

The Miracle of the Little Wooden Duck  
**Margaret Wild / Dee Huxley**  
TEACHERS' NOTES  
By Janet McLean

**Title:** The Miracle of the Little Wooden Duck

**Author:** Margaret Wild

**Illustrator:** Dee Huxley

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

**Author:** **Margaret Wild** was born in South Africa and came to Australia in 1972. She has been a journalist on newspapers and magazines, and she has worked as a book editor in children's publishing. Margaret has written many wonderful picture books, including *Baby Bird's Blankie* (illustrated by Gwyn Perkins), *The Midnight Gang* (illustrated by Anne James), and *Piglet and Mama* and *Piglet and Papa*, (illustrated by Stephen Michael King). Her books are published around the world and have won numerous awards. Margaret says about writing *The Miracle of the Little Wooden Duck*:

*I've always liked the idea of inanimate objects, particularly well-loved toys, coming to life. Some toys have so much personality and character that children easily engage in play-acting and believe (well, want to believe) that it's entirely possible for their toys to speak and move. I've had a small wooden duck sitting on a shelf in my kitchen for years, and I've always thought that one day I would write a story about it. During a holiday in Tasmania I saw a little green duck swimming on its own in a river. It reminded me of my small wooden duck, so I started making up a story about a lonely child who loves a little green wooden duck and wishes it could love her back.*

**Illustrator:** **Dee Huxley** has been illustrating picture books for many years and is now one of the most popular and well-known illustrators in Australia. Dee studied design and craft at the National Art School, East Sydney. She has been a freelance illustrator since 1976 and her work is displayed in galleries nationally and internationally. Dee has collaborated with many authors. Some of her most recent books include *You and Me Our Place*, by Leonie Norrington, short-listed for the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Picture Book of the Year Award in 2008; *Tom Tom*, by Rosemary Sullivan, an Honour Book, CBCA Picture Book of the Year Award in 2009; and *Look See, Look at Me*, by Leonie Norrington (2009). Dee says she is very pleased to be illustrating a text that is in high contrast in the subject matter of her recent picture books. She is also pleased to be working on another Margaret Wild text. (Previous books by Margaret and Dee: *Mr. Nick's Knitting* and *Remember Me*). Dee says:

*The story is about a duck. I love ducks. I love their shape & mad character. We both had quite a journey, this little green duck & I. This was a fantasy adventure for the duck, & one of exploration, and trial & error for me. Recently I worked successfully with some students using*

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*oil & turps technique, and decided to attempt my duck in oils. After a lot of experimentation, I achieved the results I wanted - layers of rich, deep, 'painterly' colour, with highlights, achieved by lifting wet colour out with turps & a brush or rag. Because I was working on white oil paper, which has texture like canvas, the highlights seemed to glow. I also wanted some fine line work here and there. This was achieved by incising the lines into the wet paint, using the other end of the paintbrush or sometimes my fingernail. Working in layers with oils means long drying times, especially if the paint is thick or textured. So I had to work on other areas of the book while waiting to apply another layer. As the entire book was already designed & roughs finalised, I could draw up another illustration & apply the first layer of colour, & then return to a previous one. This prevented loss of precious time. With a deadline looming, waiting for something to dry can test ones patience (of which I have little!)*

**SYNOPSIS** *The Miracle of the Little Wooden Duck* is a modern day fairytale of hope and friendship. Annie loves her little wooden duck. Her wish is that it will come to life. Everyday she picks it up, strokes it, whispers to it, holds it close, wishing “*it would love her back... But, of course, it couldn't*”. One day the duck is swept away from Annie when a great gust of wind blows it off the windowsill and into the river. After surviving many hazards in the swirling river the duck comes to a place where “*everything gleamed like silver*. And there a miracle happens. The tale ends happily. Annie and her duck are reunited. Annie’s wish comes true.

