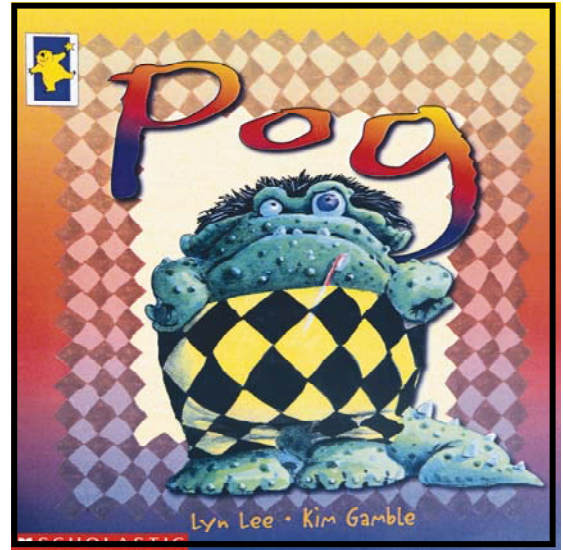


TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

Pog

Written by Lyn Lee
Illustrated by Kim Gamble



The story

Pog is a little monster. He's two metres tall and as brave as a bathtub full of sharks. Pog is afraid of nothing - well, just one thing: human children. Every night he checks carefully in his bedroom, and especially in the wardrobe, to make sure no children are lying in wait for him.

When it's time for Pog to start going to school, his mother tells him he's too little to go by himself. His teasing big brother Vandal frightens him by telling him that children hide in the bushes, lying in wait for little monsters who come wandering past alone.

And that's exactly what happens. When the two monsters are returning home from school, they come across a child crying in the bushes. Vandal is terrified and flees; but 'Pog thought he must be dreaming. He stood and looked at the child. It was so small, so sad and so damp that he couldn't be afraid of it.' Pog takes the child home, to the consternation of the rest of his monster family, and that night he asks Tom to sit in his wardrobe. ('Everyone knows that's where children hide, ready to jump out and scare little monsters,' explains Pog.)

That night Pog dreams Tom away, and in his dream he sees the boy happily reunited with his parents. Pog is sure he'll never, ever be afraid of anything again, and he isn't - well, not very much!

The author: Lyn Lee

It happens rarely that a new writer with real talent is discovered in the tottering pile of unsolicited submissions that an editor wades through each week. However, this was the case with Lyn Lee.

Lyn originally intended her manuscript to be considered as a potential Dipper (a now defunct range of books once published by Omnibus for younger readers). She was 'devastated' when told that Dippers had been discontinued, but sent in her story just the same. 'In case of rejection,' she wrote, 'the manuscript can be put in the recycling bin.'

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

The author cont...

Pog never went near the recycling bin. A quick read through the manuscript was enough to convince us that Lyn was a superb storyteller, and that *Pog* was a wonderful little character. At 1467 words the manuscript was much too long for a picture book, but it responded well to redrafting. In the tradition of *Possum Magic*, which was also reworked from a much longer work, *Pog* shed some 800 words to be transformed into the fluent, beautifully structured text it has now become.

Lyn Lee has no particular background in writing, although she did have a short story ('Dream House') published in *The School Magazine* in 1999. She started her tertiary training at Art School, 'where I went to a lot of parties' and joined a rock band as a guitarist. But, she says, 'somehow or other I ended up married with three children and a dog and living in suburbia. Believe me, that's probably been the wildest experience of all.'

Her interest in books for children began when she became a mother herself. 'I read to [my children]. I was enchanted by the enormous amount of wonderful books available. I thought I'd like to have a go at writing one.'

Lyn still lives in suburban Sydney, but now her writing has become a much greater focus in her life. She is certainly no 'one-hit wonder': her next picture book text, *Eight*, has already been accepted by Omnibus, and she has plans for many more.

The writing of *Pog*

Lyn writes: 'As a child I was scared of monsters. My children went through the same stage. Telling a child that there is no such thing as a monster is no help at all. If the child has a strong imagination, then the child can't help but believe in them, and the fear is real even though the monster is not. One day I was doodling, thinking about this. I drew a cartoon of a monster sitting in bed, covers drawn up under its chin, and shivering with fright. Then I drew the grinning face of a child peeping out from under the bed. My kids thought it was very funny. So I wrote the story.'

