



A Bush Christmas

By C J Dennis

illustrated by Dee Huxley

Written over a quarter of a century ago, *A Bush Christmas* is a classic Australian bush ballad. This new publication in the poem-as-a-picture book genre is a wonderful way to introduce primary level students to Australian verse. The coupling of Dennis's gift for telling a yarn and Huxley's delightful illustrations should provide students with a memorable experience of Australian literature — and hopefully leave them wanting more.

Learning Exercises

Appropriate for primary school children from Year Three.

The book has applications in the key learning areas of Literacy, including Drama, and also Science, Art and Music

Activities could culminate in a class Christmas party organized by the students themselves.

The content of the book does not refer to Christmas in religious terms and is suitable reading material for children of all Faiths.

1. LITERACY

The book format.

Class to identify the following:

- The book's title?
- The author's name?
- The illustrator's name?
- The publisher's name and date of publication?
- Locate and read the information about the author.



Visual literacy

Without reading the book, look first at the illustrations:

- What did the family eat for Christmas?
- Compare the mother's Christmas Day with the father's Christmas Day
- What does the exterior design of the house and yard have to say about the weather and environment?

Read and discuss

- Class to read the book silently.
- Discuss what is the style of writing (poem); who are the main characters; have any of the class spent a Christmas in a cold climate, if so did they enjoy it, how was it different; do students eat a hot Christmas meal the same as in the poem; if not, what do they eat; do they make their own Christmas decorations; do they exchange gifts on Christmas Eve (as Europeans migrants usually do) or on Christmas day?
- Class read the book aloud as one, concentrating on the rhythm of the verse.

Interview about Christmases past

By telling o'er again his yarns...Half glimpses of old memories...and all that half-forgotten hallowed joy

Students to interview a parent or another older relative or family friend asking them to describe how they spent Christmas when they were a child – where, who with, what did they eat, including what were their happiest memories, how was Christmas different/the same for them in those days

Writing

The student to compare his/her Christmas celebrations with how that older person celebrated Christmas as a child – what has changed, what's stayed the same.

Drama

Class to rehearse and perform the poem-as-a-play.

Select students to play Dad, Mum and Rogan for speaking roles, and the two children, with rest of class acting as narrator. Those with parts to play could dress in character.



2. ART

Students to make backdrops required for presentation of the poem-as-a-play.

First of all, however, students will need to decide on the two or three simple backdrops.

Divide into groups to complete tasks.

Or

Make Christmas decorations for the classroom and Christmas cards for family members. Students of other Faiths could make Happy Holiday greeting cards instead.

3. SCIENCE

1. Gum trees (Eucalypts)

The sun burns hotly thro' the gums...

(i) Introduce the topic. Discuss:

- What is the correct term for gum trees? (A: Eucalypts)
- Why are Eucalypts called gum trees? (A: Trunk exudes sticky gum-like substance)
- What are the names of some varieties of gum trees? (A: e.g. yellow, red, blue, ghost, lemon-scented, stringybark, ironbark)
- What makes gum trees ideally suited to Australian climatic conditions? (A: Can withstand dry conditions/ regenerate after fire)
- What native animal depends solely on gum leaves for food? (A: Koala)
- What sort of medicinal products are made with the eucalyptus oil extracted from the leaves of some species of gum tree? (A: e.g. soaps, gargles, lozenges, inhalants)

(ii) Send class into the school yard (or home garden or local park/paddock):

- Locate gum trees. How many different varieties are there?



— Compare the bark, trunk, foliage including shape and colour of leaves, flowers, scent, gum nuts. Make notes and sketches

— Look at the base of the gum trees – do they shed bark, drop branches?

(iii) Follow-up: research in pairs.

— Identify one variety of gum tree

— Where else in Australia does it grow?

— When does it flower and what do the flowers look like?

— Any other interesting information

Excellent gum tree references:

— <http://asgap.org.au> (then click on “eucalypts”)

— Google “gum trees” then click on “Burkes Backyard >Fact Sheets >Top Ten Gum Trees”

4. MUSIC

Learn to sing Home Among The Gum Trees

(Go to Alldownunder.com then click on “Uniquely Australian” then go to “More great Aussie songs”, for lyrics to Home Among The Gum Trees)

5. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A major contributor to Australian literature in the early twentieth century, CJ Dennis (1876-1938) was a prolific writer of both poetry and prose from a young age. He spent most of his working life as a journalist-in-verse. His ballads, written in the “language of the larrikin”, resonated with the public and were hugely popular, selling many tens of thousands of copies.

His most famous work, *The Sentimental Bloke*, has been made into a film and a musical comedy.

In his later years he gained great pleasure from writing for children. *A Bush Christmas* was published in 1931.

6. ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Dee Huxley has been short-listed twice for The Children’s Book Council of Australia Picture Book of the Year award. She lives in Sydney and teaches illustration and design part-time.