

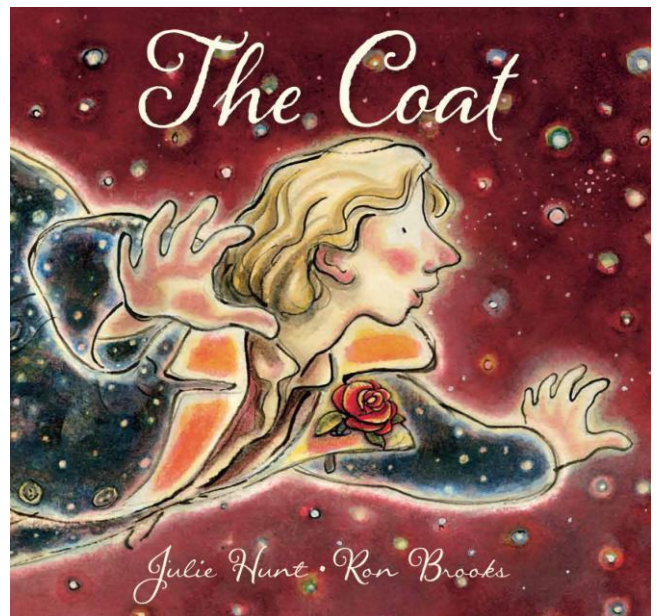
Teachers' Notes (Primary)
by Julie Miller

The Coat
Written by Julie Hunt.
Illustrated by Ron Brooks

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Recommended for ages 5+ yrs

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Introduction	2
Themes.....	3
Curriculum topics	3
English language and literature	3
Visual literacy	5
Creative arts.....	6
Study of history, society and environment.....	8
Health & wellbeing.....	8
Conclusion.....	8
Related texts & other resources	8
About the writers	10
Blackline masters	11-12



83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest, Sydney
NSW 2065
Australia

PO Box 8500
St Leonards
NSW 1590
Australia

ph: (61 2) 8425 0100
fax: (61 2) 9906 2218

info@allenandunwin.com
www.allenandunwin.com

Allen & Unwin PTY LTD
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INTRODUCTION

The coat stood in a paddock at the end of a row of strawberries.

It was buttoned up tight and stuffed full of straw and it was angry”

From the start, it's clear that this is no ordinary coat: it is a flying entity with a strong personality.

With its appealing characters, engaging plot, and rich themes and illustrations, there is much in this picture book for primary school students to engage with. The narrative style and poetic text have echoes of folk tales, and the text is enriched by the splendid images that contain many sophisticated allusions, such as to the artwork of 16th century painter Pieter Bruegel (the Elder) and the dream-like paintings of Marc Chagall. The book is a celebration of transformation, possibilities, the joy of music and colour – and most of all, living life to the full.

Originally published in 2012, *The Coat* was the winner of the 2013 CBCA Picture Book of the Year Award. A paperback edition was published in 2019.

STORY SUMMARY

Alone in a paddock, surrounded by strawberries, an angry scarecrow stands. *“What a waste of me!”* he yells, and soon along the road comes a “disappointed” man, who at first thinks the scarecrow is someone waving at him, but on closer inspection he realises it’s just a scarecrow. But this is no ordinary scarecrow – when the man puts on the fine coat of the scarecrow, his transformation begins. The magical coat flies him over fields and towns to an appointment at the *Café Delizia*. At a table ready for him, the man sits down to enjoy a “musical themed” meal of dishes such as *“Tango Zest”, “Rare Glissando”, “Fresh Duet”* and others...but the coat has more wonders to perform, and the man finds himself playing the accordion, with the guests soon dancing on tables, and singing *“highflying songs that turned the guests into acrobats”*. The transformation is complete – the coat has played all night while the man has sung, and now it fits him perfectly.

The disappointed man is disappointed no more; with a new air of confidence, he leaves the café with a spring in his step, a fine well-fitting coat, and a future full of possibilities.

THEMES

There are several key ideas or themes, which flow through this work:

- Identity
- Optimism
- Creativity
- Freedom
- Self confidence
- Change and transformation

The central theme of celebrating human potential is relevant to all ages – change is always possible.

