

# If I Was a Horse

*Sophie Blackall*

TWO-TIME CALDECOTT MEDALLIST

TEACHERS RESOURCES

# If I Was a Horse

*Sophie Blackall*

## Teachers Resources by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Themes &amp; Curriculum Topics</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS)</b>	
<b>English Language and Literacy</b>	
<b>Visual Literacy</b>	
<b>Creative Arts</b>	
<b>Further Topics for Discussion and Research</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>About the Author/Illustrator</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Worksheets</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>About the Author of the Notes</b>	<b>15</b>

# INTRODUCTION

*If I was a horse, I would gallop all day.  
I could go anywhere I want . . .*

If you were a horse, what could you do? Or what could you not do? There is a yearning for freedom in this visual and written text which is extremely touching. The child's feelings about parental and other controls are subtly revealed by their wishes to be able to bathe, eat, and sleep, how and when they want to. They reveal an insecurity as well: 'and everyone would want me on their team'. It celebrates any child's wish to gallop away if they so desire. Haven't we all felt that way at some stage in our lives?

Gallop along with two-time Caldecott Medallist Sophie Blackall through this riotous day in the life of a child who imagines their life as a horse. Sophie's delightful text and resonant illustrations that feature a very large horse in familiar settings offer a visual feast, a grand dose of joy and a celebration of the real power of imagination to help us navigate the world, in the astonishing spectacle of a child imagining life as a horse.

## THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes covered in this book might be related to the Australian Curriculum, including:

### HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS)

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/humanities-and-social-sciences/>

### IMAGINATION

**Discussion Point:** This book explores the 'indoor/outdoor' dichotomy which prevails in a child's world. Most children enjoy the freedom of being outdoors where physically and mentally they are able to roam free. This symbolically evokes the child's need to play and to assert their independence. The book begins with a horse inside the family home, climbing and descending stairs in an incongruous image, and then ends in the final image with a child galloping in the fields near their home, riding on their (until then unseen) sibling/narrator's back in a triumphant game. The latter is wearing a polka dot sweater in the same pattern as the horse of the child's imaginings. (Horses don't generally have polka dots, but larger patches referred to as skewbald or piebald.) Invite students to discuss the meaning of this final image and whether it surprised them. How do they feel when they are able to 'run free'? Discuss games and activities they enjoy as a family when outdoors.

**Discussion Point:** Every child imagines themselves either as someone else, or in a completely different situation, at some stage. Some imaginings are fanciful (becoming a fairy or a princess), some are based on reality (becoming a horse!). Discuss the imagination and the things your students have imagined for themselves.

**Discussion Point:** Imagining is a way of escaping the restrictive nature of daily routines. A child who resists taking a bath, wearing the clothes their mother has selected, and eating what their father has prepared, disappears into a world where the perceived freedom of a horse becomes symbolic of escape. Invite students to discuss some of the family routines which they find restrictive and how they 'escape' from them.

## HORSES

**Discussion Point:** Horses are often well-loved by children and this book is a celebration of that passion. The horse in this book is a majestic creature, a horse which can run and leap, dive into a pool, and climb stairs as well! Invite students to discuss their feelings about horses, or perhaps another animal which holds a similar attraction to them.

**Discussion Point:** Discuss the many interesting words which relate to horses, such as their colouring (piebald, roan, skewbald, palomino), their gender or age (mare, filly, stallion, pony), their type (racehorse, draughthorse, Appaloosa, thoroughbred, Clydesdale, brumby, Andalusian etc.).

**Discussion Point:** Read, research and discuss your findings about horses after reading several non-fiction texts.

## FAMILIES AND FAMILY LIFE

**Discussion Point:** What sort of family is the one depicted in this book? For example, dad is seen making lunches for the children (pp 10–11) so there is a sharing of household tasks evinced in that frame. The brother appears to be keen on computers but also likes knitting. What else did you notice about this family?

**Discussion Point:** The home in this book is surrounded by a picket fence, beyond which is a rural scene of a hillside covered in flowers. This landscape is reminiscent of scenes in *Farmhouse* (2022) Sophie Blackall's previous book. What feelings is such a bucolic, rural setting evocative of?

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

<<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/english/>>

The text of this book might be studied in relation to the following aspects of its written narrative:

**Discussion Point:** The first thing to note about this text is that it is written as a series of statements in first person beginning with 'If I was a horse...'

