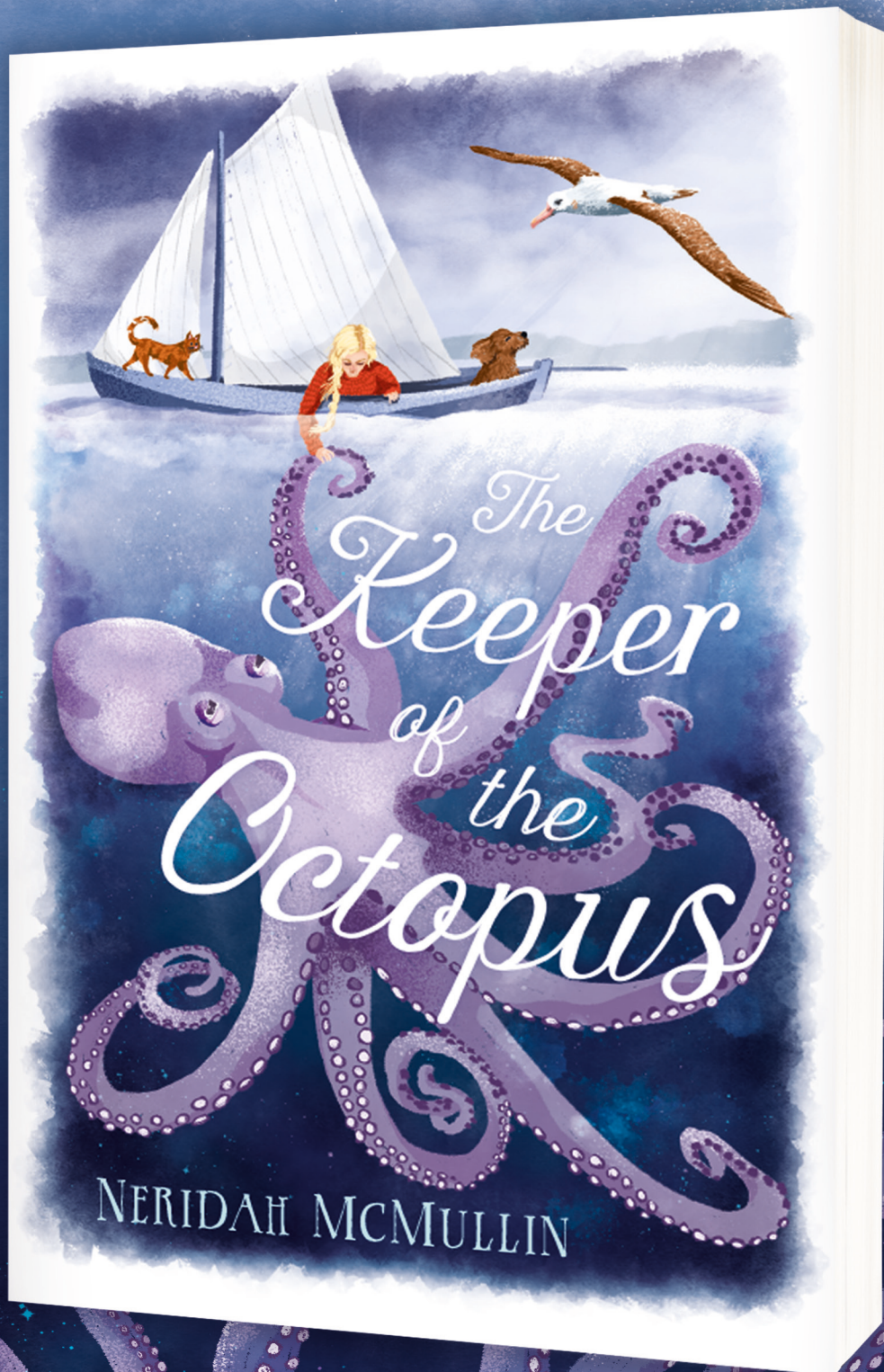




TEACHER NOTES

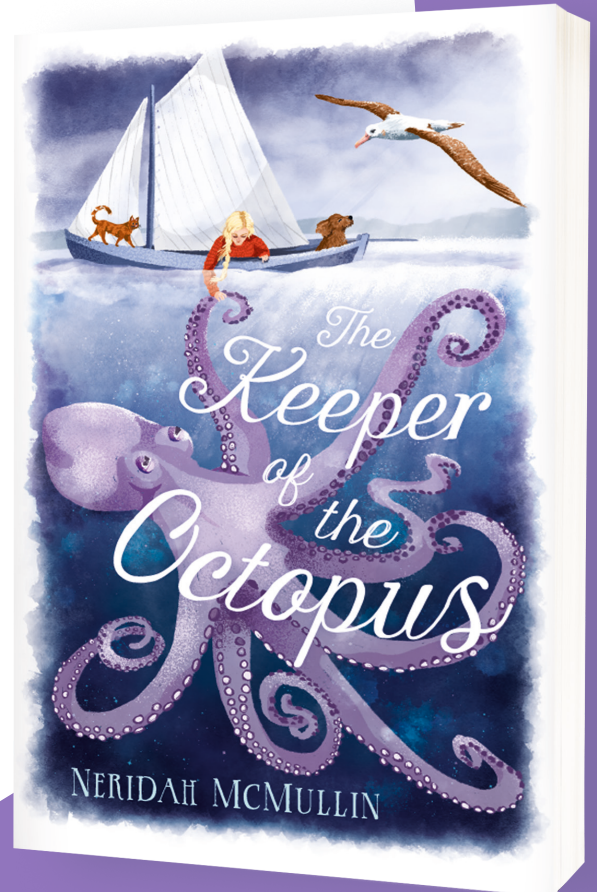
Teacher Notes by Belinda Bolliger

WALKER BOOKS

ABOUT *the* BOOK

THE KEEPER OF THE OCTOPUS
AUTHOR: NERIDAH MCMULLIN
ISBN 9781760659479 PAPERBACK
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*Since her father sailed away,
Uncle Isaac is the only family
Pippy has left. Together they
spend their days fishing off the
coast, until one day Pippy is
knocked into the sea and rescued
by a gentle, giant creature ...*



Uncle Isaac knows it's time to tell Pippy the truth. Pippy is the descendant of a long line of Keepers – the Keeper of the Octopus, responsible for the giant octopus who protects the fisherfolk of the village. At first, Pippy is hesitant to meet Octavia, but soon the octopus is sharing her dreams with Pippy and they recognise each other as kindred spirits. But when the Calamary Brothers come to Portablow, she learns of their search for a particular giant octopus. It's up to Pippy – and her rag-tag crew of a cat, a dog, a hobgoblin called Ferg and an albatross – to rescue Octavia from the Calamary's clutches.

ABOUT *the* AUTHOR

NERIDAH MCMULLIN loves animals, true stories and history.

An author of twelve books for children, Neridah is also an award-winning short story writer and poet. Her middle-grade fiction novel *Evie and Rhino* was shortlisted for the CBCA Book of the Year in 2023, shortlisted for the Readings Prize and won the Australian Speech Pathology Book of the Year for Younger Readers. Her picture books *Drover*, *Shearer* and *Tearaway Coach*, set during the Victorian gold rush, were published to great acclaim. Her picture book *Eat my Dust!* was a CBCA Notable in 2024. Neridah believes she was born at least 100 years too late. She loves old books, old people and local historical societies. She also loves footy, family, walking her dog and meeting other people's dogs.