This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Teachers should be able to adapt them to suit the demands of their class level and curriculum requirements.

CURRICULUM TOPICS

1. English language & literacy
2. Visual literacy
3. Creative arts
4. Study of history, society and environment
5. Health & wellbeing

ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERACY

The Coat could be included in a study on the narrative structure of fairy/folk tales and myths. The story follows a “hero's journey” structure style found in Ancient Greek mythology – in the grand tales of Hercules and his quest to slay Medusa, for example. The hero's journey resembles the personal growth and development we all face in our lives. It begins when the person in question, (in this case 'the man'), is separated from his or her own world. In *The Coat*, the man is separated from the world he knows once he puts on the scarecrow's coat and begins his magical journey.

The second stage in the hero's quest involves the transformation of thoughts and actions resulting in new levels of awareness and skill. Wearing the magical coat, the man finds himself in a café, where he is expected to know how to play the accordion and sing for the guests. The man's fear of failure and confidence is tested, but he is transformed by the wearing of the magical coat: “*His voice was thin at first but then it grew and so did he*”.

The final stage in this style of narrative is the “return to the old world” with all the new discoveries, including the gaining of courage and virtue – in this case the man goes off into the night with renewed confidence and courage.

Activities

- Discuss "The Hero's journey" narrative structure. What other stories in books or films follow this structure? (*Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*) See also <http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/herosjourney/>
- Discuss the text and language features of *The Coat*. Ask students to select sections of text that identify the following: alliteration, repetition, and rhythm.
- How does the language and sentence structure change as we build up to the dancing and singing scene of the book? How has the author used descriptive language of the excitement of music and dancing (*spinning, heartbreaking, wild, twirling, highflying*) to build up to a climax?
- Ask students to tap the rhythm of the text as you read the book. Are there gaps and silences in the text? Are there moments in the text that are louder than others? How do these features convey emotion and build tension? Discuss.
- A number of phrases are repeated throughout the book. What examples can you find?
Examples: "*Splendid*", *said the coat*, "*splendid*", *said the man*.
"*Thank you*", *said the coat* "*thank you*", *said the man*.
"*Who knows*", *said the man*. "*Who knows*," *said the coat*.

Why do you think these phrases are repeated? Can you think of any other stories which use repetition?

- "*He had Tango Zest and Rare Glissando, he had Fresh Duet, Wild Solo and a grand finale of Bass Magnifico*" Julie Hunt uses imagery (descriptive language) to create a magical "music-themed" meal. Why do you think she has done this? How does this language add to the story? What other fantasy restaurant meals can you think of?
- Use *The Coat* as writing inspiration:
 - Make up the story of the coat's past life. Who made it? Who did it belong to? How did it end up in the paddock?
 - Write about the man's past life? Why was he wandering along the road? What happens when the coat and the man leave the Café Delizia?
- Invent your own coat or other item of clothing (boots, shoes, hat).
 - Look up costumes and fashion through the ages for inspiration.
 - Design and draw your item of clothing. Describe it in detail. Some words you might like to use are: *elegant, long, short, sleek, wild*.
 - Ask yourself 'If this coat/hat/pair of boots was a person, what would they be like?
 - What happens when you put on this item of clothing?

VISUAL LITERACY

This book can be used as an investigation into the part that the illustrative text plays in the construction of the narrative, and to explore different meanings for readers of different ages and sophistication.

Read the book aloud in class. *The Coat* can be viewed as being divided into two parts. The first part depicts the anger and loneliness of the scarecrow and the disappointment of the man; the second part shows the joy, energy and transformation of the man through wearing the coat.

