

MY MOTHER'S EYES: The Story of a Boy Soldier

MARK WILSON

NOTES by Robyn Sheahan-Bright (with additional notes by Mark Wilson)

Curriculum Topics

Study of history, society and environment
English language and literacy
Visual literacy
Creative arts
Learning technologies.....
Mathematics.....

Introduction

'I will do what must be done for I have learnt to see life though my mother's eyes.'

William is nearly sixteen when he enlists during the First World War, and is accepted (like many other under-age boys), into the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) and sent to the battlefields of France via Egypt.

His letters home from the front reveal how, for the boy soldiers, the 'great adventure' was both a triumph and a tragedy. William matures in his brief experience of war, so that even before he reaches Europe, he's offering comfort to other wounded soldiers in Egypt, albeit with no experience of war himself. He eventually takes part in the Battle of Bullecourt, one of many such disastrous confrontations, and the book starkly suggests that he meets his death there.

Mark Wilson's text is lyrical and sparsely suggestive. The horror of war is hinted at, and the ending of the story is left to be surmised. The underlying impression given, though, is that William's family will be one of the thousands torn asunder by the futility of war.

Mark's paintings are moody and painterly. He evokes a sense of nostalgia, of things remembered and lost by his hazy, atmospheric paintings, and shows the text of William's letters home, juxtaposed against the printed text. This obtuse approach allows the reader to emotionally engage with the visual and written text, which evoke pain and loss in a manner that allows for interpretation.

The denouement is open-ended. There is nothing one can say about the horror of war and of young lives lost carelessly – except that the loss of even one life is far too much.

Themes

Several themes are covered which might be related to other curriculum areas:

- **War**

During World War One thousands of young people lost their lives despite the fact that they were underage and should not have been allowed to enlist at all.

Activity: Research **boy soldiers** in WWI and their experiences. At the end of the book the Author's Note explains where they were killed. Read about these conflicts.

Australian War Memorial, Boy Soldiers on the Roll of Honour

www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/boysoldiers.asp

Activity: William's **letters** are typical of the sorts of letters young men wrote. [See also **Language and Literacy** below.] They could not describe the horror. And they didn't want to distress their families either. Read some of the letters and oral histories of people who fought in the war. *Memories of War: Letters From the Front-the Nepean Times at War*, Penrith City Library.

www.penrithcity.nsw.gov.au/index.asp?id=2774

A Month at the Front-Diary of an Unknown Soldier, The Miegunyah Press. 2007.

Activity: Research **The Battle of Bullecourt**, WW1, the battle that William takes part in on the Western Front. Visit *NSW Online, Modern History, Western front Battles*, and research why both the first and second battles of Bullecourt were disasters for the allies, and how they shaped the Australians distrust of their Generals.

www.hsc.csu.edu.au/modern_history/core_study/ww1/bullecourt_hamel/page16.htm

Activity: Research the **recruitment practices** used during WWI. Did the authorities willingly turn a blind eye to the age of many who enlisted? Were boys like William brave to enlist, or were they duped by propaganda and the pressure of peer expectations? The famous war posters of Lord Kitchener are a good starting point to prompt this discussion. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Kitchener_Wants_You]

Activity: If you are working with secondary students, read Jackie French's *A Rose for the Anzac Boys* (2008) which gives a clear picture of the role played by young women in WWI and of the horror of the injuries sustained by many young soldiers and the long lasting emotional, mental and physical effects of war. Secondary students might also read other classic novels such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* or Robert Graves autobiography *Good-bye to All That*, or read other contemporary picture books and novels about World War One such as Anthony Hill's *Soldier Boy* (2001); David Metzenthen's *Boys of Blood and Bone* (2005) and *Black Water* (2006). Primary and secondary students might read picture books on war as well: *Memorial* (2004) by Gary Crew and Shaun Tan; *The Donkey of Gallipoli* by Mark Greenwood and Frané Lessac (2008) or *In Flanders Fields* (2002) by Norman Jorgenson and Brian Harrison-Lever.

Activity: 'My Boy Jack' is a 1915 poem by Rudyard Kipling which inspired a play by David Haig and a television drama starring Daniel Radcliffe. [Links to each can be found at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Boy_Jack] Have the class study the texts of these works and discuss them in relation to this picture book. Rudyard Kipling wrote

the poem as a tribute to a son John who was lost in WWI, but the irony was that he had actively encouraged his boy to enlist.