After writing *Pog*, one of the first things Lyn learned was that the author of a picture book must leave room for the illustrator; so among the first pieces of text to be jettisoned were some interesting but superfluous descriptions. Just for interest, here is the first paragraph of the original draft: *Pog's home was a hole underground. It was very roomy, dark and gloomy, full of cobwebs and fat spiders and bats hanging in untidy rows. There were moans and groans as the wind whistled through the tunnels and sometimes yellow eyes peered out of corners. It was perfect.*

Pog lived with his mother who was as busy as a dung beetle, and his dad ...

By deleting most of this and starting the story with the last line [*Pog lived with his mother*], the reader is immediately confronted by *Pog's* extraordinary family - and Kim Gamble's superbly atmospheric paintings are allowed to create the background.

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

The illustrator: Kim Gamble

Kim Gamble has been for many years a popular and outstanding illustrator of children's books. He was inspired to become involved in this particular creative field for the same reason as Lyn Lee decided to try writing children's stories: because he had children of his own.

Born in Sydney, the youngest of four children, Kim had been encouraged to draw since he was little, but 'never really made a living out of it before'. He spent ten years working for a small Sydney publisher, followed by two years in advertising, and then started doing freelance work for *The School Magazine*. The magazine editor, Anna Fienberg, is herself a writer, and loved Kim's work so much that when she wrote her book *The Magnificent Nose and Other Marvels*, she requested that he illustrate it. *The Magnificent Nose* went on to win the CBC's Book of the Year (Younger Readers) Award in 1992, and Kim has been inundated with illustration work ever since.

Kim's titles include a number by Anna Fienberg (*The Hottest Boy Who Ever Lived* and the ever-growing list of *Tashi* titles), as well as *Arabella* by Wendy Orr, *Let's Escape!* By Mike Dumbleton, *First Day* by Margaret Wild, and the *Minton* series of books. He is a winner of the Crichton Award for Illustration (1992).

Kim loved the character of *Pog* immediately, and saw the text as being all about 'our own (human) monstrosity and our childhood fears'. He prefers stories about 'love and feelings', and says: 'A good illustrator has to be an actor as well. You've got to put yourself in the head of each character that you're drawing and imagine their feelings in order to be able to draw them ... [You] have to be able to interpret it in the same way as an actor, even if it's within your own head.'

Kim's artwork for *Pog* has been done in his characteristic watercolour and pencil, and reveals both his sense of humour and his fascination with detail. Rounded shapes, use of space and perspective, and a generally low-key palette with splashes of vivid colour, all contribute to the way he conveys the variety of emotions expressed in the story. One of the defining characteristics of *Pog* is the way it combines wit and fun with a sense of poignancy. The appeal of the little monster *Pog* is that he is at once fierce and vulnerable, and Kim's portrayal of him beautifully conveys both these qualities.

Notes on the story

Why has Lyn Lee chosen to write about a monster who is scared of children? Why didn't she write about a child who was scared of monsters? What is the effect of this reversal?

- The central idea of *Pog* shows us straight away that we are in a topsy-turvy world: after all, aren't human children supposed to be afraid of monsters? At once we know that the story is giving us a specifically humorous slant on a favourite subject - childish fears and how to overcome them. One of the best ways of overcoming fear is through humour, and Lyn's clever dislocation of the norm provides abundant opportunities for this.
- Presenting us with the unexpected always makes us think. It casts a different light, creates a different perspective. (Think of all the versions of fractured fairytales, such as *The Frog*

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

- *Princess.*) Pog is shown as being both like and unlike us. He is clearly a little monster, and we don't expect a monster to be afraid of anything. The fact that he does have such feelings makes him 'like us': we relate to him and sympathise with his fears. Apart from his appearance, Pog's life is in its essentials exactly that of a human child. He has a mother and a father and an older brother and a baby sister and a grandmother. His baby sister is a bit of a trial and his older brother is mean to him. He brushes his teeth before he goes to bed. He goes to school with a packed lunch in his backpack. Given all these likenesses to human children, his monster qualities are the more extraordinary, comical and larger-than-life.

