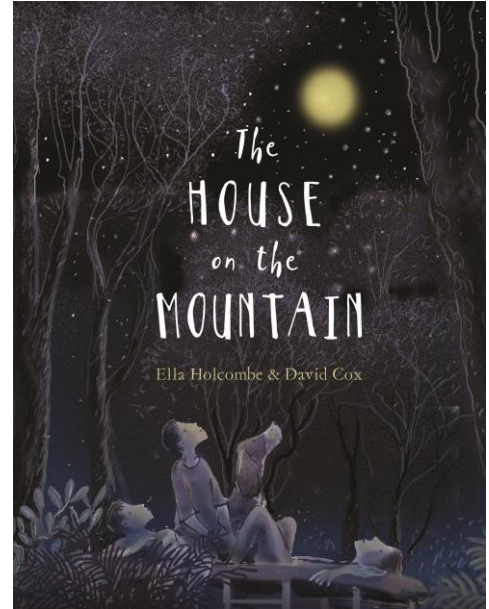


The House on the Mountain

By Ella Holcombe,
illustrated by David Cox



February 2019 ISBN 9781760636968
Hardback Picture Book
Recommended for 7 – 11-year-olds

Summary

Atmospheric and intensely moving, this is the story of a family experiencing a bushfire, its devastating aftermath, and the long process of healing and rebuilding.

Background

Commemorating the 10th anniversary of the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday bushfires, when 173 people lost their lives, *The House on the Mountain* captures the intense drama of that devastating natural disaster while focusing on the author's family home as a central symbol of loss and renewal. Themes of resilience, regeneration and recovery make this fictionalised story an excellent and non-threatening way to discuss natural disasters and their aftermath with young students.

David Cox's illustrations will not disappoint his many fans. His digitally finished images create a natural spontaneity and wit, and beautifully capture the 'essence' of the Australian bush. And his mastery of body language is once again evident here, enabling the reader to better understand the gamut of emotions experienced before, during and after a natural disaster.

Use in the curriculum

The House on the Mountain can be used as a stand-alone story text in English or as part of a unit on bushfire or natural disasters. It is suitable for use in Primary Years 1 to 5. It relates to the following content descriptions of the Australian Curriculum F-10.

Science

Yr 3, 4, 5 - Biological, Chemical and Physical science. In particular, the topic of heat is investigated in Yr 3. See also 'The use and influence of science.'

Art

Yr 1-5: Exploration of the visual aspect of storytelling. Compare with other picture books about bushfire - see 'Comparison picture book titles' on page 5 of these notes. Explore media used and design/layout.

Visit <https://www.allenandunwin.com/resources/for-teachers> for free down-loadable teachers notes, reviews by teachers, extracts and more. And sign up to the Allen & Unwin e-newsletter to receive monthly updates on new resources!

Contact Carolyn Walsh, Education Marketing Manager,
Ph: +02 8425 0150 Email: education@allenandunwin.com

English

The text can be studied as a sequential tale, an illustrated story (visual literacy), a story based on real life but fictionalised.

Textual features include cover, illustrations, endpapers, font, layout and design, **and** an afterword explaining the book's inception and importance to the author.

Compare with other picture books about bushfire - see 'Comparison picture book titles' on page 5 of these notes.

HASS

At all Primary year levels, this story is an excellent resource to foster discussion of the historical concepts of continuity and change, cause and effect, perspectives, empathy and significance. **It also addresses concepts of connection to place, community, belonging and helping others.**

Yr 2 - How have changes in technology shaped our daily life? What is a place? How are people connected to their place and other places? What factors affect my connection to places?

Yr 3 - How and why do people choose to remember significant events of the past?

Yr 4 - Interactions between people, places and environments.

Yr 5 - How can the impact of bushfires or floods on people and places be reduced? How and why do people participate in groups to achieve shared goals? Why regulations and laws are enforced and the personnel involved.

Themes

- bushfires
- family
- loss and grief
- recovery and assistance
- resilience and regeneration

Afterword from the author

At the end of the book, there is a page headed 'A note from the author (to be read with a grown-up)'. It is worth repeating this afterword here:

'The little girl in this story began her life as me. The twins were once my brothers, the parents my mum and dad. Ruby was our dog, Brittany.

