



# *The Secret Boat*

Teachers' notes

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Poetry by Mark Macleod

Illustrations by Hélène Magisson

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Teachers' notes by Robyn Ewing AM



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## Synopsis:

*In The Secret Boat, waterways, beaches, horses, cars and bikes, planes, gusts of wind, shifting clouds, fancies and dreams offer possibilities beyond where we are right now.*

Mark Macleod

*The Secret Boat* is a beautiful collection of poems for younger readers by Dr Mark Macleod. At the same time, these poems will be lots of fun for older readers too. Humour, whimsy, playfulness, dreams, wondering and thoughtful observations transport us through a range of different places and everyday experiences. There are spaces for sharing different interpretations and imaginings at home or in the classroom.

Hélène Magisson's intricate and often quirky illustrations often tell or suggest another story alongside the words themselves and give us permission to think alternatively.

Recommended for early childhood: 4 to 8

## About the Creators

**Dr Mark Macleod** is passionate about children's literature and has been honoured with awards for his distinguished service in this important area. Mark is the author of picture books as well as poems for children and adults. As a senior academic, Mark has coordinated studies in Children's Literature, Australian Literature and Creative Writing at Macquarie University and Charles Sturt University. He has taught at universities around the world, most recently in India. A former National President of the Children's Book Council of Australia, television and radio presenter, Mark has also worked as a bookseller, editor, Publishing Director for Random House and for Dirt Lane Press, Publisher at Hachette Australia and as publisher under his own name imprint, Mark Macleod Books.

**Hélène Magisson** is a French-Australian artist who originally trained in medieval illumination and art restoration. Since turning her skills to children's illustration she has illustrated dozens of books, several of which have been awarded recognition. *The Secret Boat* is Hélène's first book with Dirt Lane Press. The images in this book tell their own stories and are integral to the book. Discussion on aspects of the illustration and of the illustrator's techniques will nurture learners' visual literacy skills.

## About the Unit

**Focus:** to enjoy the richness, playfulness and rule-breaking that poetry brings to our lives and learning.

**Duration:** Lesson suggestions are aimed for children in preschool and the early years of school but can be adapted for older learners.

**Themes:** Joy, play, the natural world, exploration, secrets, resilience, childhood, hope, friendship.

## Introductory Notes for Teachers

How do you think about poetry? Alfred North Whitehead (2012) wrote that 'poetry [is] the highest form of thought' and Jackie French in Murphy (2021) writes: 'a poem compresses what is most deeply felt into as few lines as possible' (p.vii). Mandy Tunica (2005) describes poetry as 'word magic'. And Mark Macleod writes: *Poems offer ways to transport ourselves. To other places, times, ideas and moods.*

Yet both early career and experienced teachers sometimes find teaching poetry challenging. Often personal memories of over-study and deconstruction of mandated poems or over-emphasis on writing in particular forms (cinquain, haiku etc) are cited as intruding on enjoyment of the poem itself. As Mark Macleod<sup>1</sup> writes:

*...our lack of ease with poetry is due to the way it has been mystified, examined and analysed as a subject in English. To labour over the parsing of a poem for days on*

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<sup>1</sup> The quotes from Mark Macleod throughout the notes are excerpts from personal communications about *The Secret Boat*.

*end, to 'pull it to pieces' without remembering to put it back together again, is to risk obscuring those inspiring moments in a poem when our emotional, intellectual and even physical responses coincide so wonderfully that we can't put the experience into words.*

Poetry helps us both understand and express our emotions. It builds our experience with rich and imaginative words and nurtures our love of rhythm and rhyme alongside our empathy and compassion. Sharing favourite poems aloud can build our trust in each other and help to foster a collaborative learning community.

As a starting point for this unit then, make sharing your favourite poems in this book a daily feature of your classroom. Share why you like the poem, how it makes you feel, what is important to you and/or what excites or puzzles you. As you start to read through the book, ask learners to share their comments about the poems too.

Learners can also be asked to bring in other poems or song lyrics that appeal to them and share their thoughts or feelings about their choices. In addition they might bring in and share any poems or rhymes they have written. In time a class anthology could emerge.

One of the best ways to respond to poetry is to write our own. For we all can become poets. Georgia Heard's (1989) description of poets is something we can all aim to for:

Poets...