**Activity:** Invite students to write a short text beginning with the words: 'If I was a [?]'. The word they insert will then lead on to the completion of several sentences to make a story.

**Activity:** Test your students' **comprehension** by asking them questions about the written and visual text. For example, at one point the text reads: 'I'd give my sister a ride to school,'. We can see the small child riding the horse. Who is the narrator? Note, too, that in the spreads depicting the parents they are looking at the horse, not at either of the other two children.

## VISUAL LITERACY

<<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/the-arts/visual-arts/>>

The visual text of a picture book combines with the written text to tell the story using the various parts of the book's design and illustrations, as explored below:

**Discussion Point:** The **outer packaging** of the book contains both a **jacket** and a **case (or**

**cover**) – the former showing the horse ascending the stairs of a home (with a portrait of a horse on the wall of the staircase) and then descending wearing a glittery tutu and a party hat, and the latter showing a horse leaping, with the smallest child in this family drawing a hopscotch on the ground behind the animal. The **cover** of a book is an important part of its message. Discuss the information gleaned from these two cover illustrations for this book. [See **Creative Arts** below.]

**Activity:** The **endpapers** provide a drawing lesson in themselves. They depict a grid of three rows on which the horse is traced first as an outline, then shaded, and then coloured in the third row. Encourage students to examine this closely and then to experiment in drawing their own horses. Once drawn, decorate the horse by dressing it in a tutu or another costume. Add collaged materials and glitter to complete the image. [See also **Worksheet 1.**]

**Discussion Point:** The **title page** (pp 4–5) is a double page spread with the title depicted in an open doorway and the entrance to the house decorated in a patterned wallpaper with a painting of an apple on the left of the frame, and a horseshoe acting as a door knocker attached to the door. In the middle of the frame, there is a carved screen in which the details of illustration and design are printed with publication details above, inside a picture frame. There are three pairs of wellington boots beneath the screen. What information or messages does this title page convey?

**Discussion Point:** The author-illustrator Sophie Blackall has designed a work in which patterns and ideas are repeated; there is a great deal of sub-text in the images. The wallpaper in the opening frame (pp 4–5) is similar to the field of yellow flowers which appears on the subsequent frame (pp 6–7). The third frame (pp 8–9) is an aerial view of the home and through the window you can see the father setting meals on the table. In the subsequent frame (pp 10–11) the horse is at the same table eating a sandwich with the two other children of the family, a boy and a girl. The boy has a bag of wool in his room (pp 16–17) and in the third-last frame he is knitting a scarf (pp 24–35). The framed landscape in the kitchen (pp 10–11) is the scene which appears at the end of the book in the horse/narrator’s dream (pp 26–27) and finally, in reality, where the sun is rising over the hill behind the narrator carrying their little sister on their back (pp 28–29). In the narrator’s darkened bedroom (pp 26–27) you can see pictures of horses on the walls and on their bedhead, including the Trojan Horse of Greek mythology, and of course their backpack has an image of a horse on it, as well. Horses traditionally enjoy apples; apart from the artwork featuring an apple (pp 4–5), a bowl of apples appears (pp 10–11) and (pp 24–25). What other details did you notice in this text?

**Activity:** What can you surmise about the characters in this book, by observing their **facial expressions and ‘body language’**? Study each image for insight into how Sophie Blackall’s characters are conveyed visually.

**Activity: Medium** is integral to how picture books are created. On a panel facing the title page there is a note to readers: ‘The illustrations for this book were made using a combination of traditional and digital media, including watercolour, gouache, pencil, fabric, and wallpaper, and assembled in Procreate and Photoshop.’ Encourage students to use such materials and found objects in their own work to create a response to this picture book text. [See also **Worksheet 1.**]

**Activity:** The **colours** used in this book are rich, warm and vibrant with life. Colour your drawing of a horse employing colour in this way.

**Discussion Point:** In each of Sophie Blackall’s books, the wallpaper is often **patterned** and floral. In this book, the mother’s dress is also a vibrant checked geometric pattern. There are two framed folk art works on the wall in the living room (pp 24–25), another common feature of Blackall’s work. Research American Folk Art. Examine the appearance of folk art in other works by Sophie Blackall.