'When I was born, Mum and Dad brought me home to their bush block in Kinglake. We lived in a tiny caravan while they built a shed, and then moved into the shed while they built their house. By the time my brothers were born, we were living in the house, similar to the one you can see in this book. Much like these kids, we spent a lot of our childhood outside, roaming the bush.

'On 7 February 2009, there was an enormous bushfire in Victoria. A hundred and seventy-three people died, and thousands of people lost loved ones, homes, pets, possessions and more. That day became known as Black Saturday. My brothers and I lost our mum and dad, our home, and our beautiful Brittany that day.

'I could have written that story, but I knew it too well already. Instead I wanted to capture something else – something about continuity, about movement and regrowth.

'My brothers and I still own the block of land on top of the mountain. At first, we had a few caravans up there, then we built a shed, and we're about to start building a house. We were there from the beginning, when everything was still black, and the wind howled through spaces where the bush once was. We watched tiny shoots of green appear from trees we

thought had died. And we were surrounded by friends who came up to help. Now I watch my own son playing among the trees where our house once stood.

'I wanted this story to be about more than loss. Because family and home are bigger than that. This is for you, Mum and Dad. Thanks for letting us roam.'

— Ella Holcombe, 2018

Discussion questions and activities

Before reading

1. Watch the following film (produced by the Victorian government for students) as an introduction to the events of the Black Saturday bushfires <http://education.abc.net.au/home#!/media/31095/> and answer the following questions.
 - a. How did scientists describe the intensity of the heat that the fires released onto the communities?
 - b. Three factors are given to explain why the fires were so destructive. What are they?
 - c. What is the most dangerous part of a bushfire?
 - d. What other natural disasters do you know of?
2. In the clip, reporter Nathan Bazley describes the Victorian bushfires as 'easily Australia's worst natural disaster in history'. Do you agree? Explain your reasons, considering both the short-term and long-term effects.

Cover

3. Look at the text, illustration, colours and font used on the front cover and guess what this book might be about. Now turn the book over, looking at each of these elements again and explain how your expectations might have changed.

Internal text and images

4. Look closely at the larger of the two images on the first double-page spread and describe how the artist has captured the sense of intense heat and everything being 'heavy and still' in the image of the house and its bush surrounds.
5. Why might the author's mum and dad want to collect fallen branches as their kids lie on the kitchen floor? Discuss other things people can do to protect their homes before a bushfire?
6. What does it mean when the author writes that mum and dad 'hover' by the radio as they clear branches? Why might a radio be very important at times like these?
7. Look closely at the image of the family racing to get away from the fire in their car. The text tells us that there is smoke everywhere, a fierce wind and things crashing into the car. Can you find examples within the image that show each of these things? What else can you see happening in the image that isn't mentioned in the text? (Hint: how are the animals reacting, what is the colour of the sky, and is the fire in just one place?)
8. Turn to the next double-page-spread and, in your own words, describe what is happening in the four small right-hand images.
9. 'It's like stepping into a picture book after all the colour has been drained out. The trees that are still standing are nothing but spindly fingers, reaching up towards the sky.' Look closely at the image that accompanies this text and describe how you think the people in it are feeling. Does the way they are holding each other tell you something about their reaction and how they might respond as a family?

10. Who do you think are the people who 'come and go – people who want us to talk to them, who want us to draw pictures; people who play music for us'? Can you find examples in the text that show us the narrator really does need some help to deal with what has happened?
11. Look closely at the image of the narrator's family friends gathering to help rebuild and the image on the opposite page of the family happily playing. What do you notice sitting in the bottom left-hand corner of both images? Why do you think the illustrator included this here?
12. Turn the page and this theme of regrowth continues as the author experiences again familiar smells, sounds and sights that remind her of her old home. What particular things about her new home trigger happy memories? Do you think that our senses are important in remembering times and events?
13. [*Consider whether this question is likely to upset students before asking it.*] Unlike in the story, the author's real-life parents and dog were tragically killed in the bushfires. 'I could have written that story...Instead I wanted to capture something else – something about continuity, about movement and regrowth,' she writes in her notes at the end of the book. Why do you think she wanted to write a different story, and do you think she was successful in capturing continuity, movement and regrowth?

