

Teacher  
Notes

TEACHER NOTES



HOW TO  
MAKE A  
BIRD

meg mckinlay  
matt ottley

WRITTEN BY  
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WALKER & BOOKS

# How To Make A Bird



## *How To Make A Bird*

By Meg McKinlay

Illustrated by Matt Ottley

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From award-winning author Meg McKinlay and celebrated artist Matt Ottley comes a moving and visually stunning picture book that celebrates the transformative power of the creative process from inception through recognition to celebration and releasing into the world. We shadow the protagonist as she contemplates the blueprint of an idea, collects the things that inspire from the natural world to shape a bird. And breathes life into it before letting it fly free. It shows how small things, combined with a little imagination and a steady heart, can transform into works of magic.

**MEG MCKINLAY** is the author of a treasure trove of books ranging from picture books and young adult fiction through to poetry for adults. Raised in central Victoria, in a TV- and car-free household, Meg was a bookish kid, in love with words and excited by dictionaries. On the long and winding path to becoming a children's writer, she has worked a variety of jobs including swim instructor, tour guide, translator and teacher. Meg is now a full-time writer and lives near the ocean in Fremantle, Western Australia, where she is always busy cooking up more books.



**MATT OTTLEY** is an internationally acclaimed and multi-award winning artist, working equally across the fields of literature, visual arts and music. Matt has a plethora of published picture books to his name and his awards include the CBCA Picture Book of the Year, the Queensland and NSW Premier's Awards for literature and the International IBBY Australia Illustrator Award, as well as a shortlisting for the Australian Prime Minister's Literary Awards. In 2014, Matt was made an Endorsed Yamaha Artist for his work as a composer. He has worked with The West Australian Symphony Orchestra on scores for many of his picture books, and has had a large symphonic work recorded by the Brno Philharmonic Orchestra and the Czech Philharmonic Choir of Brno, Czech Republic. His music has also been performed at the Perth International Arts Festival, the Perth Fringe Festival and the Hong Kong International Literary Festival.



These resources were created by **LEONIE JORDAN**. Leonie Jordan is a former Secondary School English Teacher and Children's & Youth Librarian who has presented at the State Library of NSW on numerous occasions. She has worked for a number of publishing companies including Walker Books Australia and Allen & Unwin, and regularly reviews and creates test material for Educational Assessment Australia, writers of the NAPLAN, ICAS and GAT assessments.

# Classroom Activities

Select from the following activities as is appropriate for the level of your students. All activities are written as they would be presented to students.

## LOWER PRIMARY

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Look closely at the first two pages of the story. What are some of the things the girl has in her room? From looking at these objects, what sort of person do you think the girl might be? Do you think you would be friends?
- *“These are what will float on air.”* Look at the picture of the girl’s home on these pages. How do you think it would feel to live in this place? Would you like to live there?
- On the pages beginning with *“Take these bones,”* compare the skeleton of the eagle with the skeleton of the sparrow. What do you notice about the two? Is it strange to think that they’re both birds, even though they are different in so many ways?
- *“Breathe deeply and take your time. The making of a bird is not a thing to be hurried.”* Why do you think it’s important not to rush the making of a bird? Can you think of other times where it’s good to slow down?
- What does the girl in the book make her bird from?
- Why does the bird need *“a heart that beats faster than any human heart”*? In what ways is a bird different to a person? In what ways are they like each other?
- *“Set your bird upon the sill and watch ...”* What do you notice about the appearance of the bird in the series of images on these pages? Why do you think this change occurs?
- How do you think the bird in the picture feels as it’s about to take flight for the first time?
- When has the girl really made a bird?
- How do you think the girl feels after she has released her bird? Do you think she wanted to let it go? What might have happened if she hadn’t let the bird go?