**Discussion Point: Humour** is another element of this text — the horse prancing up and down the stairs on the cover; naughtily chomping on the flowers in the hedge outside the school (pp 12–13); diving into a pool wearing goggles (pp 14–15); participating in a parade in their living room dressed in a tutu and party hat (pp 24–25); standing asleep on a bed with the child’s floral quilt wrapped around their torso (pp 26–27). The odd perspective is part of the humour, for the size of the animal in these cosy rooms is a source of hilarity but also of meaning, for this symbolically represents the child’s chaffing at containment. Invite students to discuss the images and how they make them feel.

**Activity:** Invite students to draw, paint, or collage a scene to accompany the story they wrote above. Create a classroom mural using all the images. [See also **Worksheet 1** below.]

**Activity:** Read other picture book texts about the imagination, or about horses and discuss the ideas they convey. [See **Bibliography**.]

## CREATIVE ARTS

There are many creative activities suggested by this text:

**1. Create a diorama of the horse inside the home** which is depicted in this story. Create another scene in which the horse appears.

See: ‘How to Make a Diorama’ *WikiHow* <<https://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Diorama>>

**2. Create a cardboard Dala (or Dalecarlian) horse in the Swedish carved wooden toy style.**

See:

‘Cardboard Dala Horse (3 Ways)’ *Art Camp Studio*

<<https://www.artcampstudio.com/new-blog/2016/12/3/day-5-cardboard-dala-horse>>

and ‘Dalecarlian horse’ *Wikipedia*

<[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalecarlian\\_horse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalecarlian_horse)>



**3. Colour a folk art image in texta pens** and then frame it. [See **Worksheet 2**.]

**4. Encourage students to study folk art images** and then to design a pattern like the one below but featuring a stylised horse rather than a bird. [See also **Worksheet 5**.]



5. Create a poster to advertise this book.

6. Create a Book Trailer to promote this book. [See **Bibliography**.]

## FURTHER TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH

- Research the work of Sophie Blackall. Compare this book to her other books.
- Students might research this book in comparison to reading other picture books such as those listed in the **Bibliography**.
- Investigate any other topic which you consider is suggested by this text.

## CONCLUSION

Sophie Blackall has created a joyous work about the sheer force of a child's imagination, desire for the freedom of the outdoors, and also, the love of horses!

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR/ ILLUSTRATOR

**Sophie Blackall AM** is an award-winning illustrator of over 50 books for children, including the *New York Times* best-selling *Ivy and Bean* series, the 2016 Caldecott Medal winner, *Finding Winnie: The True Story of the World's Most Famous Bear* and the 2019 Caldecott Medal winner, *Hello Lighthouse*, which she also wrote. She is the four-time recipient of *The New York Times* Best Illustrated Picture Book Award and has worked with UNICEF and Save the Children, UK on global health and literacy initiatives. *Farmhouse* was published to acclaim in 2022, and is shortlisted for the 2023 CBCA Picture Book of the Year award. Originally from Australia, Sophie now splits her time between Brooklyn, New York, and the Catskill Mountains, where she has built a retreat for the children's book community called Milkwood Farm <<https://www.milkwoodfarm.org/>> In June 2022 Sophie was awarded the Order of Australia (AM) for significant service to children's literature.

See: <<https://www.sophieblackall.com/>>

See also:

Blackall, Sophie 'Sophie Blackall presents 'If I was a Horse' Youtube  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oKJkf2UiVE>>

Blackall, Sophie '2016 Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech' *The Horn Book Magazine* June 27, 2016  
<<https://www.hbook.com/story/2016-caldecott-medal-acceptance-by-sophie-blackall>>

Blackall, Sophie '2019 Caldecott Medal Acceptance by Sophie Blackall' *The Horn Book Magazine* June 26, 2019  
<<https://www.hbook.com/story/2019-caldecott-medal-acceptance-by-sophie-blackall>>

O'Sullivan, Joanne 'Caldecott Medalist Opens Retreat for Authors and Artists in the Catskills' *Publishers Weekly* March 15, 2022  
<<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/88771-caldecott-medalist-opens-retreat-for-authors-and-artists-in-the-catskills.html>>

Rich, Susan 'The Audacious Choice of Sophie Blackall: Profile of 2016 Caldecott Medal Winner Sophie Blackall' *The Horn Book Magazine* June 30, 2016  
<<https://www.hbook.com/story/the-audacious-choice-of-sophie-blackall-profile-of-2016-caldecott-medal-winner-sophie-blackall>>

Saxon, Antonia 'Q&A with Sophie Blackall' *Publishers Weekly* September 8, 2022  
<<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-authors/article/90266-q-a-with-sophie-blackall.html>>

Sheahan-Bright, Robyn 'Sophie Blackall: A Profile' *Magpies* Vol 38, Issue 2, May 2023, pp 20–22.





