

Author/Illustrator: Margaret Wild/Julie Vivas

Title: **The Very Best of Friends**

Publication details: Scholastic Press, Sydney Australia, 2005.

Appropriate year level(s): Grade P-3.

SUMMARY OF STORY

James and Jessie live on a farm and share a life of happy companionship. James has a beloved cat called William, and even though Jessie is not very fond of cats, she tries to love William too. One day James dies unexpectedly and Jessie withdraws in grief. She neglects herself and William, and spurns all his efforts to help. Unattended, William grows 'mean and lean' and one day scratches Jessie, which causes her to suddenly see what he has become without care and affection, and that she needs his friendship, too. So she tries to win back his trust and love.

PURPOSE FOR CHOOSING THIS BOOK

1. I could identify with Jessie's expression of grief.
2. Concepts: Friendship, change, loss, rejection, tolerance, acceptance, grief, trust, love, companionship, neglect, sadness, anger, depression, familiarity, relationships, comfort, misunderstanding, death, rage, belonging, loneliness, care, healing, pets, nature, farming, cats.

UNDERSTANDINGS

1. CONTENT

- Grief is expressed in many ways
- Grief and anger can make us behave in unreasonable ways
- You can't judge a book by its cover
- Relationships change
- Relationships and all they provide such as a sense of belonging, being valued, loved, cared for, accepted and appreciated are vital to being healthy
- Stories can evoke powerful feelings in us
- Stories can tell us things about how other people live
- Stories can help us feel okay about our own feelings and experiences.

2. LANGUAGE

- Interpret the text and illustrations about some of the features of relationships and compare their own experiences with those in the book.
- Different texts have different structures.
- Pronouns are an economical way to carry information that's already been given.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES (Orientating Phase)

1	<p>Investigate notions of loss by carrying out a number of scaffolding activities. (1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show students photos of how my garden had died from the drought whilst I was overseas. I had grown the plants from their infancy and was devastated. I cut back all the dead matter and after time, most of it grew back and now with grey water and the recent rain it is thriving again. • Invite a speaker to talk about an experience that involves loss and, if possible, something positive that has come from it e.g. someone who has experienced an injury, survived a natural disaster, a refugee, organ donor or indigenous Australian. • Talk with students about their experiences of loss. Write their words and statements on strips of paper as a record of perspectives. Read each strip and fasten on the board as a list. Group strips and label each group. This will introduce students to a way of organising and collating their ideas and information and lead into the use of a mind map activity later on. 	<p>Reader Practices (2)</p> <p>MM Become acquainted with ideas of loss. Draw on own prior knowledge and experience of loss. Identify ways of grouping characteristics of loss.</p> <p>TA Understand that loss can be talked about and present in different ways. Recognise the diverse views of loss presented by other students and begin to understand how loss is characterised.</p>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk with students about ways they could collect the information they are interested in (e.g. an interview) and the person they would like to know more about. • Discuss the difference between open and closed questions. • In small groups, students develop questions for their interviews, and list things they could note about the person they talk to. • Group discussion about the sorts of questions that could be asked e.g. Have you ever lost something or someone special? What did it feel like? What does it feel like now? How do you live without it? Is it ever good to have felt loss? • Notes could be made about the person's appearance, the sound of their voice, things around the person or that they show the student e.g. photos, treasured objects. • Ask students to suggest ways of making sure they remember the information they gain from the interview e.g. writing some words or asking the person interviewed to write something. Draw or take some pictures of the person interviewed, or record the interview. • Model an interview. • Students bring notes, drawings and photos from their interviews and discuss and compare this material in pairs or small groups and create a retrieval table (3) with headings based on the interview questions (above) and other significant information about the interviewee such as physical appearance and quotes to use later in their picture story books. • Explain that a Mind Map is a way of organising and collating ideas and information. As a group create a Mind Map with the information gathered from their interviews. Ask students to suggest ways of grouping characteristics they attribute to loss. Model the features of a Mind Map by writing loss as the central idea and finding an image to represent it, then on different coloured branches radiating out from the centre enter the information under headings such as loss (of life, of a treasured object), moving (house, country), change (body image, job, retirement, family structure (then sub-headings such as divorce, remarriage) underlining key words, drawing pictures for each and adding additional branches for the details. (4) 	<p>TU Understand an interview as a way to gather information about someone who has a story about loss and ways of noting it.</p> <p>CB Develop questions for interviews. Practise the language structures and patterns of questions for real purposes.</p> <p>MM Consider questions to extend their understandings of loss.</p> <p>TA Begin to understand that the kind of information collected has implications for the way ideas are selected and represented in text.</p> <p>MM Compare interview material</p> <p>TA Recognise the diversity of ideas and information about loss and begin to understand how the category of loss is constructed.</p> <p>TU Use a Mind Map to organise and collate ideas and recognise that it has a particular structure that can be used to collate information in a particular way.</p>

DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES (Enhancing Phase)

1	<p>Introduce the picture storybook <i>The Very Best of Friends</i> with the text covered and invite students to ‘read’ the illustrations (5). In particular, look at how the visual ‘language’ of colour, texture, line, shape, form, space, light and dark combine through conventions of balance, composition (how attention is attracted and focussed), vectorality (how the eye is led through the image) and style of drawing to convey meaning. Before James’s death, curved lines and warm colours contrast with the stark straight lines as the ambulance drives away and the sharp jagged and diagonal lines and dark colours for William’s transformation. Frequent use of repetition of shapes. (6)</p> <p>Questions that could stimulate discussion include: (Book cover, front matter and end point) • What do you see? • How does the illustrator make us aware of the relationship between James, Jessie and William? • What kind of book do you think this is going to be? • What makes you think this? • What do you think has happened? What do you think will happen next? • How would you describe the mood or atmosphere in the illustrations? What overall impression do you get from the colour in the illustrations? • How is the character’s relationship to the surroundings conveyed through the illustrations? • Can you see any patterns in the illustrations? • Is there anything that puzzles you about the illustrations? (7)</p> <p>Describe William’s feelings: helping James around the farm, inside the house with James and Jessie, when James died, when Jessie ignores him, when Jessie moved him out of the house, when he became a wild cat, when Jessie changed and accepted William, helping Jessie around the farm, on the bed at the end. What do you think it’s like to be a cat? How do you think Jessie is feeling? How does the illustrator convey that? • Has anything you have seen in the illustrations happened to you or someone you know? (8)</p> <p>Other questions to guide critical analysis include: • What do you think the illustrator wants you to feel or think about William? Jessie? Their relationship?</p>	<p>CB Recognise and identify the visual codes in a text.</p> <p>MM Recognise how the patterns of visual codes create visual imagery.</p> <p>TA Begin to understand that the visual imagery in the illustrations represent the characters in a particular way and influence readers’ perceptions.</p> <p>MM Interpret literal and inferential meanings from the illustrations.</p> <p>TA Recognise point of view in the illustrations. Begin to understand that visual images can influence viewer’s perceptions.</p> <p>MM Use the illustrations to predict the meaning and purpose of the text.</p>
2	<p>After reading the text: • Is the story what you expected it to be? • How does the author want you to think, feel, act? • What is the message in this book? How do you know? • What kind of person could have written this book? • Who has the book been written for? • Why did the author write this book? Encourage students to think about where they get their ideas from and to explain their comments for example, where did you get that idea from? Can you show everyone the page/picture that tells you that? (9)</p> <p>Ask questions that encourage observation about the relationship between the written text and the illustrative text • How do the illustrations support the text? • How powerful would the story be without the illustrations? • Do the illustrations say something that the text doesn’t? (10)</p> <p>* Who is the title <i>The Very Best of Friends</i> referring to?</p> <p>Consider the illustrations with the ambulance taking James away, Jessie on the verandah and William all lean and mean. How does this make us feel? What do we know of their feelings from these illustrations?</p>	<p>CB Identify aspects of the written text and illustrations that lead them to draw particular inferences and conclusions.</p> <p>MM Interpret literal and inferential meanings from the text. Uses pictures and knowledge of context to check their understanding of meanings.</p>