Activity: WWI is sometimes called the ‘great war’ or the ‘war to end all wars’ and yet the Second World War followed it and there have been many other conflicts since. You might therefore compare this conflict to the many which succeeded it in the 20th and 21st centuries. Have boy soldiers been allowed to enlist in subsequent conflicts?

Activity: Visit *Legends and Traditions of the Great War*

<http://www.worldwar1.com/heritage/heritag2.htm>

Research some of the many aspects of the war covered here which might interest your students.

Activity: Anzac Day and Armistice (or Remembrance) Day are celebrated annually, on 25 April and 11 November, respectively. Research the meanings of both and have students discuss the associations they evoke, and whether we should celebrate them. The concept of the ‘unknown soldier’ for instance is commemorated, and even now the Australian government is still seeking scientific evidence to identify Australian nationals killed in the conflict. Is this pursuit a useful one in your opinion? [See also **Creative Arts** below.]

- **Bravery and Duty**

William in his young life has taken on a huge responsibility. He has left school at fourteen in order to help his widowed mother and grandfather and has taken on the role of farmer and provider on their small property. Then he recognises his ‘duty’ to enlist and to join his ‘mates’ in fighting for his country.

Discussion Point: *‘The troops returning to Egypt from Gallipoli told stories of valour and heroism, but many were wounded and died.’* Discuss the connotations of this statement. Do men at war experience pressure to dress their experiences in valour?

Question: Does the concept of masculinity still entail such notions of sacrifice, responsibility and valour? Or is this something that has been whittled away in recent decades?

Question: William’s letters hint at his fear but he obviously tries to put a positive light on the situation. Do men today still cover up their feelings, in order to put on a brave face? Or are they more in tune with their emotions?

Discussion Point: The title of the book refers to William’s mother’s eyes and in his last letter he writes: *‘I will do what must be done for I have learnt to see life through my mother’s eyes.’* What do her eyes represent to him?

- **Memory, Loss, and Regret**

The book shows how simple images and memories stay with the main character and offer solace in his fear and loneliness.

Discussion Point: What impressions do you glean of the life he led at home?

Question: What might be the feelings and images most prevalent in William's mind as he enters the battlefield?

Curriculum Topics

This picture book might be used in conjunction with curriculum topics with upper primary of secondary school students in the following suggested areas:

- **Study of History, Society and Environment**

This book touches on all the themes above and can be used in studies of history, society or environmental issues.

Activity: Research the effect World War One had on society and the economy of Australia.

Discussion Point: Discuss the values associated with war such as courage, bravery or valour, cowardice and associated concepts such as mateship.

English Language and Literacy

The text of this book might be studied in relation to the following aspects:

Activity: The text contains literary quotes which suggest the futility of war from Laurence Binyon's *For the Fallen* and John McCrae's *In Flanders Fields*. Read other sonnets and poems about World War One and discuss the impressions of war which they give you.

Activity: Symbolism is often used in this written text. For example Spring is mentioned, past and present. What does the idea of Spring denote? And how might it be interpreted here?

- **Question:** This story is told in a combination of two kinds of texts. The main text is a **third person past tense account** of a boy's enlistment in World War One. But this text is **undercut by the series of first person letters home** explaining his experiences, up until the whistle blows for he and the rest of the troop to enter battle. What did these letters tell you about William's feelings? For example the first, sent from a camp in Australia, simply indicates the boredom of their routine training exercises, and a growing sense of camaraderie in playing cards together. The second is written from a ship during their evacuation from Gallipoli and hints at the danger in their situation but also at William's continuing patriotism. The third is from the trenches in France, and in it William describes the plague of 'flies, lice and fleas', as well as the frostbite. But he also comments on the weather and the arrival of Spring, and observes the birds nesting amidst this mayhem with admiration, for William is a country boy at heart. The story then shifts at the end to a single scene showing the grandfather reading William's final letter, and beginning to tremble... for the letter states that: '*and should the worst happen I have had a good life.*' It makes it clear to the old man that William is not coming home, without actually saying that in the text. This is a very dramatic way to end the story. Did you find it interesting? Or would you have liked more detail?

Activity: Write another description of these events in the first person voice of William’s mother or grandfather. Then create another record of it as if written by William’s great- niece who has researched and discovered what he experienced.

Activity: The language used is spare and suggestive. For example, the way in which William’s youth is described is evocative of the simple pleasures he enjoyed, rather than described with emotional regret. If the language had been more emotive, what would the effect on the reader have been?

