

Pooka

Carol Chataway / Nina Rycroft

TEACHER NOTES

By Janet McLean

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Author: Carol Chataway was born in England in 1955 and emigrated to Australia in 1965. She graduated from Flinders University in 2004 with first class honours in creative writing, where she also won the University Medal for outstanding academic achievement. She now works for a living in the morning and imagines stories in the afternoon. She is the author of four published children's picture books, *The Perfect Pet*, 2001 and *Wings*, 2004, *Edwina Sparrow*, 2007 and *You Are My Special Baby*, 2011 (Working Title Press). *Pooka* is her fifth children's book, created while ambling with her dog in the Adelaide Hills. Carol also shares her days with her husband and three sons.

Illustrator: Nina Rycroft From the moment Nina Rycroft received her childhood copy of Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen*, picture books have been her passion. After graduating with a Diploma in Graphic Design from Randwick, in 1992 she spent 6 years working as a designer in Sydney, London and Rome. She returned to Sydney in 1998 with her English husband, Andy, and began working on her first picture book, *Little Platypus* written by Nette Hilton, which was a 2001 CBCA notable book. In 2008 she illustrated the award-winning picture book *Boom Bah!* (Working Title Press) written by Phil Cummings. *BoomBah!* was published in conjunction with the Australian children's theatre production of the same name by Windmill Performing Arts Company. Her other books *Elephant Dance* (2007) *Ballroom Bonanza* (2009) (Working Title Press) *No More Kisses*, (2010) and *Now I Am Bigger* (2010) (Working Title Press). Nina recently moved to Auckland from the Blue Mountains with her husband and two children, Charlie and Jayme.

SYNOPSIS Told from a small boy's point of view, *Pooka* is a heartwarming story about love, and about coping with, and accepting loss. From the moment Pooka turns up on the doorstep everyone loves her, in spite of Grandad's warning, '*Don't go getting too attached*'. When Pooka's owner finally comes to pick her up the small boy is angry and sad, but with the help of his family he begins to '*look forward to tomorrow again*'.

WRITING STYLE When Carol Chataway was thinking about writing *Pooka* she imagined "a story where the child lost a dog - the dog only being with the child for a short time, but who made the greatest of impressions." However, Carol did not like the idea of the dog dying. She says, "So I imagined a scenario where she could come and go, cause loss and grief, but end in a positive way. To tell the story of Pooka Carol has used a simple narrative structure of: a setup (a lost dog, Pooka, is found on the doorstep), a complication (the small boy begins to love Pooka so much that he doesn't want to give her back to her owner), and a resolution (with the help of his family the small boy comes to accept the loss of Pooka. '*She taught us a lot didn't she?*' said Mum. '*About how to be happy and be*

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a good friend,' said Dad. And to eat up all your carrots,' laughed Grandad. Slowly the boy began 'to look forward to tomorrow.' Carol uses the boy as the narrator of the story. This writing strategy allows the reader to know what he is thinking and feeling. *'... I spent every moment I could with Pooka. During the day it was fine. But at night when the shadows crept into my room, the dark thoughts would creep in too'.* Dialogue is used to carry much of the story. For example, *Mum said, 'Grandad's right, someone will be missing her.'* *So we went looking,'* tells us that Mum knows that however much everyone would like to keep Pooka, they have to try and find her owner. Dialogue also reveals the personalities of the different characters. For example Grandad's continual reminders, *'Don't go getting attached.'* *'I'm warning you,' grumbled Grandad, 'someone will come looking,'* show that he is speaking from experience, and that he wants to protect the boy from being hurt. He is preparing the boy (and the reader) for the time when Pooka leaves. The story has a happy and satisfying ending when Pooka returns with a surprise for the small boy.

ILLUSTRATIONS Nina Rycroft used pencil and watercolour for the illustrations in the book. When she first read the manuscript for Pooka she was taken "completely by surprise". She says, 'I found myself choking up trying to hold back a tear.' This big reaction helped her to connect with the story and bring that emotion to the illustrations. Nina says,

I approached the illustrations for Pooka from the inside out. I first worked on the characters, then the relationship between the characters, and finally the setting. My favorite part of illustrating is developing character with gesture and interaction, spending the time getting to know the characters, how they interact with each other.