SUITABLE FOR READERS 8+

THEMES: Family and belonging; courage and responsibility; friendship; caring for our environment; loss and hope; magic; community

CURRICULUM LINKS: **English** (Literature, Literacy); **Science** (Biological sciences, Science as a human endeavour); **Humanities and Social Sciences** (Geography, History); **The Arts** (Visual arts, Drama)

CROSS-CURRICULAR PRIORITY: Sustainability

TEACHER *Notes*

ONCE UPON A GENRE

- After reading the novel, as a class, brainstorm how you would describe *The Keeper of the Octopus*.
 - Is it a thriller, an adventure, a mystery, a drama – or a blend of these?
 - Which moments in the story made you feel excited, tense, curious or emotional?
 - Do you think the author deliberately combined different genres? Why might that be effective?
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BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: MAGICAL REALISM

- What is magical realism? As a class, create a working definition. (You might compare it with fantasy, myth or realism to clarify the meaning.)
- How does *The Keeper of the Octopus* fit into this genre?
 - Identify examples where the ordinary world and the extraordinary mix together.
 - How do the magical elements feel different from pure fantasy? Do they feel like a natural part of the characters' everyday lives?
 - How does the inclusion of magical elements change the way you interpret the story?
- Which genre label would you give the novel? Why?
- If you were recommending *The Keeper of the Octopus* to a friend, how would you describe the kind of story it is?
- Do you think the novel would be the same without the magical elements? Why or why not?

Activity

- To further understand magical realism and its role in the story, find a scene where something magical happens in an otherwise ordinary setting:
 - Identify a character's reaction to something magical. Do they accept it, question it or ignore it?
 - Look for a moment where the magical element reveals a deeper truth about life, family or identity.

- o Share findings as a class and build a collective 'map of magical realism' from the novel.
 - o Did this exercise help you understand why the author chose magical realism to tell Pippa and Octavia's story?
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CAST AND CREW: CHARACTER STUDY

- There are so many wonderful characters in this novel: Pippa, Octavia, Uncle Isaac, Wally, Ferg, the Calamary brothers ... Who is your favourite character?
 - o Write an opinion piece (exposition) explaining who your favourite character is and give at least three reasons why, supported by examples from the novel.
- Choose three or four key characters in the story (not your favourite character from the activity above!) and create profiles for each of them. In your profile, include:
 - o Key traits
 - o Personal losses or challenges
 - o Major decisions or turning points
 - o Quotes that reveal personality
 - o Symbols or colours that represent them.
- Pippa is the main character in *The Keeper of the Octopus*.
 - o How does she change from the beginning of the novel to the end of the story?
 - o What qualities make her suited to be Keeper of the Octopus?
 - o Draw a timeline of the novel (beginning, middle and end). At key points, describe what Pippa is like at that stage of the story – her feelings, choices, behaviours and so on.
 - o Add a short quote or example from the book that illustrates how she is at those times.
 - o Circle the moments where you think Pippa changes the most. Write one or two supporting sentences that explain why this moment is important in her growth.
 - o At the start of the timeline, write three words to describe how Pippa is at the beginning of the story. At the end of the timeline, write three words to describe what Pippa is like by the end of the novel.
 - o What is different? What has caused those changes?
 - o Write a short letter from Pippa at the end of the story to her earlier self. In the letter, she could give advice, share what she's learned or reflect on how she's changed.

IN AN OCTOPUS'S GARDEN

- Octavia is also a main character in the novel. She is more than just an octopus – she is a guardian, Pippy's connection to her mother and she also becomes Pippy's friend.
 - What kind of personality or qualities does Octavia have?
 - How do you think the author wants us to feel about Octavia – curious, respectful, fearful, full of wonder and awe? Why?
 - Octopuses are fascinating creatures. They have blue blood, three hearts and a mini brain in each long arm! They are highly intelligent and adaptable and have even been known to make friends with humans.
 - Research real-life octopi facts to discover information about camouflage, intelligence, behaviours, etc.
 - How is Octavia different from real-life octopuses? How is she similar? Create a T-chart: **Fact (real octopuses) vs. Fiction (Octavia)**.
 - Does knowing about real-life octopi behaviour and science make Octavia more believable as a character?
 - How is Octavia a good choice for a magical realism character? What does she bring to the story that another animal wouldn't?
 - What might be the meaning behind Octavia sharing dreams with Pippy? How can dreams tell us things we don't realise when we're awake?
 - Write a diary entry from Octavia's point of view. Imagine that she is researching you instead of the other way around. What would she observe? What does she find strange, funny or interesting?
 - There are many wonderful real-life stories about octopuses. Here are some you might enjoy:
 - [youtube.com/watch?v=abRPaXgJGQg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abRPaXgJGQg) (giant octopus steals fisherman's crabs)
 - [youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=mnZ9wF-Bv1w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=mnZ9wF-Bv1w) (octopus playtime)
 - theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/13/the-great-escape-inky-the-octopus-legs-it-to-freedom-from-new-zealand-aquarium (octopus escapes)
- My Octopus Teacher* (rated G but not suitable for children under 9 years of age). Available on Netflix.
- If you were to write a magical realism novel, what animal would you choose to be the Keeper of?