- How do you feel after reading the book? What words would you use to describe the overall mood, or feeling, of the story?
- What materials do you think Matt Ottley has used to create his illustrations with? (For example, crayons, pencils, paint)
- Meg McKinlay wrote her book for *“all the makers out there... To everyone who has the courage to breathe life and let go.”* What are some things that you have made in your life? Can you think of some things you have created which are not just physical objects (things you can touch)?
- Meg McKinlay and Matt Ottley are both *“makers”* as together they have made a book. What are the different things that go into *“making”* a book?

### FURTHER ACTIVITIES

- *“Breathe deeply and take your time. The making of a bird is not a thing to be hurried.”* Do a class meditation where you focus on breathing deeply and slowing down. You might like to do this before you start a new activity, then discuss how you felt after the activity. Did you feel any different to usual as you did the activity?
- Draw and label your own simple diagram of a bird.
- Trace the migratory routes of different birds on a globe or in an atlas. (A great companion text would be Jeannie Baker’s *Circle*, which follows the migration of a bar-tailed godwit from Australia to the Arctic.)
- Find feathers in the school playground or at home. Try to identify the species of bird and the part of the bird the feathers come from.
- Observe birds in the playground then do your own bird drawings. Alternatively, make your own *“bird”* from found objects.
- Working in small groups, conduct simple science experiments demonstrating the four forces of flight: lift, weight, thrust and drag. Ideas could be making paper airplanes, releasing balloons, and using a hairdryer to keep light objects aloft (in the air).

# UPPER PRIMARY

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The opening double-page spread includes an image of the preserved skeleton of a large, prehistoric-looking fish. Why do you think Matt Ottley may have decided to include this in the illustration? What does the girl have stuck to the walls of her room? What might this tell us about her?
- “*These are what will float on air.*” Look at the picture of the girl’s home on these pages. Does it look like a place that might exist in the real world? If not, why do you think Matt Ottley has drawn it this way? How would you describe the mood of this illustration?
- “*But when you sit it sitting, / cold as a statue, you will know / there is a more to a bird than / these things you have given it.*” What else might there be? Why do you think the author chooses not to list these additional things? How does the bird in the picture above this text look? Why do you think it has such a long shadow?
- Examine the way the light changes in the illustrations throughout the text. How do these changes make you feel?
- How do the illustrations create the feeling of flight or ascension (going up)? Think particularly about the vast, open spaces and the curved lines which suggest the shape of the earth. Does this make you feel like you’re the bird in any way? Why do you think the authors might want us to feel this way?
- Do you consider *How to Make a Bird* a story? Why or why not? In what ways is the written text of the book similar to a poem?
- Is this just a book about making a bird, or is it about something more? If so, what might it represent?
- An allegory is a story which operates on a symbolic level. Do you think *How to Make a Bird* is an allegory? Why or why not? If so, what do you think the bird in the story might represent? Can you think of any other picture books you’ve read that could also be allegories?
- Meg McKinlay dedicates her book, “*To all the makers out there... To everyone who has the courage to breathe life and let go.*” In what ways are you a “maker”? Can you think of some things you have created which are not just physical objects? What do you think McKinlay means by the phrase “*breathe life and let go*”?

- Discuss the idea of creation and ownership. Some questions to consider could include: if you create something using paper and pencils that belong to your friend, is it yours because you made it, or theirs because it was made from their things? If you write a story and someone else reads it, is it yours because you wrote it, or do they own it as the reader? Your parents created and raised you, do they own you or are you independent?
- Meg McKinlay and Matt Ottley are both “makers” as together they have made a book. What are the different things that go into “making” a book? Is making a book a solo activity or a collaborative one?
- When do you think a book “comes to life”? For example, could it be when the story is first thought of, or when it’s written down on paper? When the illustrator does the pictures? When the book is published? When somebody reads or hears it? Or at some other point?
- One idea is that *How to Make a Bird* is about letting go of the things you have created. In what ways might Meg McKinlay have had to let go of her story? How do you think she feels about this?
- In what other ways might a creator have to let go of the thing they have made? You might like to consider this question in relation to specific types of creations, both physical and non-physical. Ideas could be artworks, novels, recipes, fashion designs, social systems, relationships and children.