	<p>Students to break into three groups and consider these questions (11) and report back to the whole group. Group 1: From the earliest days Jessie ignored William, even when he tried to be helpful. How would you feel if that happened to you? • The day that William scratched her, Jessie really looked at him. What do you think she saw and felt? • What makes Jessie act in the way she does after James's death? • Why might Jessie be angry with William? • How do we know how badly William has been affected? • How do you feel about what happened to William?</p> <p>Group 2: When James died Jessie and William both missed him. People show grief in different ways. How do you know Jessie was grieving? • At first William tried to get into the house. Why do you think he did this? • When William prowled at night he 'grew mean and lean and he hated everyone and everything' why was William so angry?</p> <p>Group 3: Do you think that Jessie was fair to William? Explain why you think that? • Jessie was very unhappy. Does this excuse the way she treated William? • Jessie and William had to learn to accept each other. What do you think it was that made Jessie change? • William had to learn to trust Jessie again. Brainstorm what you could to help people accept a friend after they have been let down by them.</p>	<p>TU Understand the purpose of the text.</p> <p>TA Recognise the author's purpose in creating the text. Begin to recognise that texts are not neutral.</p> <p>MM Compare own experiences with those in the book. Compare different responses to the questions.</p>
3	<p>Initiate a group discussion about the narrator in <i>The Very Best of Friends</i> • From whose perspective is the story being told? • Why do you think that? • Are any of the characters in the story telling the story? • Who do you think is the main character?</p> <p>Read <i>Michael Rosen's Sad Book</i> • From whose perspective is <i>this</i> story being told? • What is different about the way this story is written compared to <i>The Very Best of Friends</i>? Discuss the similarities and differences between the two picture books. Both have a beginning middle and end, what characterises each? (E.g. rejection, grief, acceptance).</p> <p>Use examples from each text to illustrate the use of pronouns: "Because James loved William so much, Jessie tried to love him too. She always made sure William had a tasty piece of fish and a fresh bowl of milk. She even scratched him under the chin now and again". • Who is Jessie scratching under the chin, James or William? Why do you think that? • Why didn't she write "She always made sure he had a tasty piece of fish and a fresh bowl of milk?"</p> <p>"This is me being sad . . . What makes me sad is when I think about my son Eddie. He died. I loved him very, very much but he died anyway. Sometimes this makes me really angry. I say to myself, "How dare he go and die like that? How dare he make me sad." He doesn't say anything because he's not there any more". (Identify pronouns: I, me, my, as distinct from he, his, him). • Why do you think the author uses pronouns rather than names all the time? • When would they start using names again?</p> <p>Show other examples where the use of pronouns is ambiguous or confusing. Explain that a pronoun means in the place of a noun.</p> <p>Small groups work with sentences from both books and identify the pronouns used and report back to the whole group where findings will be collated into a table of different varieties of pronouns.</p> <p>Individually students write up one paragraph based on the person they interviewed that makes use of pronouns. Return to the whole group and share their examples.</p>	<p>CB Recognise and identify the visual codes in a text. Monitor the sense they are making from texts.</p> <p>TU Understand that descriptive language has particular structure and features.</p> <p>TA Understand that subject matter is selected organised and structured according to the views and interests of the author.</p> <p>TU Use a table to collate information.</p> <p>CB Recognise the sentence structure of descriptions. Use the conventions as a basis to represent of a person they are describing.</p> <p>MM Interpret literal and inferential Meanings from written text. Recognise themes being explored in a text.</p>

CONCLUSION (Synthesising phase)

1	<p>Individually, using the information collected on the retrieval table, students either create a narrative about loss, as in <i>The Very Best of Friends</i>, or their own experience of loss as in <i>Michael Rosen's Sad Book</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What feelings will you will you be trying to convey on each page? • How will you make use of pronouns? <p>Students publish their work in the form of small concertina book, of approximately four pages, containing an introduction to the character, some significant details about their story and something about how they have managed to cope with their loss.</p> <p>The writing process will involve creating a Mind Map for the story, drafting, consulting with others, editing, proofreading and typing. The illustrations will include creating a storyboard outlining the image(s) on each page, viewing picture story books for inspiration about illustrating techniques (e.g. <i>King & King</i> and <i>We're going on a Bear Hunt</i>), technique demonstrations, experimenting with different media, creating the artwork, scanning it into the computer and overlaying the text (ICT lessons) and construction of the concertina book. (12).</p> <p>As the project progresses share the students work with the class for ideas.</p>	<p>MM Select statements to construct an image of a person who has experienced loss.</p> <p>TA Understand that subject matter is selected organised and structured according to the views and interests of the author.</p> <p>All four roles are represented in this activity.</p>
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Footnotes

1. Introductory activities based on Ludwig, C. (2006) *Why Wait? A Way in to Teaching Critical Literacies in the Early Years*, Curriculum Corporation, Carlton South, Victoria, Australia (pp.37-39).
2. All reader practices descriptions modified from Ludwig, C. (2006) op cit (pp.36-47) and Harris, P. [et al] (2001) *Reading in the Primary School Years*, Social Science Press, Katoomba, NSW. (pp. 87 & 108).
3. Ludwig, C. (2006) op cit (p.49)
4. Buzan, T. (2003) *Mind Maps for Kids: The Shortcut to Success at School*, Thorsons, London. (p. 10).
5. O'Sullivan, C. (1987) *The Challenge of Picture Story Books: A Teacher's Guide to the Use of Picture Books with Older Students*, Methuen Australia, North Ryde, N.S.W. (p.18)
6. Rolton, G. (2005) *Let's Learn with Picture Books: Philosophy-Centred Discussion*, Curriculum Corporation, Carlton South, Victoria, Australia (p.38) and Anstey, M. & Bull, G. (2006) *Teaching and Learning Multiliteracies: Changing Times, Changing Literacies*, International Reading Association, Newark, Del. (p.110).
7. O'Sullivan, C. (1987) op cit (pp.18-19) and Hillel, M. & Holmes, J. (1995) *Unlocking Ideas: Thinking with Picture Story Books*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne. (p. 48).
8. Rolton, G. (2005) op cit (p.41).
9. Ludwig, C. (2006) op cit (pp.42).
10. O'Sullivan, C. (1987) op cit (p.19).
11. Rolton, G. (2005) op cit (p.38) and Hillel, M. & Holmes, J. (1995) op cit (p.48)
12. Based on Ludwig, C. (2006) op cit (p.47).

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