# WORKSHEETS

## WORKSHEET 1. DRAW AND COLLAGE THIS IMAGE

Draw a background to the image below and then paint or decorate the scene you have drawn. You could also use collaged materials and glitter to decorate the image. And you could add a caption or sentence to describe it.



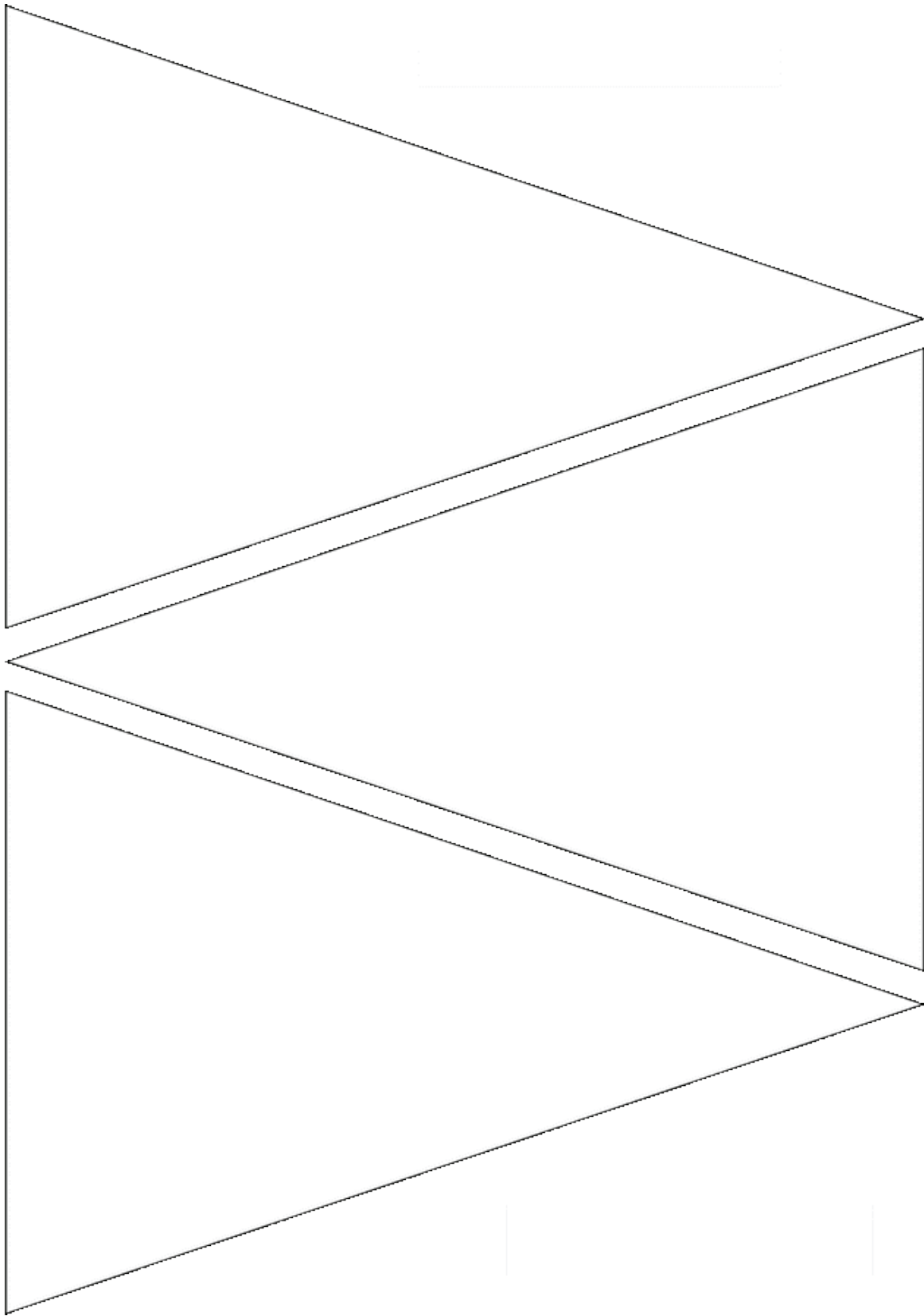
## WORKSHEET 2. FOLK ART TEMPLATE

The template below can be coloured in and then framed.



