

**The Brown dog**  
Gina Inverarity / Greg Holfeld  
TEACHER NOTES  
By Janet McLean

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

**Author:** **Gina Inverarity** studied Writing and Communications at the University of South Australia and for the past 18 years has worked as an editor for a range of independent publishers, including Wakefield Press, Omnibus Books, Working Title Press and Allen & Unwin. She completed honours in English at Victoria University, Wellington, in 2013 and lives in New Zealand with her partner and two daughters and two happy dachshunds. *The Brown Dog* is her first picture book. Gina was inspired to write *The Brown Dog* after talking with a friend whose son didn't seem interested in anything and spent time lying on the couch.



*This was the image that stuck with me – the idea of being pinned to the couch by a lack of energy and inspiration. And then because I'm often pinned to my chair by my dogs sleeping on my lap I thought, what if you felt like you had a big dog lying on your chest? It might make you feel more thoughtful and introverted for a short time but when that visitor or feeling stays too long it starts to feel heavy and slows you down.*

**Illustrator:** **Greg Holfeld** is a Saskatchewan-born animator, illustrator, and visual artist living and working in Adelaide. After leaving Vancouver's Emily Carr College of Art and Design in 1986, he worked on television animation projects across Canada and the UK, and as an illustrator and cartoonist in Tokyo, before settling in Australia. Here he has directed award-winning animation and live-action commercials for a variety of national and international clients and his short films have been featured and awarded in festivals worldwide. Greg is the illustrator of nearly 40 picture books and graphic novels, a number of which have been selected as notable Books by the Children's Book Council of Australia. His work has hung in numerous group shows in South Australia, and he has been selected as a finalist in the Waterhouse Natural Science Art Prize. Greg was surprised, but pleased, to be asked to illustrate *The Brown Dog*, as the theme of the book is 'a long way from the assertive and usually humorous graphic-novel style work (he) is known for'. One critic described his style as 'rambunctious'. Greg realised that *The Brown Dog* needed a style that was the exact opposite of this. He saw the task as a welcome and stimulating challenge.

**SYNOPSIS** The brown dog often visits Henry on rainy, grey afternoons. Usually he doesn't hang around for long. But one Saturday the brown dog decides to stay, and Henry needs to find a way to make him leave. Gina Inverarity's evocative text and Greg Holfeld's beautiful illustrations provide the perfect platform for young readers to think and talk about their feelings.

**WRITING STYLE** **Gina Inverarity** has written a story for children of middle primary school age and older that addresses a complex and timely topic - an exploration of emotions, mood and melancholy. She uses 'the brown dog' as a milder version of 'the black dog', a metaphor that is sometimes used to describe depression. This book is highly original and has a superbly understated text. The theme of the story is set up in the first three pages. In the simple sentence on page one Gina introduces the down-in-the-dumps mood that pervades much of the story. *The brown dog turned up one rainy Saturday* ('rainy' is a metaphor for the gloomy mood and 'Saturday' - sets the story in a timeframe).

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The main character, Henry, is introduced on the next page. Henry's dialogue, *Oh, it's you, brown dog,' said Henry*, tells the reader he recognises the sad feeling that has come over him. Then, *But this time the brown dog decided to stay* leads into the story that follows.

... a little bit of melancholy on a Saturday afternoon is normal but if the feeling sticks around for a week or two it might become a habit. Gina Inverarity



Over the next twelve pages Gina shows how Henry's energy level and behaviour is affected by his melancholic mood. She uses the dog as a metaphor for Henry's mood and actions. For example:

- On Saturday Henry doesn't respond to Dad's suggestions to go next door and play with Sam, or ride his skateboard in the driveway. *The brown dog didn't move. 'Maybe later,' said Henry.*
- On Monday Henry didn't want to go to school. ... *the brown dog sat on the footpath and refused to go to school. Henry had to drag him*
- On Friday he misses practice and he can't explain to Mum what is wrong with him. ... *the brown dog lay in front of the door and wouldn't let him out.*

At the weekend, there is a turning point in the story. ... *Grandpa's car pulled into the driveway.* And there is an immediate change in Henry and the brown dog. *The brown dog's ears pricked up.* Being with Grandpa and sharing some different experiences, Henry gradually cheers up and can say to dog, *'We both know you've stayed too long.'* Finally, he can watch the brown dog push open the gate and scamper away, and he can tell Grandpa that the next time the brown dog visits he will know what to do.

