

# Afloat

AUTHOR

**KIRLI SAUNDERS**

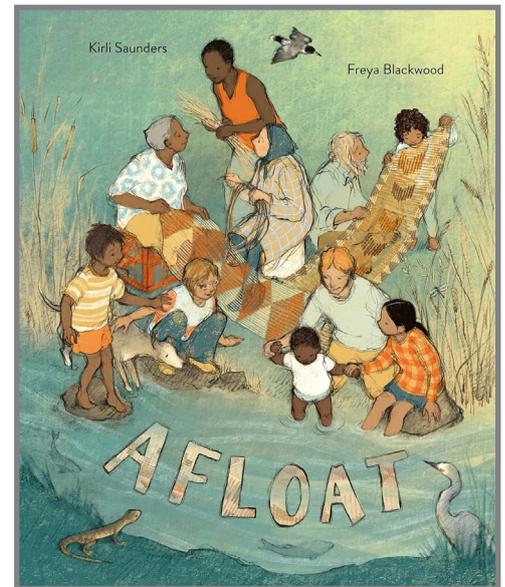
ILLUSTRATOR

**FREYA BLACKWOOD**

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**RECOMMENDED FOR:** Lower Primary



## SYNOPSIS

*Afloat* is a story that explores the impact of climate change, particularly on First Nations peoples; how climate change can drive the further dispossession and displacement of First Nations peoples from their homelands.

The story follows an Elder and child as they gather the materials they need to weave a raft. In subtle, poetic language, writer Kirli Saunders describes the practice of handing down knowledge and coming together as a community. Freya Blackwood's illustrations are similarly gentle, inviting readers to bring their own interpretations and experiences to the story. All of this is brought together in a simple but ultimately hopeful narrative that invites readers to consider how they might come together with their own communities to create the future they want.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kirli Saunders is a proud Gunai Woman who rarely stays in her lane. She's an award-winning multidisciplinary artist, writer, singer-songwriter and consultant. Kirli creates to connect, to make change. In 2022, she was awarded an Order of Australia Medal for her contribution to the arts. Kirli's books have been celebrated by multiple literary awards, such as the Prime Minister's and the Queensland, Victorian and Western Australian Premiers' Literary awards, the Children's Book Council Australia awards and the Australian Book Industry awards. Her titles include *Afloat*, *The Land Recalls You*, *Returning*, *Our Dreaming*, *Bindi*, *Kindred* and *The Incredible Freedom Machines*.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Freya Blackwood is an award-winning illustrator of children's books, who draws with a distinct style that is warm, perceptive and immediately recognisable. Since publishing her first picture book in 2003, she has won multiple awards, including the prestigious Kate Greenaway Medal, and worked with writers such as Libby Gleeson, Margaret Wild, Jan Ormerod, Nick Bland and Danny Parker. Freya lives in Orange, New South Wales, with her daughter, Ivy.

## THEMES

- First Nations
- Climate change
- Community
- Creativity
- Connection
- Weaving

## STUDY NOTES

### THEMES

#### Community and Connection

- In *Afloat*, we see the many roles weaving can play: it's a useful life skill, a way of passing on cultural knowledge, a creative practice and a way of coming together and creating community. Describe the community you see in the book. Who makes up your community? What are some of the things that you do together?
- Discuss the way that the author, Kirli Saunders, uses the language of weaving to also capture the way that community comes together. One example of this is 'to form bonds'. What other examples can you find?

#### Climate Change

- In her author's note, Kirli Saunders writes that '*Afloat* sits in the broader global, political context of the climate crisis. It is written for this time of rising seas, where First Nations Peoples particularly are dispossessed of their homelands and displaced.' Discuss this statement. Are there any words or phrases that you don't understand? If so, look them up and discuss their meaning in context. Describe some of the signs of climate change that are evident in the book.
- What do you think this story suggests about the future?