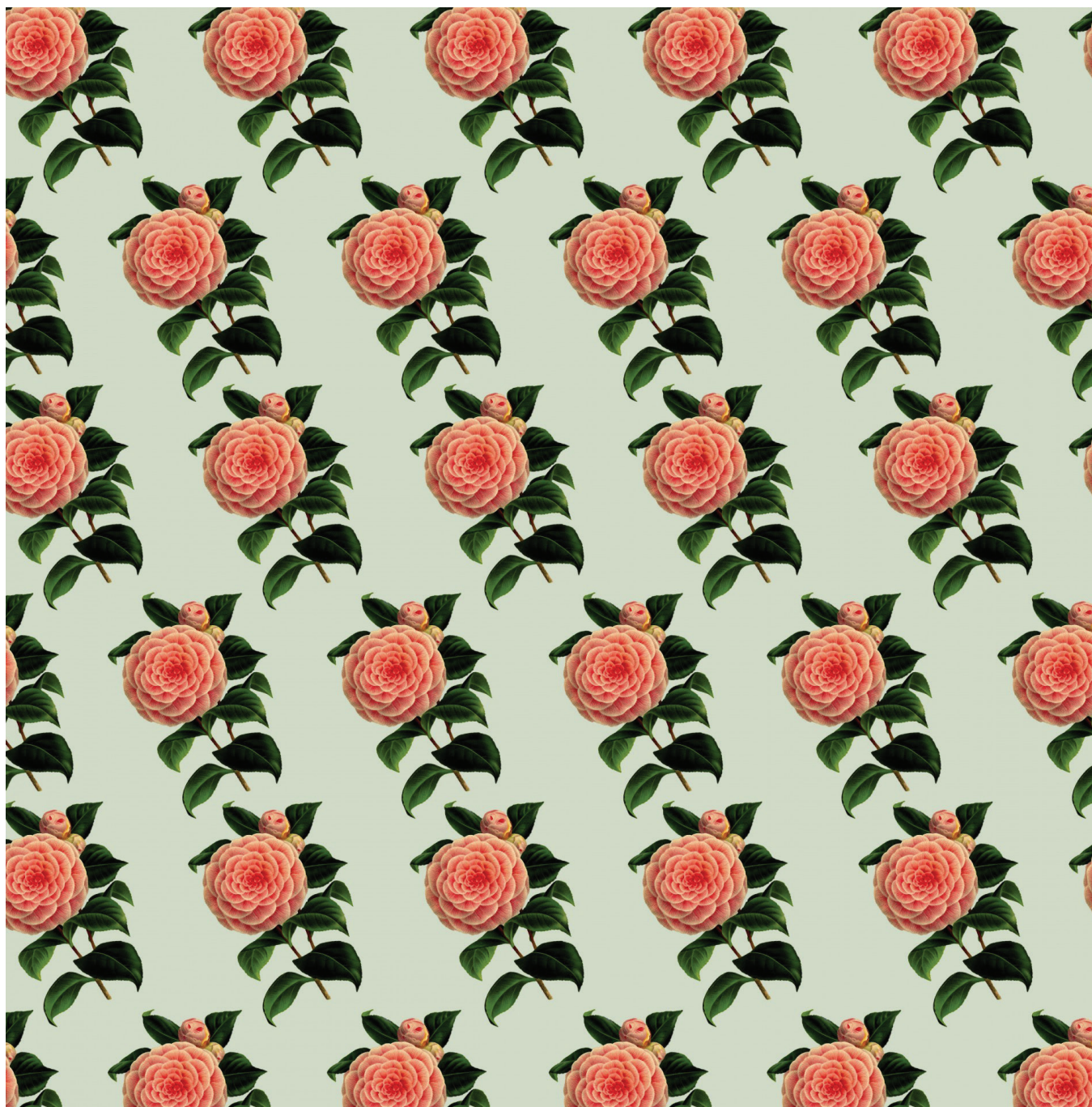
## WORKSHEET 3. PAPER BUNTING

Use the template below to cut out pieces of fabric to make a brightly coloured and patterned bunting to hang in your room, just like the bunting in the room in this book. [See pp 22–23.] Hang the pieces from a ribbon or string.



