

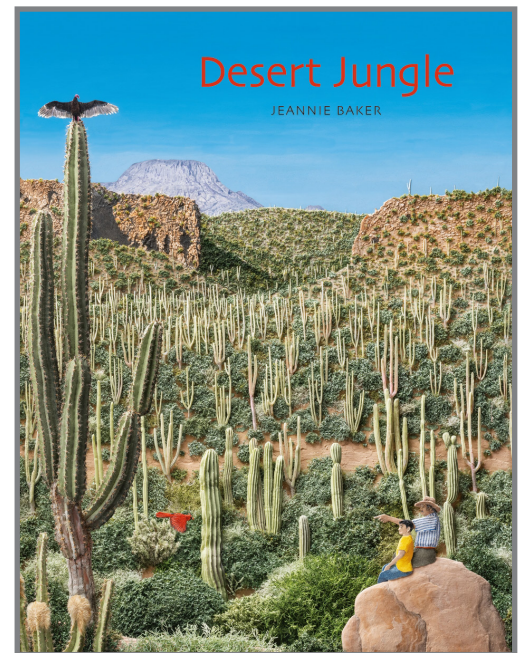
Desert Jungle

AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR
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RECOMMENDED FOR: Lower Primary



SYNOPSIS

Chico’s grandpa has taken him on holiday where he grew up as a child, out in the desert. Chico has no interest in exploring the land—the desert jungle frightens him, and he’d much rather play on his tablet. Grandpa decides that it is time to show Chico the secrets and the wonders that the desert has to offer so that he will not fear it but, instead, welcome it, embrace it and help protect it. Grandpa shows Chico paths through the cactus and the scrub, teaches Chico the plants’ names—ocotillo, cholla, cirios, pin cushion, fishhook—and, soon, Chico begins to understand the wonders of the wild. He learns the value of watching, waiting and listening for all the life that hums within his desert home.

ABOUT THE CREATOR

Jeannie Baker is the author and illustrator of a number of award-winning children’s picture books, including *Where the Forest Meets the Sea*, the critically acclaimed dual language picture book *Mirror* and her previous masterpiece *Circle*. Her characteristic use of mixed media to create detailed and elaborate collages is stunning and unique. *Window* was shortlisted for the Kate Greenaway Medal in Great Britain and both *Window* and *Mirror* won the Children’s Book Council of Australia Picture Book of the Year Award. Baker was the IBBY Australia nominee for the prestigious 2018 Hans Christian Andersen Award for Illustration. Her work focuses on a diverse range of issues including: family, society, sustainability and the environment. Baker was nominated for the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2021 and 2022. Originally from the UK, she lives in Australia.

Learn more about Jeannie Baker at www.jeanniebaker.com.

STUDY NOTES

CRITICAL LITERACY

- Before reading, examine the cover and discuss what the book might be about and any other suggested message in the cover design. Note the double page spread on the front and back cover depicting a lush desert landscape with no blurb, how is this wordless image a good introduction to the text?
- The title of this book, in itself, is provocative—pairing the two seemingly opposite words ‘desert’ and ‘jungle’ prompts the reader to ask questions and to question their presumptions about a desert landscape. As a class, look at pictures of deserts and jungles and then read the *Desert Jungle*. How is the landscape different in the story from the landscapes of the individual deserts and jungles?

THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

Desert Ecology including that of the Sonoran Desert, Mexico

- Under The Setting in the back of the book we are told that the Sonoran is the hottest desert in Mexico with average annual rainfall less than 125mm (5 inches). Research the many features of this incredible ecosystem.
- ‘The Sonoran Desert (Spanish: Desierto de Sonora) is a desert in North America and an ecoregion that covers the northwestern Mexican states of Sonora, Baja California, and Baja California Sur, as well as part of the southwestern United States (in Arizona and California).’ (Wikipedia) Research the terrain and refer to maps as you study this desert.
- The Sonoran Desert landscape is full of vegetation: ‘Grandpa shows me amazing plants . . . ocotillo, cholla, cirio, pincushion, fishhook . . .’ (p 17) Research some of the plants of this desert area also mentioned in The Setting. Research these plants further.
- Research some of the animals of this desert area mentioned in The Setting: ‘Mountain lions, bighorn sheep, peninsular pronghorn deer, frogs, chameleons, rattlesnakes, tarantulas, eagles, hawks, and owls.’
 - Make a list of other animals which might be found in this environment.
- ‘Petroglyphs (carvings) and paintings (some prehistoric) can be found on rocks and in rock shelters and caves. It is believed these were created by different groups of hunter-gatherers and fisherfolk at various times over more than 7,000 years.’ (The Setting). Research these artistic remnants of past cultures.
- This book invites readers to study desert ecology in all parts of the world; encourage students to research a variety of deserts.
- Invite students to study Australian desert ecology. Identify Australia’s ten deserts. What distinguishes each of these deserts? Identify features of each of them.
 - Many types of flora and fauna are found in each of these Australian deserts. Research the flora and fauna found in each of these deserts.

