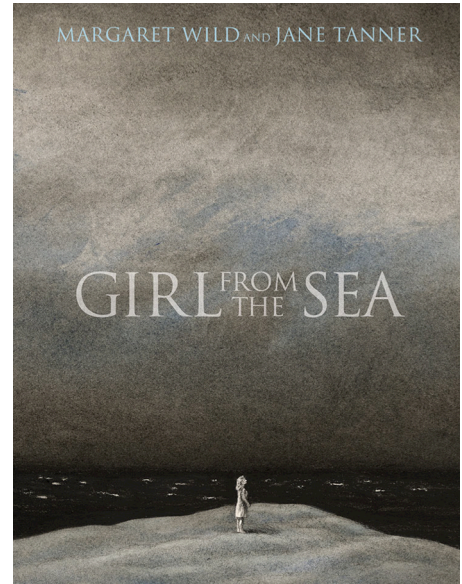


Girl from the Sea

By Margaret Wild
Illustrated by Jane Tanner

May 2020 9781760524302
Hardcover picture book
Recommended for 7–11-year-olds



Summary

Who lives in that cottage by the sea? Why do only the animals see the girl? Renowned author Margaret Wild's unusual ghost story is open to many interpretations, and is supported by exquisite illustrations by Jane Tanner.



The Girl from the Sea's soft and largely monochromatic charcoal images create a sense of intrigue that captures the reader's interest from the very first illustration and quickly intensifies with the introduction of the girl of the book's title and an additional colour, the subtle blue of the sea.

There is a riddle here to be solved about the girl and the family to whom she is drawn but the book's creators never provide an easy solution: rather they ask the reader to look for clues that will help them come up with their own interpretation.

Margaret Wild's text, beautiful in its sparseness and subtlety, is matched by Jane Tanner's illustrations which blend the earthly and the aquatic, presenting a mysterious girl communing with the animals of the land and sea, distant from the humans she quietly observes and wishing to be part of their world.

Use in the curriculum

1. English language and literacy
2. Visual literacy
3. Critical literacy
4. Creative arts

Girl from the Sea can be used with students of all ages to develop an understanding of how English language and visual images can combine to create multiple meanings. The book's text is poetic yet simple and provides hints of two stories – that of the girl and the mother – that are complex and tragic. The activities in these notes are designed to help students find out why/how this is so. *Girl from the Sea* is also an excellent example of a picture story book that can generate very sophisticated thematic discussions with older students.

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Themes

- loss • renewal • family • love • remembrance

Discussion questions

Cover

Jane Tanner, the illustrator of *Girl from the Sea*, notes on the book's imprint page that her cover illustration was inspired by Caspar David Friedrich's *The Monk by the Sea* (1808-10). Search Google Images to find the Friedrich painting and discuss the similarities and differences between both images. After reading *Girl from the Sea*, discuss why you think Jane Tanner chose this particular painting as her inspiration for this story. Think about the themes that might be shared between both works of art and the visual techniques used to express these themes.

Comprehension

Read the story through once, lingering on every illustration to take in as many details as possible. Now answer the following questions:

- Who do you think the girl from the sea might be?
- When might she have lived and how do you think she may have died?
- Why do you think she is drawn to the family living in the cottage by the sea?
- Do you think the mother in this family is happy? Nothing in the text tells us how she is feeling so what did you see in the illustrations that made you think that? Can you think of what might have happened to make her feel this way? What visual clues has the illustrator included to give you a hint?
- Do you think the mother opened the door and asked the girl from the sea into her home? Why do you think this?
- Did this act make them both happy again? What in the final illustrations made you think this?

Literary Techniques

- The girl from the sea repeats several key lines throughout the story. Why might the book's author, Margaret Wild, have chosen to use repetition?
- Margaret Wild frames much of the story as questions asked by the girl from the sea. What affect did this device have on how you read the book?
- The girl from the sea wonders whether the mother can *see* her running, *hear* her singing and *feel* her curling around her waist. What do see, hear and feel have in common and why do you think Margaret Wild chose to use them here?

Visual Techniques

- Why do you think the illustrator chose to use charcoal as her main medium for this particular story?
- How and to what effect has she used colour in a story that is mainly shown in muted shades of black, white and brown?

- Why is the girl surrounded by sea creatures (dolphins, fish, shells, sea foam) as she approaches the cottage?
- How and to what effect are symbols of the sea presented later in the story?
- Look closely at the last double-page spread and explain how reflections in the wet sand tell us that the mother has accepted and found comfort in the girl from the sea?
- How does the final image make you feel about the story?

Themes

- Read the author's inspiration piece below and consider whether you agree that the story is 'full of yearning and longing'? Do you also think it might be one of acceptance, too? Discuss.