## WORKSHEET 4. WALLPAPER

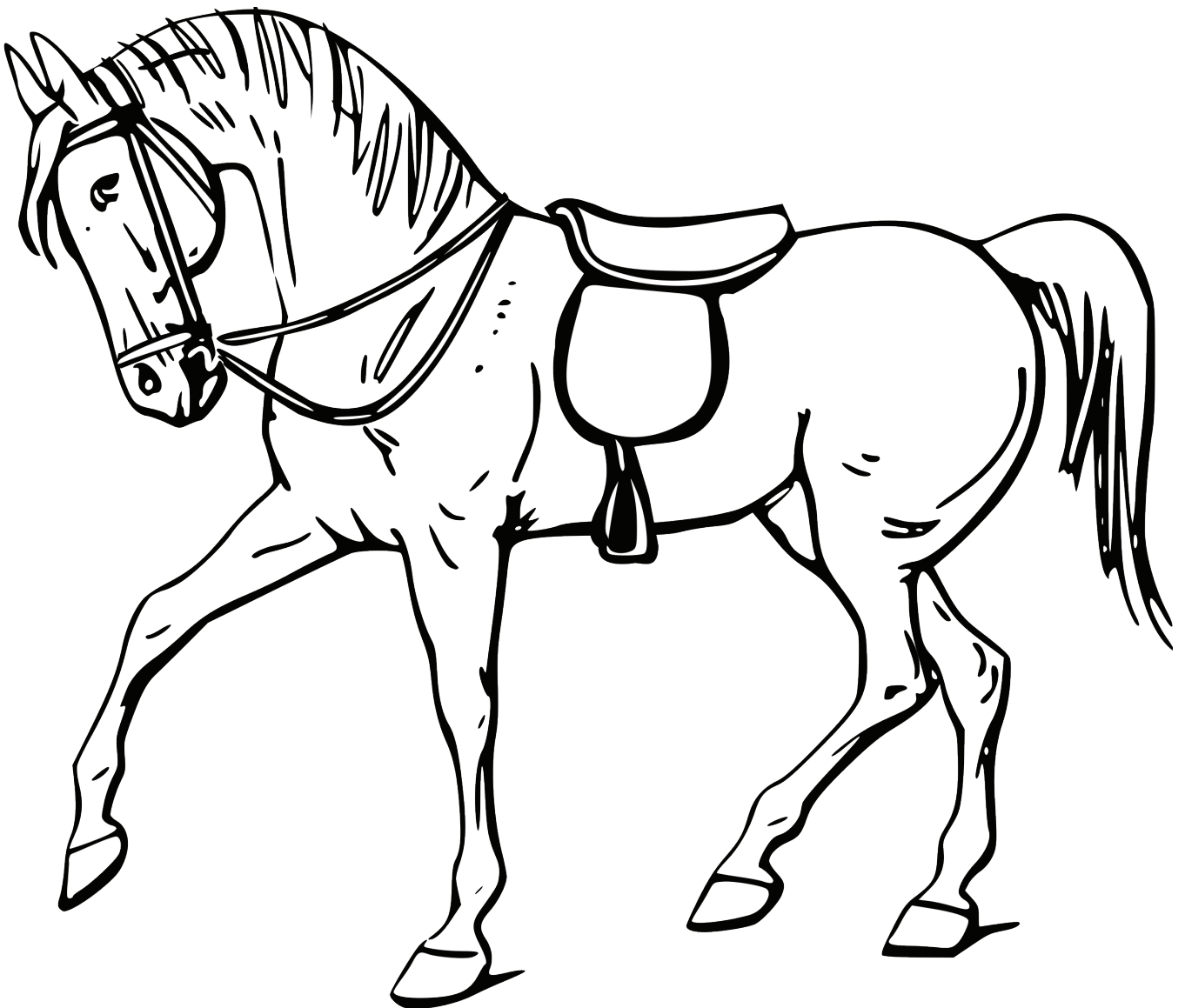
Print the wallpaper below in colour. Then cut it out and use in the diorama you have created under **Creative Arts**. (You may need to print it twice depending on the size or number of walls you wish to decorate.)



## WORKSHEET 5. FELT HORSE DECORATION

Cut out the image below as a template and trace around it onto two pieces of felt. Make a mane and a tail out of threads of wool and glue to the inside of one piece of the felt. Then hand stitch all the way around the outline of the animal and insert some wadding between the two sides before closing it up. (The stitching can be in a different colour as this felt object is intended to be decorative.)

