

TEACHER NOTES
My Brother
by Dee, Oliver, and Tiffany Huxley

Title: *My Brother*
Author / Illustrator: Dee, Huxley
Co-creators: Oliver and Tiffany

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Author / Illustrator: Dee Huxley studied design and craft at the National Art School, East Sydney. After graduating she taught visual arts in secondary schools in Australia and London, and later worked as a graphic designer for television. Dee has been illustrating picture books for many years and is now one of the most popular and well-known illustrators in Australia. A freelance illustrator since 1976, her work is displayed in galleries nationally and internationally. She was short-listed for the Children's Book Council Picture Book of the Year Award for her illustrations in *Mr Nick's Knitting* in 1989, *Rain Dance* in 2001 and *You and Me Our Place* in 2008. She is also the illustrator of the 2009 CBCA Honour Book, *Tom Tom*, written by Rosemary Sullivan. *My Brother* is the fourth book Dee has written and illustrated. It has been done with help from her son and daughter Oliver and Tiffany.

SYNOPSIS

When a gentle creature sets out to search for a lost brother we are taken on an ethereal journey across land and sea to strange, beautiful and faraway places. To fantastic, floating cities, and mediaeval towns full of dark alleyways and winding staircases – to vast open grasslands and eerie, silent forests – and eventually to a place of timeless beauty and light. *My Brother* is a metaphorical picture storybook for older children that looks at loss and grief from a sibling's perspective.

WRITING / ILLUSTRATING / DESIGN STYLE *My Brother* has been created by Dee Huxley, with her son Oliver, who created the visual characters, and her daughter Tiffany, who designed the book. Together, they drew on a heart-rending experience to create a book in which the words and pictures tell a moving, symbolic story of loss, and grief, and of the gradual steps taken towards the hope of renewal. Dee Huxley says,

This book came about because of the loss of a loved one in tragic circumstances, & our world changed forever. It is both a tribute & a release. A tribute to a beautiful, empathetic soul, who touched so many lives, young & old, & who will be loved & missed forever. A release, albeit sorrowful, to be able to make this book for him, & us, & others like us, & a hope that he is somewhere beautiful & safe now. The main character, a metaphorical gentle creature, represents the emotional journey of loss, disbelief, grief, but also a journey of hope.

The reader is led gently into the story through the title page with a soft black and white drawing of a pair of carelessly discarded boots; and the dedication page with a simple inscription and a drawing of a single tree. On the next two pages Tiffany sets up a layout that will be the pattern for most of the book. She has used various design techniques that help establish the pace and mood of the story. The text sits, like a stanza of poetry, on the stark white left-hand page. The text is spare and understated, but every word and line, and its placement text on the page, adds to the deep meaning of the story, beginning with a simple statement:

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‘I miss my brother’. The space that is left between this line and the next, creates a catch-of-breath pause, before: ‘I’m so l o s t without him’. The tiny word ‘so’ combined with the word ‘l o s t’, with a space between each letter, heightens the sense of anguish.

On the facing right-hand page a single illustration is enclosed within a white border. In contrast to the pared down, but poignant, text, the illustration is complex and layered with meaning. Graphite and watercolour have been used for the illustrations in this book, although the watercolour is not introduced until the last three double pages.

On this page:

- The softness and sharpness of the moonlit shadows in the blacks/whites/greys of the graphite drawing evoke deep sorrow.
- The reader’s eye is first drawn to the creature seated at a table. This character represents the journey that must be taken through grief and loss, to a place of release and hope)
- The creature is placed in the centre of the picture - drooped head, slumped shoulders, downturned eyes, a piece of pie uneaten, on the table.
- Around the room are real and metaphorical images that relate to the lost Brother, and to the intense sorrow of the main character
 - Light from a full moon shines through the window where a duck (in boots) stands keeping a watchful eye a friend.
 - A flock of dark birds gather near the ceiling, symbolising dejection and loss.
 - Two hats and two coats hang sadly on the wall.
 - Two pairs of boots wait on the floor.
 - On the table sits one cup, untouched, another is still on a hook.
 - One dark bird nestles in a coat pocket.
 - Another bird is anchored in the bottom left-hand corner investigating the rest of the pie, a passing allusion to the child’s nursery rhyme, *Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds*.
 - On the wall is a memory of happier times - a picture of the siblings together.



On the next page the creature is roused by the thought that Brother might also be lost: ‘I wonder if he’s lost too... I need to find him’. The illustration shows the creature and the duck from behind, looking out into the vast world they need to explore in the search for Brother. The remainder of the book takes the reader an *emotional journey of loss, disbelief, grief, but also a journey of hope*. The story is contained in thirteen double pages. The illustrations on ten of these pages are drawn with graphite. Woven through each of the drawings are, as Dee says, images of thoughts and memories related ‘to childhood, adolescence, & the few years of adulthood ... resulting in a surreal, nonsensical thread throughout the book’. She adds, ‘We know their meaning, others can form their own interpretation’.



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Over the next three pages colour is gradually introduced - from a hint of the rising sun and pale blue sky, then opening to the mellow light of early morning, and, on the last page, the colourful brightness of a new day.

DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

Themes and ideas

This book is a moving and metaphorical response to grief, loss and death. It addresses grief, healing and renewal, isolation and loneliness, and the time needed for a healing process.

- Get to know the book thoroughly yourself before using it with students.
- Take time to consider the emotional power of the understated text, and the illustrations, and how you can use it with the age group of students you are working with.
- Find out more about how to support students through the grieving process. Useful resources for teachers and families can be found on the Kids Matter website at: <https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au>
- Decide whether to use the book with a whole class, in small groups or with individuals, knowing that you might need to allow time for sharing stories, discussion, and reflection.
- You might share an experience of death and grieving that you have had.
- Some students might have stories of their own to share – the death of a relative or a pet, or even finding a dead bird in the back yard.