After the first reading, give students the opportunity to openly discuss their thoughts and feelings towards the text. Use the following questions to help prompt the discussion:

- What is this story about? Where is this story set? Who are the characters in this book? Is there a **message** in the text?
- How does the **colour of the illustrations** change through the book? Compare the beginning of the story where the man meets the scarecrow (sepia tones) to later illustrations in the café (glowing, bright warm colours) – why do you think the artist changed the colour of the illustrations so dramatically?
- How does the artist **convey emotions** in the illustrations? What words describe the emotions of the man at the beginning, middle and end of the story? How do his emotions change? Looking at the illustrations in the last pages, how do you think the man feels at the end of the story? Look at the different facial expressions of the guests at the café.
What different emotions do they convey? Write a list of the different emotions that you can see.
- The **text or font** of the story is in a handwriting style – how does this style contribute to the story? What do you think the author is trying to convey with this style?
- Look at the **emphasis placed on the sky** in this book. (Travelling through the sky to the café, figures floating in the air) How does 'the sky' in the book represent a place of freedom or dreaming? How is it inviting? Where would you travel if you had the coat on? Describe and/or draw these places. (See BLM 2)
- **Viewpoints:** As a reader where are we positioned throughout the story? How does this help us feel about what happens to the man? (Viewpoint of the viewer/reader is in the sky behind the man when flying -we can see what he sees from the sky.)
- **Symbols**-What symbols have been incorporated in the story? (scarecrow, crow, roses, musical scores on plates) Do you know any other stories that have scarecrows in them? How were they different to this scarecrow?

Bruegel and Chagall

Influences of the **paintings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder** (1525-69) and **Marc Chagall** (1888- 1985) are incorporated into the book. The illustrations of the guests in the café have influences of Bruegel's *Peasant Dance* (1567) a wonderful work of strong colours, boisterous whirling movement.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter_Bruegel_The_Peasant_Dance.jpg

Like Bruegel, Ron Brooks has depicted the guests in a riot of energetic activity and freedom. As the man continues to play, the music transports guests to a dreamlike world, incorporating the Chagall painting *Double portrait with a glass of wine* (1917)

<https://www.marcchagallart.net/chagall-227.php> and *The Birthday* (1915)

<http://www.chagallpaintings.org/birthday.html>

The images become more softly coloured and have a dream-like quality as the figures float in space. This imaginary world has transported everyday objects and figures into a world of fantasy and fairytale.

Knowledge of work of the artists incorporated in the story can deepen and enrich understanding. Discuss the following:

- In what historical, cultural and geographical context was it created?
- What message and/or emotions does it convey?
- What might have happened before/after what is portrayed in the artwork?
- What is your personal response to the artwork?

CREATIVE ARTS

Music and performance were essential ingredients in the conception of this book. The author, Julie Hunt, explains:

I began having ideas for this story when a friend of mine was making a suit out of newspapers. He made a solid free-standing papier-mâché jacket. It stood in the kitchen and had a lot of presence. It was like a person. At the same time, I was thinking of another friend – a Polish musician who lived in a falling-down house. He played accordion and had a dark sense of humour. His instrument was very old and when he played it a musty smell came from the bellows. To me, the air that came out of that accordion smelt of mould and graveyards and old churches. But the music was exuberant.

Another thing that influenced me when I was writing *The Coat* was performance. I was singing with a group called the 'Kazakstan Kowgerls'. The Kowgerls were mad characters from Eastern Europe. They sang songs from Bulgaria, Georgia and Romania and, when they got it right, the music was beautiful. It was bold and wild and sometimes very sad. They sang 'heartbreaking gypsy tunes that made the audience lie on the floor and weep' just like in the story! The experience of performing in front of an audience helped me write the book. When you are on stage you grow larger, like the man in the story did. I find writing itself is a kind of performance. It allows me to inhabit a bigger world than I do in everyday life.

Music & dance

The book provides very descriptive language for the variety of music the man played:

"Spinning music that made him want to dance"

"Heartbreaking gipsy tunes"

"Crazy circus music"

