

Authors Notes & bibliography

Mark Wilson

My Mother's Eyes-The Story of a Boy Soldier

In the archives of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, there is a Roll of Honor that includes the names of over 60,000 Australians who died in the First World War. Many of them were teenage boys of only fifteen or sixteen, one was fourteen.

The book is fiction, played out against the backdrop of war. It tells the story of a typical soldier in the First World War. The horrors of war are played down, focusing instead on the emotional response of the reader to the young boy's situation in a grown up world. This is a children's book, after all.

The boy soldiers had full time jobs before the war, such as clerks, apprentice plumbers, carpenters, farm-hands and railway porters. They did the work of men, and felt they had the same responsibilities, or enlisted for the naive sense of adventure as many of the older men did.

In *My Mother's Eyes* we follow William from his school days in rural Victoria to the battlefields of the Western front in the First World War. William's school days end after his father's death in a farming accident. He takes on his share of the farm work to help his mother and grandfather, with the added burden of a baby brother to look after. This keeps William on the farm after war is declared, as he sees his mates gradually leave the district to join up.

In spite of his young age, William is accepted into the army, as many boys were at the time. We see through his letters home to his mother and grandfather, how he feels about the war and how he is affected by his experiences. But as many young Australians did in that terribly cold winter of 1916, William's Battalion still presses on to reinforce the troops in the trenches, as the real tragedy of war unfolds before them.

The freedoms we take for granted came at a huge cost. Most of the survivors of that terrible war were so affected by their experiences, they refused to talk to anyone about it. Of those who did, most would only say how war is futile and wasteful. As a result, many of their stories are now lost forever. I have tried to tell just one of their stories, to document the huge sacrifice these men made, in order to protect their families and a way of life they believed in. This book is based on my own grandfather's experiences. He was one of the boy soldiers.

Telling the Full Story

There are three narratives running through *My Mother's Eyes*...

1. The main narrative is written in simple language that young readers will understand. It simply documents events as they unfold. This is history documented with much research done at the Australian War memorial and many reference books.
2. The content of William's letters home to his mother and grandfather, form the second narrative. We have a personal and emotional response from William about the horrors of war and how he feels. This is pure fiction and would fall into the category of historical fiction.
3. The third is the visual narrative that tells another story. I have tried to convey the loneliness and isolation of any soldier in wartime-surrounded by comrades, trusting in them with your life, but also alone with your thoughts and fears in an alien landscape. Accuracy of places, uniforms and equipment are heavily researched. AWM again. My main source of ref. for the Children in War Trilogy.

The complex nature of the subject required a complex solution, so I hope in some little way I have achieved this.

The 100th anniversary of the Australian Imperial Force is 2014. There are no surviving veterans from that terrible war. *My Mother's Eyes-The Story of a Boy Soldier* is a tribute to the boy soldiers, not only the ones who lost their lives but also the ones who served and survived, many with permanent injuries, like my grandfather, Lester Verna Litchfield.

I bookended this work with quotations from 2 of the most well-known poems from the Great War (*'The Ode'* from *'For the Fallen'* by Laurence Binyon and *'In Flanders Fields,* by John McCrae.

The first spread sets the scene for later comparison with the sunlit Australian landscape and then with the next spread, the early morning scene, the productivity of the land is evident with the horse drawn plough: again the birds, black cockatoos, pick up the theme of the birdsong juxtaposed against the roar of the guns. The black and white sketched portrait of William's mother provides the image through which we see William's wartime experience and unspoken death.

I use a montage technique to fill spreads to overflowing with information. From the text itself, from the various documents – letters & newspapers, the use of colour set against charcoal sketches to convey and contrast the life on the farm and the troops the reader / viewer is presented with a plethora of detail and information.

The earlier pastoral scene of winter is sharply contrasted with...*the worst winter in France for many years...* The charcoal rendering of the huddling figures in the trenches catches Milton's phrase ...*no light but rather darkness visible...* on the right side of the spread we have the letter that encompasses many motifs ...the birds' songs against the shells and bullets, the seasonal changes reflected with the appearance of lice and flies and of course the dried flowers pressed to be included in the letter home. I use this montage effect to incorporate information and images redolent with meaning. The sparse text is filled out with the illustration and the details allow the observant viewer / reader to glean different information from the illustrations.