Introducing the book

- You might introduce the book by looking at the cover –
 - Open the cover out so that you can see both the back and front together.
 - Talk about how the book came to be produced, why three people created the book together, and what each of them contributed to the making of the book.
 - Discuss the muted colour and wood texture of the background. What does this tell you about the story?
 - Discuss how the characters and setting are depicted in the illustrations, and how this suggests what the story might be about.
 - Compare the illustrations on the front and back covers.
 - How do the background, and the illustrations together suggest mood or atmosphere?
- Read, or ask a student to read, the description on the back cover: *When a gentle creature sets out to search for a lost brother, we are taken on an ethereal journey across land and sea to a strange, beautiful and faraway place.*
- After reading the story ask the students to write a response. Some questions to think about could be:
 - What did you feel while you were reading the book?
 - Have you had any experiences like those in the story?
 - How did your emotional response change near the end when colour was introduced into the illustrations?

Other questions to consider for discussion and writing

- What are the main themes of the story? Consider the text and illustrations together – the journey taken through grief/sadness → loneliness/isolation → healing → hopeful → release from overwhelming sadness.
- What shared experiences, thoughts, ideas, and emotions does the creature have during the journey to find Brother – childhood, growing up, happy times, scary times, adventures, travel, friendship...

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- The settings – where does the creature go to look for Brother – consider real, physical places and symbolic, emotional places – places, memories, feelings, thoughts...
- The creators of the book used the process of making it as a catharsis. Discuss the meaning of the word 'catharsis'.

Language

- Write/type the text out on a single page, arranging the words as they appear in the book – using spaces (within words, and between lines), and orientation (left-hand, right-hand, up, down).
 - Talk about how the format creates a poem.
 - Read the poem aloud.
 - Discuss in pairs or small groups how the language, and design of the text reflects the mood of the story from the beginning to the end (the words used become more descriptive and reassuring).
 - From: 'I miss my brother'
 - To: 'in a land surrounded by light', so pure, so beautiful, so safe'.
- Compile a list of the words that you think are the most important on each page. Arrange the words to create a poem. Discuss in pairs or small groups the reasons for your responses.
- Play around with some of the layout design techniques that are used in *My Brother*:
 - Create spaces between letters, words and lines;
 - Place words in different positions on the page (right and left) and within lines (spaces between letters, up and down).
- 'Show, don't tell' is advice that is often given to writers. Does the text in *My Brother* show rather than tell? In pairs or small groups discuss how.
- Discuss how your own poem 'shows', and don't be afraid to edit. The text for *My Brother* would have gone through many drafts.
- Discuss how the length of the phrases increases as the story unfolds.
 - Discuss what kind of effect this has on the emotional impact of the story.
 - In the beginning, the text is slow, quiet and sombre ('I wonder if he's lost too... I need to find him'). As the story/journey progresses the mood of the language changes, moving through
 - Hope - 'I'll search way up here... and way down there'
 - Exhaustion - 'I've looked for him for days and nights and I'm so tired'
 - Anticipation - 'The darkness is going away'
 - Discovery and a new beginning – 'There he is, surrounded by light, He is everywhere and he will always will be with me'

Visual literacy – Illustrations and design

- Dee Huxley chose graphite and watercolour for the illustrations for this book, although the watercolour is not introduced until the last three double pages. Dee says,

Graphite was an obvious choice of medium for the illustrations, to represent the dark place the creature is in, but it also has a softness to it, which suits all the characters in the book. The gradual change to colour is to suggest the chance of hope for those left behind. The characteristics of watercolour, it's softness & transparency is a perfect medium to combine with graphite, & to achieve the transfer from one to the other, using Watercolour only for the final illustration.
- Choose one picture in the book. Discuss and/or write and share with each other:
- How has mediums of graphite and watercolour been used to create the atmosphere and mood of the story? Consider how you respond emotionally to the tightly contained graphite drawings. What feelings

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are by the introduction of colour towards the end of the book. Eg. compare the sense of sadness and loss of the first illustration with the joy and tranquillity of the last two pages.

- How is the reader's eye drawn into the picture (point of view). What do you look at first, and then how does your eye move around the picture? What elements are in the foreground, the midground, and the background?
- What is the viewpoint? Is the viewer looking straight into the picture, or standing below, above, beside, or does the illustrator use a combination of all of these perspectives. What effect do these different angles create? (Consider: stillness versus action and movement; simplicity versus detail).
- How is body language and facial expression used to represent ideas and feelings: uncertainty, fear, sadness, awakening, joy, relief, acceptance. (eg. the dark birds being present and disappearing, the duck - a companion, the cat, the pier, the donkeys).
- How are real and metaphorical images used to extend the story and evoke memories and feelings – everyday objects (the backpack), animals (the duck and the donkey that share the journey, the cat), childhood memories (The Cat and the Fiddle; Hickory Dickory Dock), literary references,) The Owl and the Pussy Cat).
- How does each illustration show details that are left unsaid by the simple text. Consider: place/setting, characters, objects, layout and composition.
- Ask the students to do an illustration of their own that is based on the tightly framed graphite illustrations, and/or a picture that evokes mood through the use of colour.
- Find out what each colour used in the illustrations traditionally symbolises. Use this information to create a wall-frieze, combining your own understated text with intricate more complex drawings.
- At the bottom of each left-hand page there is a blurry illustration of a donkey. How is the donkey depicted on each page, and how does this relate to the journey? Map the donkey's progress from left to right through the book. Note how its stance and position changes as the journey progresses, and how this relates to the text and the illustration on each page.