

TEACHER NOTES

Little Owl

Phillip Gwynne / Sandy Okalyi

Title: *Little Owl*
Author: Phillip Gwynne
Illustrator: Sandy Okalyi

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Author: Phillip Gwynne stormed on the Australian children's literary scene with his first book *Deadly Unna*, which was the literary hit of 1998, winning Children's Book of the Year and selling over 250,000 copies. Since then Phillip's novels have all received both high acclaim and popularity amongst readers including his young adult novel *Swerve*, which was shortlisted for many awards amongst them the 2010 Prime Minister's Award and the Golden Inky. In more recent years he has gained a reputation as an accomplished writer of picture books, including the popular with *The Queen With The Wobbly Bottom*, *Ruby Loves To Swim* and *Ten Green Geckos*.

Born in 1958, he is one of eight children. He grew up in country Victoria and South Australia. A keen Australian Rules footballer, he played for Woodville in the SANFL before a serious knee injury finished his career. He graduated from James Cook University with a degree in Marine Biology but has worked at many different jobs including picking fruit, deckhand on a fishing boat, swimming pool manager in a mining camp and computer programming. Phillip has travelled extensively - he has trekked to Everest Base Camp, sailed up the Amazon and lived and worked in Thailand, Belgium and Brazil. He currently lives in Bali

Illustrator: Sandy Okayli is the illustrator of the Working Title press picture book *Mozzie and Midgie*. She was born and raised in Melbourne. After completing her schooling in 1980 she worked as a darkroom technician before travelling around Australia and overseas. She settled in Fremantle where she trained as a sculptural muralist and spent ten years bringing up her family. From there she moved to Stradbroke Island where she focused on painting, with a special interest in the birds and wildlife of the area. Her work has been exhibited in Fremantle, Brisbane and Melbourne. As with her earlier picture book *Mozzie and Midgie*, *Little Owl* began as a series of paintings and sketches for an exhibition before he was written into this delightful picture book story by Phillip Gwynne. Sandy lives in Brisbane with her family.

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SYNOPSIS When Little Owl falls from his nest and opens his eyes for the very first time he has one big question. *Whooooo? Whooooo? Whooooo am I?* Little Owl nibbles on a blossom with a hungry sugar glider, hangs upside down with the bats in the branches, and struts on the ground like the cranky cockatoo. But at the end of the day, Little Owl still isn't sure who he is. Until from out of the darkness comes a distant *Whooooo. Whooooo. Whooooo.*

WRITING STYLE Phillip Gwynne has created a gentle, heart-warming text about getting to know who you are, and where you belong. He has used a simple repetitive structure, and a straightforward sequential plot. The structure of the story is repetitive, while the descriptive language is rich, poetic, and perfect for shared reading. Little Owl, falls out of his nest, down through the tree, and out into the wide world. Each time he meets a different creature he does something that he sees them doing - *Little Owl nibbled on a flower like the hungry sugar glider*, and asks the same question, *Whoooo? Whoooo? Whoooo? am I?* But when they hear his hoot they soar, scurry or flit away. *'... when he opened his beak, out came a hoot and the sugar glider soar, soar, soared away.'* Tension builds as time passes. It seems Little Owl doesn't belong anywhere. When all seems lost the pace of the story changes. As the moon rises he *'looked up at the stars and began to cry.'* He reflects on the question he's been asking all along, and he thinks about what he *has* learned, *'I'm not a koala that scurries or a cockatoo that struts.'* And he opens his beak and out comes a *'whooo'*. Then *'From out of the dark there came a reply. Whoooo! Whoooo! Whoooo! Whoooo!'* Little Owl is reunited with his mother. Together they fly back home, *'where they hoot, hoot, hooted the night away'*.