Book Review

- Write a book review of *Girl from the Sea*. In the review make sure you include the book's title, author and illustrator, as well as a brief summary of the story. Pay particular attention to the strengths and weaknesses of the text and illustrations, as well as how the book made you feel as you were reading it and whether the story stayed with you after you finished it.

Author's inspiration

'For many years I had holidays on the south coast of NSW. There was particular house I liked on a cliff top. I never saw anyone at this house and I wondered who lived there. That gave rise to the opening of the story: "Who lives in that cottage by the sea?" I came up with the idea that it was a ghost girl (who only the animals can see). The girl wishes to become part of the family so the story is full of yearning and longing. The reader has to make up his/her mind if the family accepts her and asks her in.

'Jane Tanner and I collaborated on *There's a Sea in My Bedroom*, published in 1984. For each of us it was our first book. I was delighted when so many years later she wanted to illustrate *Girl from the Sea* and I find it a bit uncanny that both books have a setting by the sea.'

— Margaret Wild

The author

Margaret Wild's thoughtful, award-winning children's books have been published with great success in many countries. They include *Old Pig* (shortlisted, CBCA Picture Book of the Year), *Fox* (winner, CBCA Picture Book of the Year), *The Dream of the Thylacine* (honour book, CBCA Picture Book of the Year), and *On the Day You Were Born*, all illustrated by Ron Brooks, plus many more, including *Chalk Boy* illustrated by Mandy Ord (shortlisted, 2019 CBCA Picture Book of the Year). Margaret has been the recipient of the Nan Chauncy Award and the Lady Cutler Award for her contributions to Australian Literature. In 2020 she received the Australia Council Award for Lifetime Achievement in Literature.



Illustrator's inspiration

'I was already looking for a project that would stretch me as an artist when Margaret Wild invited me to illustrate *Girl from the Sea*. The text was poetic and deceptively simple and it was open to a number of interpretations. The character speaking could be any age, any gender and either benign or threatening. Margaret gave me room to invent more story, to decide about the supernatural elements, to stretch my drawing skills. I was moved to create a vulnerable child by the touching questions "Do you see me, do you hear me, do you feel me?"

'I looked at the Surrealists for inspiration, particularly René Magritte but I felt that this book needed to be more atmospheric than clever, more spiritual than tricky. I sought out the art of William Blake, Samuel Palmer and Caspar David Friedrich for those qualities...and I referred back to my interest in the dream work of Freud and Jung.

'It was very difficult to represent reality and the immaterial on the same page. The spirit child was too light to balance the composition so I decided to use sea colours to define her. This gave the drawings the life they needed.

'I wanted to leave the resolution a little open while bringing warmth and a positive feeling to the final pictures. Charcoal was useful for leaving out detail and creating soft atmosphere in some images and sharp contrast in others. I often had as much on me as on the page.'

— Jane Tanner

The illustrator

Jane Tanner began illustrating picture books in 1984 with Margaret Wild's *There's a Sea in my Bedroom* (shortlisted, Kate Greenaway Medal; shortlisted, CBCA Picture Book of the Year) which is still in print 35 years later. Her many awards and shortlisted books include *Drac and the Gremlin* by Allan Baillie (joint winner, CBCA Picture Book of the Year; shortlisted, Victorian Premier's Literary Awards) and *The Wolf* by Margaret Barbalet (winner, Australian Human Rights Award for Children's Literature; shortlisted, CBCA Junior Book of the Year). In 2017 Jane illustrated *Storm Whale* by Sarah Brennan (nominated, Kate Greenaway Medal; shortlisted, Prime Minister's Literary Award; shortlisted, Queensland Literary Awards).

Photo credit: Daniel Vogt



Related Texts/Further Reading

Picture books with deeper narratives below the surface story

- Wild, Margaret, *Old Pig*, illustrated by Ron Brooks (death)
- Wild, Margaret, *Fox*, illustrated by Ron Brooks (betrayal)
- Wild, Margaret, *Chalk Boy*, illustrated by Mandy Ord (homelessness and compassion)
- Wagner, Jenny, *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat*, illustrated by Ron Brooks (death, inevitability of change)

In the classroom...



- Bunting, Phillip, *Sandcastle* (transience, connectedness of all things)
- Barbalet, Margaret, *The Wolf*, illustrated by Jane Tanner (unspoken fears)

Visual literacy

- Anstey, Michèle, and Geoff Bull, *Reading the Visual: Written and Illustrated Children's Literature*. Sydney: Harcourt, 2000.
- Gleeson, Libby, *Making Picture Books*. Scholastic, 2003