**ILLUSTRATIONS**     **Greg Holfeld** says that the plan for *The Brown Dog* fell easily into place. He says,

*So one way to change your mood is to try something new and spend time with people who love you. Henry's grandpa takes him birdwatching which is something new to Henry and also gets him walking outside in the bush, another great way to feel better. Learning new skills is a great way to exercise your mind and change a melancholic pattern of thought.* Gina Inverarity

*'Dividing the script into its individual pages and finding the image for each was a smooth exercise'.* However, having decided that the illustrations should be monochromatic, or 'at least with very little use of colour', he still had to decide which medium to use – charcoal, ink, conté crayon, wash or pencil. He did many test illustrations before deciding to use pencil and ink wash on etching and rice paper with colour and composite in Photoshop.

... *the original approach of loose, almost empty sketches of soft charcoal just weren't working. Still not sure why, but the more fleshed out, detailed, and carefully observed the illustrations became, the better they served the story. Perhaps the drawings needed enough weight and detail to counter the considered minimalism of the manuscript and give the reader enough to hang onto.* Greg Holfeld

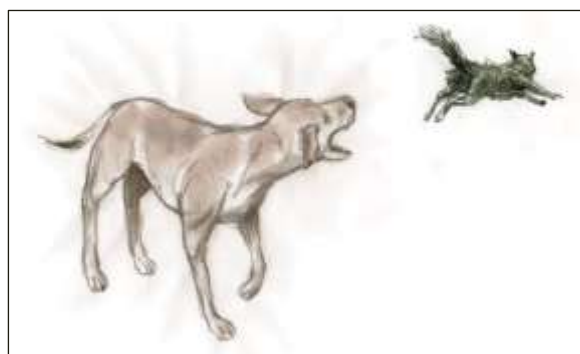
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Before doing the final illustrations Greg experimented with how real the dog should look. He says, *'He's not a character, but a metaphor, and that left the question of how much actual physical space he should occupy in Henry's world'*. Greg did some drawings where the dog was transparent, but he realized that this left a 'confusing series of overlapping lines'. He was also concerned that this *'sent too strong a signal too soon about the true nature of the Brown Dog'*. Eventually he came up with quite a complex way of creating the drawings:

- he used a soft pencil to draw Henry and the dog together
- a sheet of rice paper was laid over the drawing and the tones of the dog were painted using washes of Japanese ink
- the drawing was then scanned into the computer twice, once with the overlaid rice paper, and once without
- the two versions were then lined up and their opacities varied, giving the dog a diffused, almost ethereal presence – *'He's there, but not completely, not quite the same as everything else'*.

The illustrations on the cover, the title page, and the first page, showing only the brown dog, lead into the story and foreshadow meeting up with Henry. The cover illustration, looking at the dog from behind, embodies sadness – through the simple use of line and muted colour, with a downturned head, sagging ears, and a gaze seemingly focused on its shadow. The illustration on the back cover shows the dog front-on and standing, with dark, doleful eyes, and a questioning tilt of the head.

On the title page the dog seems to be setting off on a search, nose pointed ahead, one paw lifted, about to take a tentative step. The illustration on the first page shows the brown dog has almost reached Henry. The dog appears to have stopped in mid-stride, knowing it is close to finding Henry – out-stretched neck and a raised, sniffing nose. In this and throughout the book Greg uses an ink wash around the body to show that the dog is not real but a metaphor.



In the first half of the book the illustrations show how much Henry's (and the dog's) body is affected by his 'heavy mood' – slumped shoulders, arms hanging, dragging steps, staring into space, frowning, lying under covers, sitting alone. In the second half of the book, as his spirits begin to lift, the illustrations reflect his brighter mood. The drawings open out, taking up more space on the page, and Henry and the brown dog are much more lively and aware. In the end Henry shakes off the brown dog. He watches it barking at a cat, running after a cyclist, chasing his tail and finally scampering away. The final page has no text. The drawing's loose energetic lines show Henry eagerly racing towards his friends.