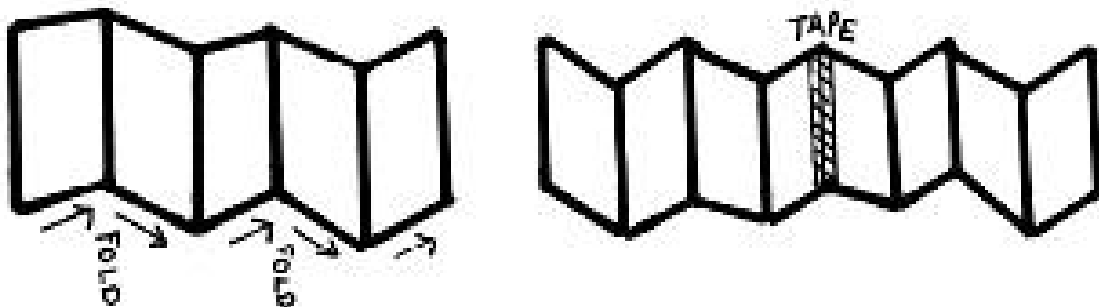
- Find examples of music that conveys these descriptions. Share them with the students.
- What music makes them feel like dancing? What emotions can the music make them feel? How would they dance to slow sad music or fast happy music? (See music sites in 'Online materials' below.)

Drama

- After reading through the story, discuss the theme of disappointment, and when students have experienced the feeling. Explore moving like characters in the story (angry scarecrow, disappointed man, dancing happy guests, man playing the accordion, confident man at story's end).
- Use "hot seating" and have students answer questions about the character they are, how they are feeling as that character, what is happening, what they think about various events in the story.

Visual art & crafts

- Make a class scarecrow, incorporating it into drama presentations or perhaps using it in the school garden!
- Look at the colours used at the café scenes. Ask students to paint a picture using only warm colours—reds, oranges, and yellows. Show children how to make colour variations by using more yellow or more red. How many colours can they make? How do they make you feel?
- Make your own accordion book and fill it with your story.



<http://www.makingbooks.com/accordion.shtml>

STUDY OF HISTORY, SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT

This book depicts life in the Middle Ages, the countryside and city life and the way people entertained themselves. <http://medievaleurope.mrdonn.org/>

- It invites students to research aspects of this period including:
- Clothing and food of the times • Pastimes and entertainment
- Contrasts between peasant life, and that of the rich or noble

Look up the history of the piano accordion. When was it invented? How is it made?

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The themes in this book of identity, optimism, self-confidence, change and transformation can assist students to explore how personal thoughts and feelings can affect one's behaviour and outlook. Discussion can also take place on developing the ability to handle disappointment, to manage setbacks and failures that are part of life, for example:

- Have you ever been disappointed because you have not been able to achieve something?
In groups discuss problem-solving techniques. What can you do to help yourself overcome a disappointing situation?
- Do you think the man was thinking positive thoughts at the start of the story? Did he change at the end of the story? Why? In groups discuss what you think. Are you a positive thinker? Are there any things you can do/say to help with this?
- Have you ever been extremely anxious about anything? How did this anxiety affect you?
In small groups, brainstorm different things you can do to cope with anxiety or apprehension in your life.

CONCLUSION

The Coat is a magical life-affirming narrative with expressive artwork that conveys universal themes that readers/viewers of all ages can enjoy. The illustrative references to the great art of Bruegel and Chagall are a visual treat for readers and viewers of all ages and encourage repeated readings!

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RELATED TEXTS AND OTHER SOURCES

BOOKS

Harris, Reg, Thompson, Susan, *The Hero's Journey: A guide for literature and life*, Ariane Pub Et Dis., 1995.

Picture books with a scarecrow theme

Pullman, Philip, *The Scarecrow and his Servant*, Doubleday, 2004.

Yolen, Jane, *The Scarecrow's Dance*, Simon & Schuster, 2009.

Picture book versions of Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

Picture books on artists

Muhlberger, Richard, *What makes a Bruegel a Bruegel?*, Viking, 1993.

Landmann, Bimba, *I am Marc Chagall*, Erdmans, 2005.