## FURTHER ACTIVITIES

- “*Breathe deeply and take your time. The making of a bird is not a thing to be hurried.*” Do a class meditation where you focus on breathing deeply and slowing down. You might like to do this before you start a new activity, then discuss how you felt after the activity. Did you feel any different to usual as you did the activity?
- Read another visual text which operates as an allegory and compare it to *How to Make a Bird*. (A list of suggested texts is provided in the “Resources” section.)
- Research and look at images of Leonardo da Vinci’s designs for flying machines. Do these remind you of any illustrations in the book? Why might Matt Ottley have decided to allude (refer) to these designs in his illustrations? Could da Vinci be considered a maker too?

- Use The Cornell Lab's "All About Bird Anatomy" site to "build" a bird. This interactive online program allows you to "turn on" and learn about the different parts that make up a bird! <https://academy.allaboutbirds.org/features/birdanatomy/>
- Choose another bird-related topic to research on the internet or in the school library. Some ideas could be nesting behaviour, courtship, birdsong or threats and conservation. You might also choose to do a close study of a particular species.
- Observe birds in the playground then do your own bird drawings. Alternatively, make your own "bird" from found objects.
- Trace the migratory routes of different birds on a globe or in an atlas. (A great companion text would be Jeannie Baker's *Circle*, which follows the migration of a bar-tailed godwit from Australia to the Arctic)
- Find feathers in the school playground or at home. Try to identify the species of bird and the part of the bird the feathers come from.
- Research flight on the internet or in the school library. Compare and contrast how birds and planes fly.
- Working in small groups, conduct simple science experiments demonstrating the four forces of flight: lift, weight, thrust and drag. Ideas could be making paper airplanes, releasing balloons or using a hairdryer to keep light objects aloft.
- "But when you see it sitting, / cold as a statue, you will know / there is a more to a bird than / these things you have given it." What else might there be? Why do you think the author chooses not to list these additional things? How does the bird in the picture above this text look? Why do you think it has such a long shadow?
- Why does the author repeat the imperative, "Open it"? How does this change the way we relate to the text?
- Examine the way the light changes throughout the illustrations in the text. What effect does this have?
- Many of the pages have a faded, sepia-toned background which creates a feeling of days gone by or antiquity; for example, "you will need a lot of very tiny bones." Why do you think Matt Ottley has chosen this background?
- Discuss the way Matt Ottley uses space and line in his illustrations. Where does his use of these elements create a sense of liberation and freedom? And where does it create a sense of emptiness and loneliness?
- How do the illustrations evoke the feeling of flight or ascension? Think particularly about the vast, open spaces and the curved lines which suggest the shape of the earth. Does this make you feel like you're the bird in any way? Why do you think the authors might want us to feel this way?
- Do you consider *How to Make a Bird* a story? Why or why not? In what ways is the written text of the book similar to a poem?

## EARLY SECONDARY

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- "These are what will float on air." Look at the picture of the girl's house on these pages. Does this look like a realistic setting or a more surreal and fantastical one? Why do you think Matt Ottley has depicted it this way?
- Note how the phrase "a song to sing" is set apart from the other text on the page. How else does the author draw attention to this phrase? Why do you think she does this? Do you think this song might represent something more than literal birdsong? What might it symbolise?



