

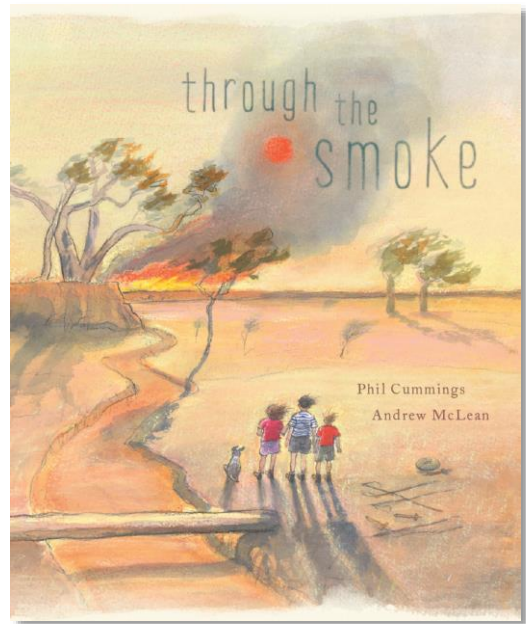
Through the Smoke

Author

Phil Cummings

Illustrator

Andrew McLean



Synopsis

Three young children are playing on their farm on an Australian summer's day. Pretending that they are fantasy adventurers, they come out of the bushland, cross the wheat field, and then play in and by the shallow and slow moving creek. But summer days can be surprisingly dangerous, and their game takes a sudden and terrifying turn when they realise that there is a fire roaring towards them, and that they are trapped. Huddled together in a shallow cave on the creek bank, they hope desperately that they will be safe in the hollow that has served as their castle all morning. And then, as the smoke rolls in and the fire draws nearer, rescue arrives. Fire trucks and firefighters with their silver sabres of water, arrive like knights in shining armour to protect the children from the dragon-danger which has come so close to defeating them. Through the Smoke is a tale of three children surviving an oft-recurring and ever-feared Australian danger, sensitively illustrated with a soft realism while the text recounts the experience as the fantasy quest and adventure that the protagonists see it as.

About the Author

Award-winning author Phil Cummings was born in Port Broughton and grew up in the mid-north town of Peterborough in South Australia. The youngest of eight children, he has worked as an apprentice mechanic, a waiter and more recently a primary school teacher. Phil has published more than 60 books for young readers since his first picture book. Recently, Ride Ricardo, Ride was named an Honour Book by the CBCA, 2016.

About the Illustrator

Andrew McLean studied at Prahran Technical College and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. He taught art to high school students before becoming a teacher of painting and drawing at Chisholm Institute in Caulfield, Victoria. He now works full-time as a painter and illustrator.

Themes

Bushfire; imaginary worlds; rural childhood life; family; rescue; firefighters; fantasy and adventure; hope; fear; danger.

Writing Style

Written in the first person throughout from the point of view of the eldest of three children, the narrative is a vivid and lyrical recount of a fantastic adventure through a magical world filled with dangers, dragons, and wonder. The entire experience of three children playing in the countryside on a summer's day, is told through sparse and elegant prose that juxtaposes the essential innocence of childhood with the complex imaginary worlds they inhabit. The descriptions of the children's surroundings are evocative and rich, describing the sensory experience on multiple levels, while consistently framing all they do in the context of the fantasy adventure they are enacting in their play. Ideally suited for reading aloud, the text is rhythmic and utilises such devices as assonance, alliteration, simile, and metaphor to good effect. The plot is simple enough for the very young to comprehend, yet with a depth of complexity within the imagery and narrative structure to intrigue and entertain much older children as well as adult readers.

Illustration Style

Created using an earth-toned palette with charcoal pencil, watercolour, and pastels, McLean's artwork captures the essential heat and aridity of an Australian summer's day. The visual narrative parallels the textual narrative, bringing to life the reality behind the fantastic adventure that the text relates. McLean's drawings are soft edged and realistic, showing the children, firefighters, and countryside as it must appear, and the events as they would look to an observer who did not have the privilege of insight into the children's inner world.

Writing and illustration Styles: The Dual Narrative

The dual narrative structure of *Through the Smoke* strengthens and enhances the impact of the story. The visual narrative relates the events as they are actually occurring, whilst the textual narrative shares the children's imagined experiences within their fantasy world of adventure and play. The emotive narrative inherent within both illustrations and text remains consistent throughout, and this strong thread of feelings and fear hold the story together. The contrasting perspectives found in the visual and textual narratives enrich the reader's experience, and add a complexity and depth to the story that makes this deceptively simple tale of escaping a bushfire profoundly moving and evocative.