- In your story, why would this creature be important to you and your community?
- What would you need to do to take care of your creature?
- What dreams would your creature share with you? Write a creative piece to describe one of these dreams.
- **Quote:** 'Pippy read the Keeper's Book well into the night. She discovered one half was a journal, dated in entries from the oldest to the newest, and the other half was information on how to care for your octopus, what to feed them and how to train them.' (p. 61).
- In the novel, the Keeper's Book has been passed down from generation to generation, explaining how each Keeper looks after their octopus. (Chapter 5, p. 44). Write your own page or entry for a Keeper's Book, explaining how to look after your creature.
- Read Pippy's pledge to Octavia (pp. 74-75). Write your own pledge for your creature.
- At the end of the novel, Pippy sets Octavia free. Do you agree that wild animals should live in the wild? Why or why not? Set up a class debate to raise awareness of the topic.

WE ARE FAMILY: FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND BELONGING

- How do Uncle Isaac and Octavia give Pippy a sense of family?
- Pippy's 'family' (and crew) includes a cat, a dog, a hobgoblin and an albatross. How do these very different characters work together?
- How does the author show that having friends and community makes us stronger and braver?
- What did you think when Pippy's father returned?
 - o Do you think he behaved well when he left Pippy?
 - o Were his actions understandable? Why or why not?
 - o Do you think he deserved Pippy's forgiveness?
 - o How is his return a turning point in the action of the story?
- The village of Portablow is full of many colourful characters. Draw a map of the village using some of the descriptions in the book, plus your imagination. Draw some of the characters and where they live.
- The novel shows how, when a community bands together, it can be a force for good. Find examples in the novel to support this statement.

THE VILLAINS OF THE STORY

- What do you think drives the Calamary Brothers? Are they simply bad or do they have reasons for wanting Octavia? Are there any justifiable reasons for how they behave in the novel?
 - Why do you think the author chose to include the Calamary brothers and their actions in the story? How do they act as a warning about the dangers of greed?
 - There are some wonderful descriptions of how the brothers look. Find these descriptions and use them to create an artwork of the brothers.
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OCEANS: WORTH FIGHTING FOR

- **Quote:** 'Drag nets are banned in many parts of the world ... You know, in many parts of the world they argue too. Back and forth and back and forth. They try to put in quotas and catch limits, to prevent fish depleting. But people are greedy, bambina. Very greedy.' (p. 153).
 - Arazio says, 'people are greedy, bambina. Very greedy.' Do you agree with this statement? Can you think of real-world examples where greed has damaged the environment?
 - How do quotas and catch limits try to protect fish populations? Do you think they work? Why or why not?
 - What responsibility do humans have when it comes to caring for the oceans and other natural environments?
 - Compare the Calamary brothers' attitudes to other characters' views about the sea. Who respects the ocean and who takes it for granted?
- Why is Octavia important to the village? How does the story reflect real-world issues of protecting endangered animals?
- When Pippy is finding out about Octavia and the sharks, what does she learn about the sharks and their behaviour?
- Create a cause-and-effect diagram showing what happens when overfishing occurs (e.g. overfishing › fewer fish › damage to marine ecosystems › people lose livelihoods).
- Hold a classroom debate: one group represents the fishing industry (arguing for profit and jobs), and the other group represents environmentalists (arguing for protection of marine life). A third group can be 'government' and decide on new rules after hearing both sides.