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I draw inspiration from the things around me. Pooka ended up being a combination shaggy dogs (Max and fudge) that I'd see regularly at the school gate. The boy is my son Jayme but slightly older but more leggy like my daughter Charlie. Grandad is my father in law. While I was working on Pooka I was also exploring my new environment in Auckland, so I'd walk for an hour each day, and if I liked a tree, a veggie patch, a fence, a hill or a set of shops, I'd be sure to take a photo and use it in the illustrations.



I wanted to keep the illustrations for Pooka fresh and spontaneous, I didn't want anything overworked or heavy. And even though the story becomes quite sad, I wanted the colour to remain light and optimistic - a sunset falls across the sky when the boy is grieving - this was a heavy and as dark as I wanted to go. I love using watercolour. I love its transparent quality. The line work literally sings through the layers of paint. I wanted to keep the movement and energy of my initial sketches, layering colour over the top. It's important that I connect emotionally with what I am painting, and I hope that this is felt when people work through the pages of Pooka.

DISCUSSION POINTS AND FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

- The points Carol Chataway would like the reader to take from Pooka include:
 - It's what's inside you that counts
 - Appreciate the time you have with a loved one
 - Never close your heart, there is always something that needs your love
- Read the story with the children. Pace the reading to evoke the responses of the family:
 - The boy's happiness, and growing attachment to Pooka
 - His deep sorrow when he has to give Pooka back to her owner. *Stupid heart. It didn't know how to stop loving. Whenever I thought of Pooka, I still loved her. With every beat of my stupid heart.*
 - Grandad's gruff concern for the boy. *'Heading for heartbreak,' grumbled Grandad.*

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- Mum's practicality – going out to look for the owner and putting up 'Lost Dog' posters
- The way the boys parents and Grandad, help him to get over his loss, by reminding him of he learned
- Talk about how the boy started to feel better about losing Pooka:
 - The passage of time - time to be alone to feel sad and angry
 - The support of his family – understanding how he is feeling, reminders about how good it had been to have Pooka, even for a short time
- Talk about how, when he had come to terms with losing Pooka, then something unexpected happened, adding to his understanding of life's ongoing pattern of challenges and pleasure
- Look at Nina Rycroft's character sketches (above).
 - Match the sketches to the illustrations in the book.
 - Talk about how the initial sketches help the artist to work out what the characters will look like and where they are placed in relation to each other. Are they looking at one another? What gestures are they making? Do they look relaxed and happy, or tense and sad?
 - These details help the reader to build an idea of how the characters are feeling and what they are thinking.
 - For example look at the sketch of the boy sitting on the ground, with his head in his hand, holding a carrot. Talk about how the picture shows what the boy is thinking and feeling.
 - Then look at the same picture in the book. In this double page spread the boy is alone, sitting apart from the rest of the family. While this picture clearly shows the boys sadness, the words add to the poignancy of the moment.
 - This is a fine example of how the words and the illustrations in a picture book work together to evoke deeper insights into ideas and feelings.
- This story will prompt the children to tell you stories about their own dogs or other pets. Ask the children to write and or draw their own stories. Transcribe the stories for the youngest children, who are still learning to write. Their stories will be much more complex and interesting, if they can dictate their thoughts to you.
- Look through the book, focusing on the drawings of Pooka. Talk about how many different ways she is depicted – a soft shape on the doormat, an appealing close-up of her face, lolling on the bed, begging for carrots. Make your own pictures of Pooka that show what she is doing and how she is feeling – remember: body language, facial expression.
- Bring photos of your own pets. Display these so that he children can look at them and tell each stories about their own pets.
- Find out more about Carol Chataway and Nina Rycroft. Visit Nina's website <http://www.ninarycroft.com/> . Look for other books they have done together