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NO PLACE FOR AN OCTOPUS

Claire Zorn



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

When a young boy notices an octopus in the rock pools at the beach, he sees a frightened and lonely creature. Imagining all of the wonderful things they could do together and what a good friend the octopus would be, the boy wonders if he should take it home. The boy realises, however, that the octopus will be happier left where it is.

No Place for an Octopus is a gentle and quiet story about friendship, empathy and understanding. It suggests to young readers that animals are happiest when left in their natural habitats.

THEMES

Friendship

Loneliness

Happiness

Empathy

The natural world

WRITING STYLE

No Place for an Octopus is a beautifully nuanced text, combining a thoughtfully written narrative with evocative illustrations. Told through the first person, present tense perspective of a young boy, it is an accessible story that extends thinking through visual literacy. Claire Zorn gives readers the space to infer, imagine and empathise. It is best suited to an early childhood audience, although has applications for readers in middle primary grades.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading, use the cover, title, endpapers and title page of the book to make predictions about the story. What do the body language and facial expressions of the characters foreshadow? What do you think the boy and the octopus are looking at?
- The book is titled *No Place for an Octopus*. Where might this place be? With a friend, brainstorm a list of places that would not be suitable for such a creature.
- The first spread sees the little boy standing on the bumpy and cold rocks. Using this spread, choose from the following activities:
 - Draw this scene from the seagull's point of view.
 - Research the rock pools habitat. How do they function? What organisms live in rock pools? How do tides affect rock pools?

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- Write a recount of a time you have explored rock pools when at the beach.
- Create an information report about an organism that lives in rock pools.
- Imagine you are one of the other creatures in the rock pool. Write a journal entry of what it is like to look out of the rock pool at the little boy peering down.
- What clues do we get from the illustrations that the octopus may not be completely happy in the rock pool?
- Why do both the boy and the octopus feel a 'little bit afraid'?
- In what ways is *No Place for an Octopus* a story about friendship?
- The little boy is able to empathise with the octopus. Discuss the theme of empathy, and why it is important. How does the boy show empathy?
- The little boy imagines that the octopus is hungry, wet, cold and lonely. Do you think the boy might also feel like this at times? Is he giving human feelings to the octopus? Discuss.
- Think of other ways the octopus may be feeling. Show your ideas through drawings.
- Why does the boy want to take the octopus home? Why, even when it is home, does the octopus still look sad? If you took this octopus home, what would you do with it?
- The boy thinks the octopus would make a good friend. What are the attributes of a good friend? What sort of friend would this boy be? How do we know?
- In the role of the boy, write a series of diary entries about your imagined time with the octopus.
- With reference to the spread on which the boy looks at his fish tank, what message is being shared in *No Place for an Octopus*? Why has this page been included?
- How does imagining taking the octopus for a swim, to the beach or to explore the rock pools help the boy to realise where the octopus would be happier?
- Draw and label your own cross-section of a rock pool, similar to that shown on the final double-page spread.
- Use recycled materials to create your own classroom rock pool. Label the organisms of this habitat.
- Retell this story from the octopus's point of view.
- Read more about octopuses. Create a presentation that shares their natural habitat, physical features, life cycle and so on.
- Innovate on Claire Zorn's text by creating your own illustrated story using an animal of your choice, for example, *No Place for a Giraffe*. Include some background research into the habitat of your chosen animal.

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AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I began writing *No Place for an Octopus* because I have always been captivated by octopuses; they are such bizarre creatures and scientists are continually making new and unexpected discoveries about them. Octopuses are capable of learning from experience and have been observed collecting and using tools such as coconut shells to build fortresses. They have neurons in their arms, which means they are almost entirely one big multi-limbed brain, and they can 'see' with their skin. There are many accounts of octopuses dismantling pumps in aquarium tanks to escape and once free they will often use drain pipes in an attempt to make it to the ocean. Like dogs, they have to be kept amused in captivity otherwise they make their own fun and become destructive.

I set out to see an octopus the way a child might: as a source of wonder. Children often seek companionship with creatures adults would ignore or consider inappropriate pets; my own sons have kept pet beetles, ants, moths and worms. I wanted to engage with a child's love of the absurd by placing the octopus in all sorts of silly scenarios, like on a rollercoaster or at the cinema. Within that premise I also sought to create an exercise in empathy where the child is able to identify the octopus's feelings about the situation it finds itself in, while affirming a child's sense of agency by having the boy make his own decision about what the best thing to do with the octopus might be without the instruction of an adult.

For me, as an illustrator, rock pools are an endless source of inspiration. The colours and tiny creatures found there are captivating and beautiful. As for the octopus, I enjoyed the challenge of expressing his emotions using only his eyes and eyebrows and found it so fun to have him look directly at the reader, thus bringing them into the story. I also played with scale as a way of signalling the transition from the 'real' world of the octopus and to the spaces he might occupy in the little boy's imagination: the octopus grows larger and larger as the boy's imagination runs wild and then smaller as he returns to reality. Likewise I used the background of the illustrations as another signal by having it fade out when the octopus is in the realm of the boy's imagination and gradually come back as the boy moves the octopus closer and closer back to its natural habitat.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Zorn is the author of three novels for young adults: *The Sky So Heavy*, *The Protected* and *One Would Think the Deep*. Published to critical acclaim both nationally and internationally, her novels have won multiple awards, most notably the Prime Minister's Literary Awards for Young Adult Fiction, the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards – Young Adult Fiction Prize, the Western Australian Premier's Book Awards for Young Adult Fiction and the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year: Older Readers (twice).
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