Then use contrasting pieces of felt to make the bridle and saddle in bright primary colours. Glue or sew those pieces on to the outside of the horse. Hang the horse from whatever you wish to as a decoration.



# BIBLIOGRAPHY

## PICTURE BOOKS

- Berger, Samantha *What If?* Ill. by Michael Curato. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2018.
- Collier, Kelly *A Horse Named Steve* Kids Can Press, 2017.
- Cooper, Kelly *If a Horse Had Words* Ill. by Lucy Eldridge. Tundra Books, 2018.
- Demas, Corinne *Once there Was* Ill. by Gemma Cabdevila. Harry N. Abrams, 2023.
- Docherty, Thomas *The Horse That Jumped* HarperCollins, 2021.
- French, Vivian *Hello, Horse* Ill. by Catherine Rayner. (Nature Storybooks) Walker Books, 2018.
- Galing, Ed *Tony* Ill. by Erin Stead. Roaring Brook Press, 2017.
- Godwin, Jane *Arno and his Horse* Ill. by Felicita Sala. Scribe Publications, 2021.
- Hoban, Russell *Rosie's Magic Horse* Ill. by Quentin Blake. Candlewick Press, 2013.
- Jeffers, Susan *My Pony* Little, Brown Young Readers, 2005.
- Lester, Alison *Imagine* Allen & Unwin, 2005, 1989.
- Lester, Alison *Running with the Horses* (Young Readers' Edition) Penguin Australia, 2019.
- Lester, Alison *Noni the Pony* Allen & Unwin, 2010. [See also sequels.]
- Lester, Alison *The Painted Ponies* Allen & Unwin, 2021, 2019.
- Marion, Gianna *If I Had a Horse* Roaring Brook Press, 2018.
- Perry, Sarah *If...* Getty Publications, 2020, 1995.
- Véïsside, Jacqueline *Ruby's Sword* Ill. by Paolo Zakimi. Chronicle Books, 2019.
- Wargin, Kathy-Jo *D is for Dala Horse: A Nordic Countries Alphabet* Weigl Publishers, 2016.
- Weber, Audrey Helen On *The Day the Horse Got Out* Little, Brown Young Readers, 2021.
- See also:  
'21 Best Children's Book About Horses' *Elephant Books*  
<https://elephant-books.com/21-best-childrens-books-about-horses/>

## JUNIOR AND ADULT NON-FICTION

- Bates, Dianne *Horses: Fun Facts and Amazing Stories* Ill. by Sophie Scahill. Big Sky Publishing, 2015.
- Edwards, Elwyn Hartley *The Horse Encyclopedia* Dorling Kindersley, 2023.
- Farrell, Russell *How To Draw Horses and Ponies* Walter Foster Jr, 2018.
- Hall, Kelly Milner *All About Horses: A Kid's Guide to Breeds, Care, Riding and More!* Rockridge Press, 2021.
- Smith, Robyn *Horse Life: the Ultimate Guide to Caring for and Riding Horses for Kids* Rockridge Press, 2021.

## WEBSITES – TEACHING RESOURCES

*American Folk Art Museum*

<<https://folkartmuseum.org/>>

'Cardboard Dala Horse (3 Ways)' *Art Camp Studio*

<<https://www.artcampla.com/new-blog/2016/12/3/day-5-cardboard-dala-horse>>

'Common Horse Colors, Patterns and Markings Explained (with pictures)' by Lucy Robinson  
*Horse Factbook*

<<https://www.horsefactbook.com/guides/horse-colors/>>

'Dalecarlian horse' *Wikipedia*

<[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalecarlian\\_horse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalecarlian_horse)>

'50 Fun Horse Facts for Kids' *Little Learning Corner*

<<https://littlelearningcorner.com/2022/02/50-fun-horse-facts-for-kids.html>>

'Five inspirations from folk art for picture book illustrators' *Margrete Lamond*

<<https://margretelamond.com/blog/5-inspirations-from-folk-art-for-illustrators>>

'Horse' *Wikipedia*

<<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horse>>

'How to Make a Diorama' *WikiHow*

<<https://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Diorama>>

'How To Make a Book Trailer' *Tristan Bancks*

<<https://www.tristanbancks.com/2015/05/how-to-make-book-trailer.html>>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

**Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright AM** operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. In 2011 she was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld Branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, in 2012 the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Australia, and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award. In 2021 she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia.