- *How to Make a Bird* could be read as an allegory, or a story which operates on a symbolic or metaphorical level. Can you think of any other texts you've read which are also allegories? Describe these to the class.
- Meg McKinlay dedicates the book, "*To all the makers out there... To everyone who has the courage to breathe life and let go.*" Who do you think these makers might be? What might she mean by the phrase, "*breathe life and let go*"?
- In the YouTube video introducing her book, Meg McKinlay says, "*I absolutely cannot wait to see it released into the wild*". How does this comment align her creation with the bird which the protagonist makes? In what ways might Meg McKinlay have had to let go of her story?
- In what other ways might a creator not have control over the thing they have made? You might like to consider this question in relation to a specific type of creation such as an artwork, novel, film, recipe or a child.
- "*Your children are not your children. / They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. / They come through you but not from you, / And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.*" (From Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* – you may like to read the full text online through Project Gutenberg). How might this quotation relate to *How to Make a Bird*? Think particularly about how the book might operate as an allegory for the experience of raising a child, then releasing them into the world as an independent being.
- In what ways does a child move beyond a parent's control as they become older? When do you think a child truly becomes independent? Are they ever completely separate from their parents or do they always remain connected?

- One interpretation of the book could be that all true creation involves a necessary loss and is therefore bittersweet. Do you think this is true?

## FURTHER ACTIVITIES

- Read different creation stories from around the world and compare and contrast them with *How to Make a Bird*.
- Research and look at images of Leonardo da Vinci's designs for flying machines. Do these remind you of any illustrations in the book? Could this be an example of intertextuality, and if so, why might Matt Ottley have decided to allude to these designs in his illustrations?
- Watch the short animated film *Bao* (Domee Shi, Disney Pixar, 2018). What parallels do you see between this and *How to Make a Bird*?
- Read the poem "*the Death of the Bird*" by A.D. Hope. (You can read this online on the Australian Poetry Library website: <https://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/>) How are the ideas in this poem similar and different to those in the text?



# RESOURCES

## LEARN MORE ABOUT *HOW TO MAKE A BIRD*

- Meg McKinlay introduces the book on Youtube: <https://youtu.be/He7iCo1w1EA>
- Meg McKinlay discusses the genesis of the book on her blog: <https://megmckinlay.com/2016/03/01/a-picture-book-by-any-other-name/>

## LEARN ABOUT THE MAKERS

- Meg McKinlay's website: <https://megmckinlay.com/>
- Matt Ottley's website: <https://mattottley.com/>

## LEARN ABOUT BIRDS

- The Cornell Lab Bird Academy: <https://academy.allaboutbirds.org/> (The Learning Games are a particularly useful and engaging resource)
- ABC Education: <https://education.abc.net.au>
- Audubon for Kids: <https://www.audubon.org/get-outside/activities/audubon-for-kids>
- Britannica for Kids: <https://kids.britannica.com/>
- National Geographic for Kids <https://www.natgeokids.com/>

## LEARN ABOUT FLIGHT

- ABC Education: <https://education.abc.net.au>
- Britannica for Kids: <https://kids.britannica.com/>
- The Exploratorium: <https://www.exploratorium.edu/>
- National Geographic for Kids: <https://www.natgeokids.com/>
- Science Learning Hub: <https://www.sciencelearn.org.nz/>
- Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum's "*How Things Fly*" website: <http://howthingsfly.si.edu/>

## LEARN TO DRAW BIRDS

- John Muir Laws: Nature Stewardship Through Science, Education, and Art: <https://johnmuirlaws.com/drawing-birds/>
- "Draw A Bird with David Sibley" on the Audubon for Kids website: <https://www.audubon.org/get-outside/activities/audubon-for-kids> (You will need to scroll down the page to find these segments)

## ALLEGORICAL VISUAL TEXTS

- Anthony Browne, *Into the Forest*
- Anthony Browne, *The Tunnel*
- Libby Gleeson & Armin Greder (ill.), *The Great Bear*
- Armin Greder, *The Island*
- John Marsden & Shaun Tan (ill.), *The Rabbits*
- Shaun Tan, *The Arrival*
- Shaun Tan, *The Lost Thing*
- Shaun Tan, *The Red Tree*
- Margaret Wild & Ron Brooks (ill.), *Fox*
- Margaret Wild & Andrew Yeo (ill.), *Vampyre*



# Also by Meg McKinlay