Sustainability/Loss of Habitat

- Research some of the threats to this habitat which the author tells us include ‘land sales, sub-divisions, mining, tourism and industrial development.’ (The Setting). What other threats might endanger this environment, for example, urbanisation?

Nature—Deficit Disorder

- Richard Louv, co-founder and chairman emeritus of the Children & Nature Network, advocates for greater attention to the fact that children often have no connection with their local environment which presents a problem. He suggests that our environment will also be at risk if the next generation has no connection to nature. Discuss this concept.
- Invite students to name any plants or animals which are found in their local bushland area. This exercise could result in a discussion of how much or how little we observe in our own local ecology.
- Discuss with students the messages contained in this text. The boy lives on the edge of the desert but has no knowledge or interest in it. Invite students to reflect on this in relation to their own environment.

Climate Change

- Invite students to investigate the research into climate changes and its impact on the Sonoran Desert and on other deserts throughout the world.
 - Then research the effects of climate change on Australian deserts.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERACY

Plot & Structure

- The text details the boy’s journey to the desert and the change in his attitudes as he spends time there. It is framed by two wordless images of the boy sitting on a rock. Discuss and create a storyline for a tale set in this landscape using a similar structure.

Style and Use of Language

- Jeannie Baker’s writing style is spare, suggestive and lyrical. Discuss the language devices the author, Jeannie Baker uses in the below examples from *Desert Jungle*, then see what other language devices you can find while reading the story.

- 'I hear scrunching, scratching, snapping' (p 12)
- 'At times I hide in the shadows, watching, waiting, listening . . . and sometimes I am gifted to see a wonder of the wild.' (p 34)

Writing Exercises

- Invite students to write a story set in the Sonoran Desert using some of the information they have gleaned from studying this text.
- Write an acrostic poem using the letters in the words SONORAN DESERT.

VISUAL LITERACY & VISUAL ARTS ACTIVITIES

Plot & Cyclical Structure

- Every element in a picture book is designed to contribute to its meaning; elements are brought together into a sequence of images which tell a story in a filmic manner. Text and images should work together—images extend the text's meaning. Encourage students to read both the written and the visual text closely, and to interpret them creatively. How do the images add to the written text?
- Examine the front and back cover which depicts a continuous landscape. After reading, discuss the cover's relationship to the text.
- Examine each double page spread and invite students to interpret its meaning and content using the following discussion questions and activities:
 - What does this picture suggest about the boy's interests? (p 5)
 - What time of the day would you imagine this depicts? (pp 6–7)
 - What plants can you identify in this image? eg. Cirio. (pp 8–9)
 - What bird can you see on the roof of the shack? (pp 10–11)
 - The image is powerfully atmospheric. The unknown plants loom menacingly over the boy and frighten him. They really do resemble a jungle. How does the boy's body language and the drawing of the plants increase the foreboding nature of this image? (pp 12–13)
 - How does this beautiful image depict the diversity of this desert? (pp 16–17)
 - How does this image differ emotionally from the earlier image of the ranch house in close up? (p 19)
 - Each of these small images represent the diversity of this ecosystem. Research any one of them. (pp 20–21)
 - The collage images cleverly suggest the wind as the tree branches are depicted blowing horizontally. How does perspective work to enhance the physicality of this image? (pp 22–23)
 - The boy and the animal are framed in the cave entrance. What does the image suggest emotionally? (pp 24–25)
 - The artist's image on this and the previous page includes on the left hand side a Petroglyph which the boy hasn't noticed. What else do you notice in this spread? (pp 26–27)
 - What emotions are suggested by the colours used here? (pp 28–29)
 - Discuss how this image suggests the ancient nature of this ecosystem. (pp 30–31)
 - Invite students to identify the features in this landscape. What bird can we see? (pp 32–33)
 - What does the design of this page, with the boy diminished by the rocks, suggest? What animal appears in the foreground? (pp 34–35)

COMPREHENSION

- What other name does the Cirio tree have in English? (Boojum tree.)
- What does Grandpa call his grandson? (Chico [Spanish for small child].)
- What does Grandpa describe as beautiful? (A Gopher Snake.)
- What is the Spanish name for the Sonoran Desert? (Desierto de Sonora.)
- What is the largest city in the Sonoran Desert? (Phoenix, Arizona.)
- Which cactus will only grow in the Sonoran Desert? (The giant Saguaro cactus.)
- The Valley of the Cirios covers a third of Baja, California. What is its name in Spanish? (Valle de los Cirios.)
- What is the red bird which features on the cover of this book and on p 32? (Desert Cardinal bird.)
- What animal does the boy discover in the cave? (Coyote.)

- What small creature standing on its hind legs appears on the far right hand in the image on p 17? (Antelope squirrel.)
- What creature with a banded tail appears on the far right hand in the image on p 35? (The Ringtail [Bassariscus astutus].)