Observe the small moments around us

Find poetry in the ordinary

See beauty in the ugly

Are curious and filled with wonder

Love the meaning the sounds of words

Look at the world in a new way

Pay attention to and write from all our feelings

Give voice to the unspeakable

Are empathetic.

The most important part of this unit is to ensure we create time and opportunities to enjoy sharing these poems, reading them aloud to each other, playing with them, sometimes reciting them together and, where appropriate, enacting the poem or adding music and movement to the words and images.

## Responding to poetry

It is always critical to respect different responses to a poem and remember that there will be a range of opinions. Here are some ways learners might respond to poems:

- Talking together and listening to each others' responses to a poem: What are your learners' immediate reactions?  
Aidan Chambers (2011) *Tell me* framework (p.177- 181) has some helpful questions that can be adapted for your context.
- Depicting the key moments in a narrative poem through freeze frames or sculpture.
- Moving with the poem - creating a movement sequence
- Clapping the rhythm or using a tambourine or drum
- Drawing, painting, making a collage in response to the emotion(s) or mood(s) conveyed in a poem.
- Choosing music that resonates with the poem
- Scripting a poem for readers' theatre – this can help learners focus on oral reading and fluency but also see the different ways the poem can be read. Percussion instruments at appropriate moments can be added as well.
- Choral reading can be lots of fun especially if time is given for small groups to play with meaning through tone, inflection, pace, pitch, pause and gesture.
- Keeping a poetry journal to record individual responses to different poems.

## Lesson Suggestions

### Lesson 1: Introducing *The Secret Boat*

**Prepare** a large outline of a boat and display on the wall.

#### **Before introducing *The Secret Boat***

Discuss secrets. What are they? them? Are there some secrets we can share? What do we do with them? Why do we have secrets?

**Predicting:** Discuss the title: *The Secret Boat*.

What might the book be about? Why might a boat be secret?

What do the pictures on the front cover suggest? And the endpapers?

Mark Macleod says:

*The title has two meanings to me. This collection is a boatload of secrets - it is a boat that contains them. But the vessel itself is also a secret. Children know the 'secret' - but it's no secret to them at all. We adults are the ones from whom its contents might have become hidden. Even better than having a secret, however, is the delight of discovering one and sharing it.*

**Visualise a time at the beach. What do you see, smell, taste, touch, feel?**

**Read one of the poems you particularly enjoyed on the first opening.**

**Share** what you like about it. Read it again emphasising different words than the first read through. For example *Grandad and me* can be read in a number of different ways. Project the poem on the whiteboard so everyone can read it together. Demonstrate how different ways of reading the poem can emphasise one part more than another.

*Poetry is a way of seeing, but it is also a way of breathing.... the way you utter a line of a poem I have written may be slightly different from the way I utter it. That's one of the great properties of English - the fluid potential of intonation.*

Try reading lines separately and then run them together. Think about how that changes the meaning(s)? the rhythm?

### **Sculpting**

In pairs, take turns to sculpt grandpa feeling scared on the sand and needing to hold my hand. Talk about how embodying feelings helps us understand them.

### **Embodying**

Embody the different things we did on the sand:

*prowling like dinosaurs*

*shivered and roared*

*collected nautilus shells*

Try saying these words to capture their meanings and adding a movement.

Draw them.

**Make freeze frames in pairs of one of the things grandad and I did at the beach.**

While frozen ask learners to think about how they are feeling at this moment in time.

Teacher can tap in to several learners and ask them to share these feelings in one word or phrase.

Teacher claps twice and learners unfreeze their freeze frame for a few moments then freeze again when teacher claps twice.

Ask children to read one of the other poems on the first opening with their partner (*The Fish Wall; Surfing the edge; Building a bridge.*) Talk about the magical images created. Some of the activities above could be repeated. For example in *Surfing the edge*, *the bubbles giggle...tickle our toes...take a breath.*

### **Drawing**

Learners choose a favourite 'secret moment' to draw and teacher pins inside the large boat outline on the wall.

Discuss the way such everyday things can be the subject of poetry.

NB: The drama strategies suggested can be undertaken with many of the poems.