Quiz: Test their knowledge with a **quiz** asking them to briefly define these words and phrases which relate to WWI:

1. Armistice
2. Trenches
3. Digger
4. White Feather
5. ANZAC
6. Ace
7. Big Push
8. Eleventh Hour
9. Frog
- 10..... Jerry

Answers at: ‘Words, Expressions & Terms Popularized 1914-1918’ *The Legends and Traditions of the Great War*. <http://www.worldwar1.com/heritage/wordswar.htm>

Discussion Point: Students might be encouraged to use critical literacy skills to unearth meaning in this text. What might have happened to the family after the war?

Visual Literacy

The visual text of a book works with the written text to tell the story using the various parts of the book and aspects of illustration explored below:

Activity: The cover of a book is an important part of its message. Read the cover and discuss its impact.

Discussion Point: The title page of the book ‘sets the scene’ with a picture of an iconic digger with his slouch hat. This and later pictures are reminiscent of the works of war artists trying to capture the essence of a scene; the action; the mood or feeling; the boredom and the chaos of war. Discuss the impressions each painting in the book gives you.

Discussion Point: The format of the book is square in shape, and the layout of the storyboard contains largely double page spreads which depict landscapes at home and abroad, although the images are arrestingly vague in detail. How does the format of, and design of the book, influence your reading of it?

Activity: The medium or style employed is oil painting on canvas. The paintings are in turn a mixture of detailed landscapes, moody portraits, and impressionistic

abstracts of the chaotic scenes of war. Try to create your own painting in this medium, depicting some scene suggested by this text.

Question: Colours used in this book are muted and sombre. How does colour affect your interpretation of this work?

Discussion Point: Images of war are starkly defined in these pictures—poppies, barbed wire, medals, crosses etc. What do these symbolise?

Discussion Point: Examine the page headed '*On the ship's deck they played cards and sang songs, while others slept. There was only a distant sense of what danger lay ahead for them all.*' The figures are largely shadows, and the double page spread has an ominous suggestiveness in its foregrounding of several figures framed suggestively. What techniques has the artist used to create this sombre feeling?

Creative Arts

Celebrate **Armistice Day or Remembrance Day** which is held on 11 November each year to commemorate the signing of the armistice and the end of hostilities between the allies and Germany on 11 November 1918. There are many creative activities you could take part in during the week:

- Students might **paint their own image of the battlefield** and then display the works as an exhibition in response to this text.
- **Listen to Rolf Harris's rendition of the World War One song 'Two Little Boys'** or watch it on YouTube. He has recently re-recorded it to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the end of WWI.
- **Create a play** which explores some of the feelings expressed in this book. Your play might include a script and music.
- Or **study the play and film** entitled *Oh! What a Lovely War* and adapt scenes from the texts. The *Wikipedia* entry on these productions offers useful links to popular songs of the time and other relevant materials.
- The Australian War Museum has many records which you might research. Create your own **War Memorial Project Display**.

Learning Technologies

The topic of war is one which can be widely researched not only in libraries but on the internet where there is a wealth of information.

Activity: Research war on the internet. [See **Bibliography** below.]

Mathematics

The study of statistics relating to war and the loss of lives, and casualties, might also lend itself to related mathematics activities.

Activity: An analysis of the various casualty figures of the countries involved in the conflict could offer students an insight into the effect of the war.

Further Topics for Discussion & Research

- Follow the links from the Australian War Museum's website to the letters of soldiers during World War One. Your parents may also remember their own grandparents' stories of WWI. Piece together some oral histories from written documents, and from these memories, if they are available, and then create a rehearsed reading of the stories to perform for the rest of the school.
- Research the work of Mark Wilson.
- Compare this work to *The Donkey of Gallipoli* (2008) by Mark Greenwood and Frané Lessac. Do they have similar messages or themes?
- What were the lessons learned from World War One about planning strategies in military engagements?
- World War One set back the development of Australia by many years. Discuss.

Conclusion

This work should encourage students to read more widely about the war and its aftermath. It is a moving account of a universal soldier's experiences, and of how many families and generations have been scarred by the loss of these young men and women.

'Lest we forget' ... this story will remind us as individuals, and as a nation, of how futile war is, and of how destructive, and hopefully remind us too not to rush into the next conflict ... as we did the last...

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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/>

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