Pog is an ugly, warty green monster with one eye bigger than the other. He is also a very lovable little character. How do the text and illustrations create this paradox?

- Pog himself constantly asserts his own size and strength, his courage and independence. His private terror of children is very much at odds with his own image of himself; and this self-deception is a very endearing quality, as is the image of a monster in bed at night with the nightlight on to chase away the shadows. (It's important to remember that Pog's great fear is of something he has never seen or experienced, so his fear is entirely the product of his imagination.)
- Like many elder brothers, Vandal knows of his little brother's fear and teases him about it. Vandal makes himself feel big and important by terrifying Pog - and this is another thing that makes us empathise with Pog. Pog is initially the victim, but ultimately the hero: another classic fairytale scenario.
- The illustrations deliberately show Pog as being grotesque; but he is also very comical - and details like the backpack and the toothbrush constantly reinforce his humanity. The humour defuses any feeling that he is frightening or ugly.
- Pog has humanity. Unlike the bigger and more powerful looking Vandal, he has the ability to rationalise his fear of children. When he sees a child for the first time, he can separate the reality from his imagined view of it - something the rest of his family cannot do. Mum responds to the child Tom with protective fear, Nanna with ignorance, Vandal with terror, Dad with aggression. None of them has Pog's strength. Pog shows us that *there is nothing to fear but fear itself*, and this is a very positive message.

Pog is all about things not being what they seem. What are some particular instances of this?

- First and foremost, of course, Pog is not what he seems! He looks grotesque but really he's sensitive and fearful. His name emphasises his lack of scariness: it's short and funny (compare this with his brother's name - Vandal - and his baby sister's - Bedlam. What do these names imply?).
- The illustrations are full of details that require a 'double take'. For instance, Pog's bedside lamp is a jack-o'-lantern. His lunchbox contains a lunch that may be alive. His grandmother's pot plants move around and perform domestic tasks. Mum wears a carpenter's belt containing an

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

axe, pliers, a wrench, a rake - and a baby's bottle, and a mobile phone. She has frivolously painted toenails, but her apron is stained with something that looks suspiciously like blood. Vandal carries a mace to school rather than a tennis racquet or a cricket bat. Pog's wardrobe bears an uncanny resemblance to its owner: open the door, and a family of bats hangs inside, but no clothes. Everywhere familiar things have been given a twist of eccentricity.

- Look at the illustration where Tom goes back to his parents. See how Pog's world and the human world blend and overlap. This is the climax of the story, where reality and the world of imagination become one. (Compare this with the climax of Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, when Max returns home to his own bedroom.) What does this illustration say? Has Tom dreamed Pog, or has Pog dreamed Tom? Which scene is reality? Compare the two sides of the illustration, both the linking elements and the contrasts.

For teachers

Childhood fears. What sorts of things are frightening to children? How do they cope with their fears? Are these fears always realistic? Are we more afraid of things we have never experienced, or of things we actually have knowledge of? Name some 'real' fears, and some that are not 'real'. Talk about how they can be overcome.

Monsters. Are the monsters shown in *Pog* frightening? Why not? Describe some monsters that *are* frightening. What makes them frightening?

Bullying. Vandal enjoys terrorising Pog, and playing on his fears. Why does he do this? Who is the stronger, Vandal or Pog? Why?

Body language and emotions. Pog's state of mind is revealed in the illustrations. Look at his eyes, his ears, his general body language to see his emotional state. Talk about how our bodies can reveal how we feel.

Dreams. Pog says he has to 'dream [Tom] away'. Why? Talk about dreams and nightmares.

Extended reading. Find some other books on the following:

- **Monsters** (especially friendly monsters): *Where the Wild Things Are* is one to start with. Roald Dahl's *The BFG* is a classic story of a friendly monster/giant; and there are also traditional fairy stories such as *Beauty and the Beast*, in which appearance belies character. Other titles include Michael Dugan's *Monster Dreams*, Susan King's *Rosie the Night Fright Monster*, and Jenny Wagner's *Amy's Monster*.
- **Dreams**, particularly books that deal with bizarre dreams. (*Where the Wild Things Are* is also about a dream/fantasy world.)
- **Bullies.**
- **Dislocations** (eg Roald Dahl's *Revoltin' Rhymes*, where the unexpected puts a new twist on a familiar story).