- Write a short poem, journal entry or illustration titled 'If the Ocean Could Speak', expressing what the sea might say about overfishing and pollution.
- Research what rules exist in Australia to protect the ocean, such as marine parks, fishing limits or bans on certain nets. Present your findings as a poster or a short oral report.

THE GLORIOUS SEA

- 'Reef sharks, gummy sharks, tuna, barracuda, black bream, snapper, flathead and silver perch.' (p. 198). There are many types of fish and sea creatures in the novel. Find images of some of these and create an under-the-ocean mural for your classroom.
- Are there species of fish in the story that you haven't heard of before? Use the internet to research one of these and present your findings to the rest of the class.
- **Quote:** 'Do you remember the fisher's rule about never whistling into the wind? In case you whistle up a storm?' (p. 222)
Why do you think sailors and fishers have so many superstitions? Do you think these beliefs were based on fear, experience or tradition? Could some of them have had practical reasons behind them?
- Research a few other sailor superstitions (e.g. black cats on ships, red skies at night/morning). Which ones seem most believable or useful? Which seem more like myths?
- Imagine you are a sailor on a long voyage. Write a short diary entry where you experience a superstition at sea.
- Create an artwork that compares The Guttled Mullet with The Flying Seahorse. Label the different parts of each boat.

INSPIRED BY THE SEA: LANGUAGE

- The author uses vivid and imaginative language in the story. Many of the similes and descriptions are inspired by the sea, helping to create a strong sense of place and atmosphere. For example, 'Pippy slid to the edge of her seat, perched like a cormorant drying its wings.' (p. 30). '... Pippy blurted angrily, like a sea squirt when poked.' (p. 35).
- With a partner, find and make a list of similes or metaphors in the story. Why do you think the author chose sea imagery so often?
- Write three new similes using sea animals or ocean imagery.

- Choose one of the sea-inspired similes in the story and think about how it makes you feel. Does it create suspense, sadness, humour, calmness, etc.?
 - How would the scene feel different if the author used land-based or city imagery instead?
 - Look at the similes that describe Pippy. What do they tell us about her personality, emotions or journey?
 - **Quote:** 'And there it was, a faint shoosh, a soft pumping, the blip of three hearts thumping.' (p. 239). This evocative line describes what Pippy hears when she slows down and listens for Octavia. Write your own line to describe what you might hear if you slow down and listen to the sounds around you.
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FURTHER ACTIVITIES

Creative writing and art

- Keeper's Journal: Write a 'Keeper's logbook' entry from Pippy's perspective, describing a day spent with Octavia.
- Dream map: Illustrate one of the dream sequences between Pippy and Octavia, showing symbols and hidden meanings.
- New creature: Invent a new magical sea creature that could help Pippy. Describe its abilities, personality and how it would join the crew.

Drama and roleplay

- Hot seat: One student takes on the role of Pippy, Octavia or the Calamary Brothers and answers questions from the 'audience' about their decisions and feelings.
- Rescue mission: In small groups, act as Pippy's crew, planning and acting out how to save Octavia without being caught.

STEM / Real-world links

- Marine conservation research: Research real-life giant octopuses and their habitats. What threats do they face? How can we protect them?
- Fishing traditions: Compare modern fishing techniques with traditional methods used in small coastal villages.

Comprehension and language

- Vocabulary: Create a glossary of nautical and marine words from the text. Use the dictionary to find definitions for any words you are unsure of.
- Figurative language: Find examples of similes, metaphors and personification in the text and discuss how they create atmosphere.

Collaboration and problem solving

- Crew skills: List each crew member's strengths and weaknesses (cat, dog, hobgoblin, albatross). Then decide how you would assign roles in the rescue mission.
- Octavia's code: Imagine Octavia can only communicate through patterns in the water. Create your own code and have classmates decode it.