For more details about these strategies see Ewing, R. and Simons, J. with Herzberg, M & Campbell, V. (2015) *Beyond the script take 3: Drama in the classroom*. Primary English Teaching Association Australia or Ewing, R. & Saunders, J. (2015). *The School Drama Book: Drama, Literature and Literacy in the Creative Classroom*. Currency Press.

## **Lesson 2: Poetry and playing with language**

*Sometimes in The Secret Boat the physical dimensions of the language are simply fun - I'm inviting you to play a game* (Mark Macleod).

### **Reading aloud**

Read aloud a selection of the poems that play with words and are 'simply fun' to read and move to. It may be because of the subject or topic or the rhythm or rhyme or the shape of the poem. Does reading poetry aloud change the way we think about things? If so, in what ways?

For example, let's look at:

- *Opposites*

### **Discussion**

Talk about what opposites are.

### **Embody**

In pairs standing back to back learners can embody each pair of opposites (e.g. under/over; in/out; strong/weak) as the poem is read aloud.

## Identifying rhythm and rhyme

Learners can clap out the rhythm or clap on the rhyming words. Percussion instruments can also be used to mark the rhythm or rhyme.

### Draw

Each learner can choose some pairs of opposites to illustrate.

### Create

Using this poem as a model, learners can build their own opposites poem as a joint class construction, in pairs or individually. This could be expanded to writing a joint poem about 'synonyms' or 'homonyms'.

Other possibilities:

- *Counting the Steps*

Play some counting games alongside reading this. poem.

- *A pinch and a punch*

It would be lots of fun to experiment with playdough and making bread after reading this poem. Learners can 'punch the dough' and 'pinch the dough' etc.

What other ways do we use the phrase 'a pinch and a punch'?

- *Circles*

There are so many circles in our lives. Ask learners to find as many circles as they can. Create a class list. Conclude by making the circle of friendship as in the poem.

Mark writes:

*As children begin to look more closely at the world around them, they observe patterns, they create patterns - of sound and shape and meaning, but making the sorts of connections that they will later come to know as metaphors, or metre and rhythm, or rhyme, alignment or verse structure.*

## Lesson 3: The artist and visual literacy

As a class consider how the artist has created the pictures.

What features do you notice? The author was clear about what the visual images needed to convey:



*I wanted a range of gender, race, age, species possibilities. I wanted a range of moods. I love the luminous palette H  l  ne has used in the celebratory images; I also love the dark clouds towards the end.*

The author, H  l  ne, talks about her process:

*To illustrate The Secret Boat, I first dedicated several weeks to developing a storyboard. Once the storyboard was completed, I embarked on a study of different tonal values to effectively convey the intended emotions with the strongest impact.*

*I then used watercolour as my primary medium to bring the illustrations to life and highlighted some elements using pastel pencils.*

*Rather than repeating the text with my brushes, I wanted my illustrations to complement and support it, offering an additional dimension and some alternative meanings to the poems. I have really enjoyed pushing my imagination as far as possible to achieve this aim. This manuscript, in particular, presented this captivating challenge.*

*Also, I have included the presence of recurring characters throughout the illustrations. I hope children will enjoy recognising and following the adventures of a charming little mouse, an endearing old lady, a pair of teenagers, and a playful little girl.*

*With over 40 poems depicting a range of human emotions, the challenge was to illustrate and support as many of these emotions as possible. We had to organize them in a subtle and efficient manner which required careful thought.*

*It made this project truly enthralling.*

- How do the layout of each page, the colour etc influence the way we read the poems?
- Consider such things as perspective. Where is the reader being placed? (eg. Mostly at eye level but sometimes looking up or looking downwards. In *Choosing a winner* we have a birds-eye view, almost as if we are flying beside the pelican.
- How do we interact with the illustrations and the words of a poem?
- What do we learn from the pictures that are not provided by the words?
- Choose a favourite poem from *The Secret Boat* and illustrate it using watercolour or pastels.
- Follow one of the recurring characters through the book.

## Lesson 4: Spaces and places to play

*In between the lines of some poems in The Secret Boat, there are little spaces where you can let your imagination out to play.*

Choose some poems in *The Secret Boat* that enable spaces for your imagination to play.

- For example, *Choosing a winner*.

Take time to explore the metaphors that Mark Macleod uses to describe ten pin bowling.

For example, *a spinning blue world*

*with swirls of white*

What do the colours and weights signify?