The spreads depicting the preparation for the attack, identifying and portraying so effectively through the illustration, the critical times of sunrise for uncertainty and evening for preparation and then action. For the climactic attack itself, leave the carriage of the action to the illustration. The full catastrophe of the night attack is conveyed in the image: the story is told with a picture but no words.

The final spread is a reprise of the opening spread but with reversals and changes. While the magpies still call and the breeze still rustles the gum leaves, day has become evening and lives are changed forever. The lightly

drawn images of youthful William, fresh faced and brimming with life, climbing trees are replaced by the darkened figures around the grave, set in stark relief against the final letter where text returns us to the earlier illustration of his mother's eyes. The pentimento image of his grandfather depicts, without words, the grief felt a world away.

I closed with the personal depiction of grief with the quote from one of the best known articulations of the memory of the Great War. In 'From Flanders' Field. And in doing so I am placing this Australian experience in the wider Great War tradition.

Illustration Technique

I started all the paintings in grey-lead pencil on paper and left some of those as they were throughout the book. I simply glued them down onto canvas on some pages.

The cover is acrylic paint on canvas for the background, and grey lead pencil on paper for the little drawing in the middle. So are pages 5-6, 11-12 and 21-22. Pages 13-14, 29-30 and 33-34 are acrylic on canvas paintings. The rest are acrylic and or Derwent pencil on paper, some with pelican ink washes behind the drawing (page 9-10 15-16 and 31-32). Some of the small canvas paintings throughout are done as studies, but if they work out, I paste them in on the final art.

All paintings are firstly drawn on canvas or paper with a grey lead pencil, then acrylic paint applied over that.

The title page and page 5 are black ink on coated paper. I then scratch back into it with a blade (similar to scraperboard) to get the etching effect, then add light brown Derwent pencil and chalk to finish.

The portrait of the grandfather with the final letter is done in blue and black biro over acrylic paint, finished with Derwent col. pencils.

Points to consider as you look at the exhibition.

- 1. What was it that made William want to join up at such an early age?**
- 2. What do you think courage is?**
- 3. How do I convey a mothers anguish as war is declared?**
- 4. Am I trying to glorify, or show the futility of war.**
- 5. Why have I not shown the big battle scenes that were typical of the Bullecourt ‘disaster’.**
- 6. How have I tried to convey what may have happened to William at the end of the story.**
- 7. What is the significance of the light left on in the window of the final illustration.**
- 8. As you look around the gallery and at the artwork and research material, spend just a moment to reflect on the sacrifices these young men made, for a way of life we now enjoy, and many take for granted.**

Teacher’s notes are available at; www.marklwilson.com.au

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About the Author/Illustrator

Mark Wilson was born in Brunswick, Victoria. He took to drawing from a very early age, and also loved comics. He went on to spend most of his teenage years ‘pretending to be a drummer in a rock band and trying to sing like John Lennon’.

Mark studied mural design and painting at C.I.T. (now Monash, Caulfield Campus). He also did National Service, followed by a Diploma of Education. In the early seventies, he became designer and illustrator for *The Education Magazine* and *Pursuit Magazine*, and also started illustrating for various publishers including Penguin, Rigby and Brooks Waterloo, in Australia, and Shortland Publishing in North America.

In 1981 he held his first solo exhibition of paintings and drawings and still paints and exhibits today. Recently, he has focussed on writing and illustrating children’s books, doing presentations and picture book workshops in schools and at literature festivals.

His recent books include *Journey of the Sea Turtle* (2010 **Whitley Award for Children’s Picture Books**), *The Last Tree* (2007 **Whitley Award for Children’s Picture Books**), *The Little Wooden Horse* (2010), *Angel of Kokoda* (2010) and *Stranded* (2010).

The Last Tree deals with the effect deforestation has on the creatures that inhabit our forests, and *Journey of the Sea Turtle* highlights the fragile existence of our Loggerhead turtle population. Mark works tirelessly in the areas of conservation and endangered species and many of his picture books deal with this subject.

<http://www.markwilson.com.au/>