After reading

14. After finishing the book and considering what the author wrote at the end, discuss why you think the book's front cover features this particular image

Related texts/Resources

State Library of Victoria
Bushfires in Victoria Resource List
<https://guides.slv.vic.gov.au/bushfires/2009>

Country Fire Authority
'About Black Saturday' - includes maps
<https://www.cfa.vic.gov.au/about/black-saturday>

Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience
Education for Young People - Disaster resilience education (DRE)
<https://www.schools.aidr.org.au/disaster-resilience-education/teaching-resources/#/>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Saturday_bushfires

Encyclopaedia Britannica
Australia bushfires of 2009
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Australia-bushfires-of-2009>
A brief, easy-to-read description of the fires, inc. maps and photo of Sam the Koala
ABC News online: 'What makes a horror fire danger day' by Kate Doyle, ABC Weather.
www.abc.net.au/news/2019-01-24/what-makes-a-horror-fire-danger-day/10685918
Contains easy-to-read diagrams of why the Black Saturday fires turned disastrous so quickly.

It's True! A Bushfire Burned My Dunny Down by Tracey McGuire, ill. by Bill Wood. A&U 2004.

A humorous non-fiction book, in the style of the Horrible History series, based on personal and professional accounts of bushfires and useful information such as how to survive a fire, how to prepare homes to avoid destruction etc. Timeline, index, resource list included. Excellent resource for reluctant readers.

Comparison picture book titles

Fabish: The Horse that Braved a Bushfire by Neridah McMullin and Andrew McLean. A&U 2016. Also based on a true Black Saturday story.

Through the Smoke by Phil Cummings and Andrew McLean. Scholastic Australia 2019

Fire by Jackie French and Bruce Whatley. Scholastic Australia 2014

Where There's Smoke by Robin Lovell and David Miller. Thomas C. Lothian 2005

Applesauce and the Christmas Miracle by Glenda Millard and Stephen Michael King. ABC Books 2008;

Edward's Magic Paintbox by Sue Robinson and Helen Leach. Thomas C. Lothian 2002

Bushfire by Marguerite Hann Syme and David Cox. Scholastic Australia 2000

Spark by Adam Wallace and Andrew Plant. Hybrid Publishing/Ford St Publishing 2016

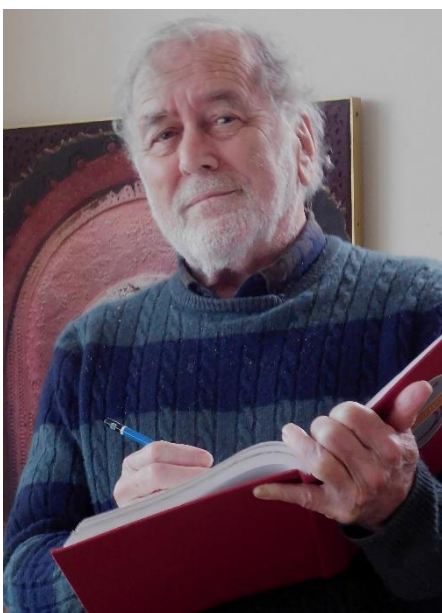
Allen & Unwin acknowledges the extremely useful resource, The Source, available through the website of Magpies magazine. Many school libraries subscribe to this database.

<https://www.magpies.net.au/>

The author and illustrator

Ella Holcombe grew up in Kinglake, Victoria, in a house on a mountain, with her younger brothers and a Brittany spaniel. Her parents were both teachers and her childhood was filled with music, books, wombats and plenty of watermelon.

Now she lives in Melbourne with her partner and their band of wild things – Harry, June, Eva and Pepe – but they still escape back up the mountain whenever they can. Ella's first collection of poetry, *Welcome/No Vacancy*, was published by Five Islands Press as part of their New Poets Series.



David Cox was born and reared in country Queensland. He worked as a jackaroo on outback sheep and cattle stations before enrolling, at 21, at St Martins School of Art in London. Back in Australia he became a newspaper artist, winning a Walkley Award, while also illustrating and writing many award-winning children's books, including four CBCA-shortlisted titles. In 2007 he won the Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for distinguished services to Children's Literature in Queensland.

David works from his home studio in Brisbane, and one of his hobbies is singing. He is coached by his wife, pianist/composer, Betty Beath. Betty and David have written music theatre pieces about St Francis of Assisi, and David regularly acts as cantor at St Phillips Church, which is attached to a Franciscan friary.