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**DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES**

- *The Brown Dog* is an exploration of emotions, moods and melancholy in children. It provides opportunities for class discussions about empathy and emotional intelligence, and could also be used with children in counselling.
- This book covers the ACARA learning areas of English, the Arts, and Health and Physical Education.
- Become familiar with the book before sharing it with students.
  - Consider the emotional power of the story, and the use of metaphor in the text and the illustrations.
  - Consider how you might use this story with the students you are working with.
  - Useful resources and information for teachers and families about sadness and depression in children can be found at: <https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/age-6-12/mental-health-conditions-in-children/depression-in-children>  
<https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/search?keyword=depression&arg1=none>  
Link to a pdf file with suggestions for teachers  
[https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/sites/default/files/public/KMP\\_C4\\_CD\\_DepressionSuggestionsForSchoolStaff.pdf](https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/sites/default/files/public/KMP_C4_CD_DepressionSuggestionsForSchoolStaff.pdf)
- 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 introduce the book by looking at the front and back covers.
  - Discuss how the dog is depicted in both drawings. Do they suggest what the story is about? What emotions are expressed in the drawings?
  - Is there anything else about the cover that indicates the theme of the story – muted colour tones of the background and illustrations, sparse layout, other?
- Read the story aloud, and ask the students for their initial responses – this could be through discussion, writing or drawing.
  - *What did you feel while you were listening to or reading the book?*
  - *Have you ever experienced the same kind of feelings? If so, describe how you felt.*
  - *How did the illustrations affect your response to the story?*
  - *How did your emotional response change when Henry was with Grandpa, having some new experiences?*
- Do the students' responses indicate that they understand that the dog is a symbol for Henry's sadness and lack of energy?
- Discuss how metaphor is used throughout the book.
  - Metaphor: 'a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable'. (*the brown dog lay in front of the door and wouldn't let him out*); or is 'a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else'. (*The Brown Dog stands for Henry's melancholy*)
  - With the students find sentences that show how Gina uses metaphor to show Henry's emotions. There are some examples in the Writing Style section above.
  - Find examples in the text where the name 'Henry' can be substituted for 'the brown dog'. For example: *On Sunday morning (Henry) didn't want to move at all. Nothing caught (Henry's) attention, no matter what.*
- Gina uses simple language, through dialogue and action, to tell this complex story. In pairs or small groups find examples like: *'Nah, not today, sorry.'* *Henry shut the door.*
- Many children and adults have had experiences like Henry's. Gina says:

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*Sometimes depression in children is a serious illness and needs professional treatment. I don't want to make light of that, so The Brown Dog is a story more about melancholy, or a heavy mood. Maybe children will be able to relate Henry's story to their own experiences.*

- Gina provides some prompts to help children recall their own experiences:
  - *Have you ever started a game of football feeling low on energy but felt better after running around for a while with your teammates?*
  - *Have you ever felt excited about spending time with grandparents?*
  - *Have you ever felt proud after learning a new skill?*
  - *What does sadness feel like to you?*
  - *Henry feels like his legs are heavy and that sounds and people look like they are far away. Is that how you feel sometimes?*
  - *Henry finds it hard to explain how he's feeling to his mum. How would you describe those sad feelings?*
- This serious subject has been presented in a gentle and positive way – anyone can feel a bit down at times and that is okay.
  - Discuss how Henry recognised and acknowledged 'the brown dog' when it turned up
  - Discuss the reactions of the people who love Henry – Mum, Dad and Grandpa. How do they respond to his mood? How do you think *they* felt about it, and how did they try to help him? Did Grandpa turn up by accident, or did Mum and Dad talk to him about Henry's unusual behaviour? Why did the time with Grandpa help Henry? Why was Henry ready to send the dog away after spending time with Grandpa?
  - Discuss how Henry, with the help of his parents and Grandpa, came to understand what he had been feeling. What did he learn about how to handle the brown dog if it returned?
- Discuss how Greg Holfeld's bold and arresting use of pencil line and Indian ink colour wash convey the mood and atmosphere of the story
  - In pairs or groups choose one illustration, and talk about the drawing techniques Greg has used that show emotions. (See notes above.)
  - Ask the students to draw pictures with characters showing different moods
- Discuss the viewpoint of the illustrations Is the viewer looking straight into the picture, or standing below, above, or 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).
- Discuss how the reader's eye is drawn into each 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?
- Find out more about Gina Inverarity and Greg Holfeld at:
  - [www.ginainverarity.com](http://www.ginainverarity.com)
  - [www.gregholfeld.com/about/](http://www.gregholfeld.com/about/)