simple words on six large cards. Hold them up in front of the class and have the students suggest words that start or finish with the same sounds. Write these words on the board. If the children are old enough, they can write some short, funny poems using some of the examples on the board.
9. Make animal masks. Collect and use some natural materials, like Lion, Zebra and Moose do, for the masks.
10. Act the story out in a simple way. Try to use only animal sounds and actions to get the story across. A narrator could read the story while it is acted out.