Barron's Artist books for children series that includes: Bjork, Christina, *Linnea in Monet's Garden*

Blaisdell, Molly, *Rembrandt and the boy who drew dogs*

Anholt, Laurence, *Degas and the little Dancer*

Other books by Julie Hunt

The Little Else series, illustrated by Beth Norling, Allen & Unwin 2010. (64-page illustrated Junior fiction books)

Precious Little, with Sue Moss, illustrated by Gaye Chapman, Allen & Unwin 2010. (picture book)

Song for a Scarlet Runner, Allen & Unwin 2013. (Fiction for 9-13-year olds)

Kidglovz, illustrated by Dale Newman, Allen & Unwin 2015. (288-page heavily illustrated hardback book for 8-12-year olds)

Shine Mountain, Allen & Unwin 2018. (Fiction for 9-13-year olds)

ONLINE MATERIALS AND SITES

Activity for the hero's journey

<http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/herosjourney/>

Bruegel artwork https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter_Bruegel_The_Peasant_Dance.jpg

Chagall artwork <http://www.chagallpaintings.org/birthday.html> Follow the 'Mark Chagall Paintings' link to view individual artworks. ('Violinist Bleu' and 'Mariee' show clearly the influence on Ron Brooks' illustrations.)

The Middle Ages <http://medievaleurope.mrdonn.org/>

Music sites: <http://henrydoktorski.com/soundfiles/pietropolkas/rhapsody.mp3>

<http://www.acmel.nl/geluidsfrag/gfm-am/les-invites/mp3/14-Gut-Morgn-AM-LI.mp3>

<http://henrydoktorski.com/soundfiles/recital/brahms.mp3>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circus_music (circus music)

<http://www.amazon.com/Under-Big-Top-Years-Circus/dp/B000002SKA> (circus music)

ABOUT THE WRITERS

JULIE HUNT

Julie Hunt is a gifted writer, author of the Little Else books and *Precious Little* (with Sue Moss, illustrated by Gaye Chapman). For upper primary readers, she has written *Kidglovz* (winner of the Queensland Literary Award - Children's Category) and *Song for a Scarlet Runner* (winner of the inaugural Readings Children's Book Prize and shortlisted for numerous other awards). She lives in southern Tasmania.

<http://www.juliehunt.com.au>

RON BROOKS

Ron Brooks has won many awards, including the CBCA Picture Book of the Year Award three times, and is published in many countries around the world. Two of his early books, *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek* and *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat*, both written by Jenny Wagner, are widely recognised as introducing Australian picture books onto the world scene. Two of his more recent titles, and perhaps his own personal favourites, are *Old Pig* and *Fox*, both written by Margaret Wild. *Fox* has won many Australian awards including the CBC Picture Book Award, and the Queensland and NSW Premier's Literary Awards, and has received international attention, winning prizes in Japan and the 2004 Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis (Germany's premier children's book award). More recently he has published a memoir, *Drawn from the Heart*, and a picture book written by Margaret Wild, *The Dream of the Thylacine*. Ron lives in Huonville, Tasmania.

<https://www.ronbrooks.com.au/>

JULIE MILLER

Julie Miller is writer and teacher who has taught in state and private schools for over twenty years and has written units of work for NSW Distance Education. She has studied children's literacy with the University of Southern Queensland and has previously written teacher notes for other Allen & Unwin publications, including *Building the Sydney Harbour Bridge*.

QUIZ

QUESTIONS

1. How did the scarecrow show he was angry?
2. How did the coat fit the man when he first put it on?
3. Where did the coat say they were going?
4. Why did the coat “billow out like the sail of a great ship”?
5. When the coat started speaking what type of person did the guests think the man was?
6. What kind of instrument did the man play?
7. What did he wear to help him play?
8. What is the name of the artist who did paintings similar to the illustration of the guests in the cafe?
9. How did the coat fit the man at the end of the performance?
10. What did the coat and the man say when the doorman asked where were they going?

ANSWERS

1. His arms crossed tightly
2. It was much too big
3. To the big smoke for an appointment at eight o'clock
4. To help the man fly
5. A ventriloquist
6. Accordion
7. White gloves
8. Pieter Bruegel
9. Perfectly!
10. “Who knows!”

WHERE IS YOUR COAT TAKING YOU?

Here is a picture of a coat flying through the sky.

Draw yourself in the coat, flying through the air. What do you see below? Is it different to what the man saw? Remember that when you are up high everything looks much smaller below!

Colour your drawing.