ILLUSTRATIONS Sandy Okayli used acrylic paint on board for the illustrations in *Little Owl*. The illustrations for this book are striking – simple, colourful, and funny. Sandy Okayli has created a delightful cast of characters (led by Little Owl) that reveal their character and feelings through expressive body language and facial expressions. The strong design elements of the book help to show the passage of time. The night sky gradually lightens into day, and then darkens into another night. Emblematic features like the moon rising as the sun sets, and the animals' silhouettes against a large round moon, add to Little Owl's (and the reader's) growing sense of loss and loneliness. The illustrations in the first half of the book are close-up and contained in

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consecutive single pages. When Little Owl meets the last creature, the frog, the space expands into double page spreads, and Little Owl appears more isolated and uncertain in the wider landscape. In the end Little Owl is reunited with his mother. This happens quietly over the last seven pages. They meet, Little Owl's mother tells him she has been looking for him 'everywhere', and says, 'It's time to come home Little Owl.' Together they fly home. The last page is an intimate, contained single page drawing, with Little Owl and his mother tucked together in a frame of tree branches and '...they hoot, hoot, hooted the night away.'

DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

- The simple, repetitive text and the bold, colourful illustrations, full of details to notice and discuss, invite adults and children to look at and read this book together.
- Before reading the story to a large group of children, spend time reading with small groups. This will provide an opportunity for children to share their own responses to the story, and for educators to draw attention to how the words and the pictures work together to tell the story. 'This is what the words say.' 'The picture shows us what is happening and sets the scene.'
- Every page of this book invites discussion. For example look at the first page. Talk about how the words and picture set the scene for what is to follow. Give the children time to look at the picture. The educator could say, 'What can you see in the picture?' 'Look at these black shapes at the top of the tree'. 'What is happening?' 'Do you think Little Owl will fall all the way to the ground?' 'Is the tree near or far away?' 'How can we tell that the tree is in the distance?' Show the children how Sandy Okayli has placed the tree in the distance. Point out the size of the nest and Little Owl. Talk about how the leaves on the tree in this picture are different from the leaves in later, close-up illustrations.
- Don't let the talk get in the way of the enjoyment of the story. Discussions like this should be relaxed and natural, and take place over time. They can be a simple and friendly way of drawing the children's attention to specific elements of a picture storybook. This is a way to help young children expand their understanding how stories work. It will help them to transform their natural active 'story making through play' into the more abstract form of the written / depicted story.

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- Invite the children to read along with you, particularly the phrase, *Whooo? Whooo? Whooo? am I?* – read with feeling.
- As Little Owl meets each of the creatures he does what they do, '*Little Owl spread his wings wide like the dragonflies in the sun.*' Look at the pictures of the actions of Little Owl and the other creatures, then draw or paint your own pictures. Use the palette of colours that Sandy Okayli has used.
- Put your drawings together as a poster or a frieze. Ask the children to tell their own story about what is happening in their drawings.
- The same activity can be used showing the animals and birds running away from Little Owl. Find different ways to use and display the different 'running away' words – scurrying, dashing, strutting and hop, hop, hopping.
- Talk about and make pictures using Sandy Okayli's techniques - line, colour, and composition - to depict different elements of the story.
- Colour is an important element in this story. List the different colours in the story. Focus on the different tone and hue of each colour.
- What colours are used? How are different tones of colour used to show different elements of the landscape – the tree trunk, the earth, the sky, the plants, the leaves, feathers, fur and skin.
- Talk about how the composition changes from single pages focusing on the characters, to more sweeping views across a double page spread.
- Talk about how the characters' personalities are depicted through particular illustrative techniques. For example: the colour, shape, body language, and facial expression of the animals,
- Talk about how the personalities of the characters are revealed through the language of the text – what they do - '*Little Owl hung upside down like the bats from the branches.*'), how they move - '*the bats swoop, swoop, swooped away.*'
- Dramatise the story – '*Little Owl spread his wings,*' – '*... the echidna bristle, bristle, bristled away*'
- Enjoy this lovely book!