### **WRITING STYLE**

In this book Margaret Wild uses language structures and characteristics that are common to all fairytales. These include:

- The traditional opening line: “*Once upon a time there was a little wooden duck...*” This lets the reader know that in the world of this story anything can happen. Although the characters are real, in this imaginary world things can change, and wishes can come true.
- The introduction of a problem: Annie wishes her duck could see and hear and speak *...she held it close, wishing it could love her back. But, of course, it couldn't.*
- The introduction of a course of action that will set in motion a number of distinct episodes that will lead to a final resolution. *One afternoon a great gust of wind tore through Annie's town... blowing the little green duck off the windowsill and into the river.*
- The use of clearly defined episodes, where events often happen in threes. *(The little green duck) catapulted through reeds and weeds. It somersaulted over rocks, and fish and frogs. It hurtled down a waterfall and plunged to the bottom of the river...*

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- The use of inexplicable or magical elements to reach a satisfactory conclusion. *The little green duck sat motionless as moonlit magic touched its eyes, its ears and its beak. I can see! thought the little green duck...*
- The use of descriptive words and short, poetic phrases – *gazed, whispered, great gust, yanking, shoving, toppling, bright as a moonbeam, glistening, gurgling*
- The use of straightforward language, often with a threefold rhythm. *It had painted eyes, a painted beak and green painted feathers.*
- A happy ending – *'Quack!' it said, and flew straight into Annie's arms.*
- A closing statement: *The End.*

### ILLUSTRATIONS

Dee Huxley has used different illustrative and design techniques in this book, including:

- The use of colour and movement to establish atmosphere.
  - Light, warm colours create an air of stillness at the beginning of the book when the characters and the setting are introduced.
  - In the river pictures the use of dark blues and blacks, and the swirling, tumbling movement create a sense of fear and menace.
  - When the duck comes to 'a serene place' the blacks drop back. The dabs of shimmering white, and the still verticals of the tree trunks create a sense of calmness and peace.
  - At the end of the book the warm colours are used once more, but now with more movement creating an air of anticipation, and concluding with a dramatic close-up of the joyful reunion between Annie and her duck.
- The dramatic use of perspective to provide different points of view and to evoke emotional responses. Consider:
  - The inside / outside view of the duck on the windowsill with a view of the outside world where much of the later action will occur.
  - The picture outside the house, looking up the tiny duck on the windowsill, where it sat 'year in, year out'.
  - The picture of the wind-storm with an aerial view, looking down from above, giving an impression of the overall mayhem.
  - The dramatic picture of Annie running out the door.

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- The two illustrations near the end of the book that show the transformed duck and Annie on facing pages, creating the anticipation of their reunion. The duck is curled up and content. Annie is silhouetted in the warm yellow of the lighted window, her elbows on the windowsill, her head on a slightly tilted and resting on her hands – waiting, watching, and wondering.

### DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

- *The Miracle of the Little Wooden Duck* will be a wonderful addition to your collection of fairytales.
- Read the story with feeling, modulating your voice for different scenes and to evoke different feelings throughout the story: Annie's wistfulness at the start of the story, the drama of the little green duck careening down the river, the sense of mystery in 'the serene place where everything – the trees, the rocks, the reeds – gleamed like silver', the warmth of the happy ending.
- When reading the story let the children respond spontaneously, and comment on, and question what they are hearing, seeing and feeling. Be aware of their unbidden responses – their body language and their facial expressions. Talk about how they responded to different parts of the story. Did they respond to the language? Did the expressive words and the poetic phrases create images in their minds, and build a sense of growing tension? Did they respond to the illustrations – the swirling dark colours of the river, the tranquil serenity of the moonlit magic?
- There are many descriptive and evocative words used in this story. Ask the children if they know what these words mean – there's nearly always someone who knows or can guess from the context. Say these words expressively together, out loud.
- Point out how descriptions and events often occur in threes, followed by a dramatic event. For example: ...*yanking off roofs, shoving over fences, toppling trees – and blowing the little green duck off the windowsill and in to the river.*
- Find picture books of other fairytales. Look for other fairytales in which inanimate objects come to life. For example Hans Christian Andersen's *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* contains many of the elements found *The Miracle of the Little Wooden Duck*. Find common fairytale elements in the different stories that you collect.
- Make up and illustrate your own fairytales. Paint pictures, make books, and share your stories.
- Try some of the techniques that Dee has used in *The Miracle of the Little Wooden Duck*. You may not be able to use oils but some of her methods can be tried with watercolour.
- Find out more about Margaret Wild and Dee Huxley. Look at some of their other books.