TEACHER NOTES

- 1)
 - a) As a class, listen to the story being read aloud. Conceal the cover from all students and do not show them any of the pictures. After reading the story aloud, as a class discuss what you think happened based on the textual narrative alone. Individually, students draw an illustration of how they envision one of the scenes in the book.
 - b) After completing activity 1a), reintroduce the book to the class as if it were a new title. Before re-reading the story, as a class discuss the front cover and title. Some things to include in your discussion are:
 - What does the picture on the front cover show?
 - Where do you think the story might be set?

- What do you think the story might be about, and why do you think this?
 - What time of year do you think the story takes place?
 - Who do you think the protagonists of the story might be?
- c) As a class, re-read the story, looking carefully at the illustrations on each page as you read. After your re-reading, discuss the experience and your understanding of the book, and in what ways it differed from your understanding in exercise 1a). Some things to include in your discussion are:
- What is Everdell?
 - Who are the children fighting?
 - What is the moat?
 - Who are the knights who rescue the children?
 - What is the dragon?
 - When the dragon hisses and crackles, what is making the noise?
 - When you look at the illustrations while reading the book, how easy is it to tell what is really happening?
 - How and why is the story different when you read it while also looking at the illustrations?
- d) Draw a picture illustrating the same scene that you illustrated in exercise 1a), this time using your full knowledge of what happened to the three children during the fire. Mount your pictures side by side on a larger piece of paper, and caption them with a relevant quote from the story. Share your two different images of the same scene with the class, and discuss how and why they differ, and in what ways they are the same.
- e) As a class discuss why you think the author and illustrator chose to create complementary yet contrasting dual narratives. Are the two stories told by the text and by the illustrations the same as each other or different? Why/why not?
- 1) Ask a representative from your local volunteer fire service to visit your class and teach you about what to do if a bushfire is approaching.
 - 2) As a class, prepare a bushfire readiness plan for your school.
 - 3) Create an artwork using acrylic paint on black paper showing a bushfire dragon rampaging across the countryside.
 - 4) Organise a bushfire or natural disaster preparation day at your school, where all students can help make sure the school is prepared and that students all know what to do in case of a bushfire or other natural disaster.
 - 5) Make a list of equipment that you can keep in a bushfire readiness kit at home.
 - 6) Looking at the children hiding from the fire in the hollow in the creek-bank, do you think that they would be safe there if no-one comes to help them? Is there anything they could have done to improve their chances of escaping the fire, and if so, what?
 - 7) In *Through the Smoke* the bushfire is presented and described as a dragon, and its noise and flame are described as the dragon's hissing and flaming breath. In small groups, brainstorm and identify the different natural disasters that people experience. Individually choose one of these

natural disasters, and write a short descriptive passage where, just as in the story, you describe its appearance, noises, and the damage it causes as the features and behaviour of a mythical creature. You can use a creature that is already found in mythology worldwide, or you might like to create an imaginary giant beast of your own.

- 8) Alliteration is where several words in a single sentence or phrase all start with the same sound. How many examples of alliteration can you find in *Through the Smoke*? Choose your favourite piece of alliteration from the story and write it in large letters on a piece of paper. Illustrate the rest of the page with a picture inspired by the artwork in the book that you feel captures the essence of the alliterative sound your phrase features.
- 9) As a class, adapt the story in *Through the smoke* to create a play or stage show. On a screen behind the performance area or stage, have a projector displaying the pages of the story, while a narrator reads the text to the audience. On one side of the stage have one group of students costumed as knights, dragons, and brave warriors act out the story as told by the textual narrative. On the other side of the stage have another group of students costumed as firefighters, ordinary children, and their parents act out the story found in the visual narrative. Perform your play for another class or at assembly.
- 10) In *Through the Smoke* when the children realise that they are trapped, the two younger ones look to their older sibling (the narrator of the story) for guidance. How do you think the narrator feels at this point? As a class discuss all the different emotions that the oldest child in the story might have felt throughout the day. In pairs or small groups, create a timeline showing the different feelings that the narrator might have experienced at different points in the story. Individually, write a brief description from the point of view of the oldest child, that describes how they felt when they realised they were trapped, when they were hiding in their cave, and when they were rescued.