Create a soundscape of what you hear when you visit a bowling alley.

- *Pelican*

Read *Pelican*.

Explore the similes Macleod uses to describe the pelican as it lands:

*slow as a seaplane...your long pink beak like a cabin bag crammed full of  
slippery fish.*

Think about your favourite bird or animal. What are its unique features? Choose some of the poems in the book to help you (*Wombats, Birds in spring*).

Can you imagine everyday objects to compare these features with?

*If we focus on the precise physical properties of an object, the more associations it seems to attract to itself. My hope is that this is the kind of poem that gives a young reader agency.*

- *Three people know*.

Who might be speaking in this poem?

How do we know?

Why is there only nail polish on one toe?

Why is it a secret to be hidden by sand even though *it shines like a jewel*?

## Lesson 5: Sad and dark times

Poetry can also help us articulate the saddest of times.

- Read *On the beach* and *Open the window*.

Discuss the worries and sadnesses that we all experience at one time or another.

- What is the poet suggesting we do at these times?
- Read *On the beach* again

What could *building a castle in the sand* and *digging a moat around it* be metaphors for?

There is hope here in this poem too:

*And if the tide should knock it down*

*We can build it up again.*

- Enact *Open the window*. Learners write down something that is sad for them on a post-it note or card and mime opening a window wide and wider to welcome in the sun and fresh air. They can place their note in a box representing a plane or a boat.
- Share Michael Rosen's *The Sad book*.

## Lesson 6: Special memories

Show your learners some artefacts that evoke a special memory for you (for example, a photo, a beautiful shell, a shiny red ribbon, a teddy bear).

Read some of the poems that describe a special memory, a special person, or a very special toy.

For example:

*Family outing. Holiday Birthday party. Holiday bath*

*Evening song....Morning song 1....Morning song 2*

- Consider how memories can evoke special feelings and bring back happy or sad times.
- Think about some special memories and share them with the whole class. What feelings did they evoke?
- **Small group freeze frames:** Individually or in small groups, students can depict some of these memories as frozen images. These images can be recorded and used to write about later.
- For those children who chose a special toy, *Ollie's odyssey* (Joyce, 2015) is a wonderful story of a special toy as is Margery William's classic *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

### Writing

Use the images to write your own poem about a special memory, a special person, a special toy. Share these one by one at different times rather than en masse.

### In conclusion

This unit doesn't need to end. Many of these suggestions can be adapted for other poems. Overall, reading, playing with and responding to poetry, and writing our own, should be integral to every classroom.

It is fitting to conclude with Mark Macleod's own words:

*I love writing poems for young people.... I believe a poem is a way of seeing that comes easily and naturally to them. This is an absolutely ordinary process of making sense of what appears to be the randomness of the world.*

## Other resources

- Anne Bell website, *Australian children's poetry*  
<https://australianchildrenspoeury.com.au/australianpoets/a-e/anne-bell/>
- Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) (2016). *Tadpoles in the Torrens Teachers Edition* <https://alea.associationonline.com.au/publicresources/browse-alea-publications-for-purchase/tadpoles-in-the-torrens-teachers-edition> *Tadpoles in the Torrens: Poems for young readers.*  
[https://jcu.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?context=L&vid=61ARL\\_JCU:JCU&search\\_scope=MyInst\\_and\\_CI&tab=Everything&docid=alma991003477479706376](https://jcu.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?context=L&vid=61ARL_JCU:JCU&search_scope=MyInst_and_CI&tab=Everything&docid=alma991003477479706376)
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<https://www.georgiaheard.com>
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A rich collection of Australian poetry compiled by Libby Hathorn, including longtime favourites alongside works of contemporary poets.
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Heard, G. (1989). *For the good of the earth and sun.* Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Joyce, W. (2015). *Ollie's Odyssey.* Moonbot.

Murphy, S. (2021). *Teaching poetry for pleasure and purpose.* Primary English Teaching Association Australia. Poet Sally Murphy's (2021) recent book provides a wealth of poems and practical activities organised in year levels.

Rosen, M. (2004) *The Sad Book.* Candlewick Press.

Tunica, M. (2005) *A passion for poetry.* Primary English Teaching Association Australia.

Williams, M. (1921) *The Velveteen rabbit.* Harpers Bazaar.