#### First Nations Knowledge

- Author Kirli Saunders notes how connection to homeland or Country is vital to First Nations peoples: it is part of their identity, and they have a strong relationship with and a deep understanding of the environment they live in. However, as a result of colonisation, First Nations peoples are not often consulted with on the treatment and management of their homelands. They are also often not allowed to live on their homelands and with their communities. This creates a barrier for them to pass on their knowledge or for younger First Nations peoples to learn about their homeland. Discuss how First Nations knowledge might be helpful in working through climate change.
- Research recent climate events that could have been prevented with First Nations knowledge of how to treat the land. Some examples you could discuss with students include #TorresStrait8 <<https://ourislandsourhome.com.au>> or the floods on Bundjalung Country <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/aug/18/the-floods-tell-us-the-river-is-sick-we-should-listen-to-indigenous-knowledge-to-help-country-heal>>.

### WRITING STYLE

- The language in *Afloat* is careful and poetic, rich with double meaning. Many of the words describe both the act of weaving (literal meaning) and the act of coming together (the metaphorical meaning). Discuss the difference between literal and metaphorical meanings. Ask students to come up with their own metaphors to describe their communities.
- The language is also very active, connecting people and place through action. To describe this action, the author uses verbs, or 'doing words'. Make a list of the verbs in the book. Can you come up with your own to describe the same actions?
- Think of an event or practice that brings your community together. Write a short narrative that describes it, trying to use a metaphor and active verbs to bring it to life for your reader.

### ILLUSTRATION STYLE

- Freya Blackwood's illustrations follow the river through Country, showing the way that people come together and collect all the things needed to weave. At first, the illustrations are realistic in the way they represent people and place, however as the woven creation starts to come together, they become more fantastical, until finally the whale is revealed, flying into the future.
  - What do you think the whale represents?
  - How do these final images make you feel?
  - Explore the very last page of the book – describe how the characters look in this image.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- Have students complete the following activities about weaving:
  - Define weaving.

- List woven objects and the fibres and plants used. List which countries or places these plants originate from.
- Draw or paint the objects and the plants that make them.
- Collect examples of different weaving to allow students to look closely, visualise, feel and hold them and see them first-hand.
- Elders, including grandparents and adults, play a crucial role in every child's life as they care for and guide children while passing on cultural values and understandings. Guide students to make a list of essential adults in your life, including those you admire. Identify why they are significant and what they teach and share. Pay extra attention to students who may find this activity challenging due to family circumstances and provide examples of people who are not family, if needed.
- First Nation Australians have a diverse range of weaving practices, and contemporary Aboriginal weavers value the connectivity and communal nature of weaving, which strengthens community cohesiveness. Invite a local First Nations weaver to teach weaving to students and bring different weavers to showcase diversity. Many weavers offer weaving workshops.
- Different types of plants are used for weaving. It is essential to understand their habitat and importance in the ecosystem. Plants have a vital role in biodiversity and serve multiple functions. For example, animals use them as food sources, shelters, nurseries for their young ones and nests for giving birth. Additionally, plants play a crucial role in maintaining the health of waterways, promoting soil health and reducing greenhouse gases caused by human development. Consider creating a mini weaving garden or visiting local botanical gardens to teach students about the multifunctionality of plants.
- Weaving is an ancient hand-made practice. Weaving styles originate from various places across the world. Weavers' woven designs, patterns and plants are specific to their places and countries of origin. Pick a specific region or country and draw the different types of weaving techniques, patterns and plants.
- Identify man-made and natural environments. Ask where the water comes from in both environments, what happens if the water is unclean and poisoned, and who does this effect/impact.
- Sea levels are rising; what communities and countries are impacted by rising sea levels, such as the Torres Strait Islands?

### Comprehension

- The river in the book runs through many different locations—what are they?
- What do the characters in the book have to do to before they start weaving?
- In the story, 'to yarn' describes the act of conversation, as well as the act of weaving. Can you see this happening in the story? (The word 'yarn' is often used in Australia by First Nations and non- First Nations peoples to describe having an informal chat with family and friends.)
- What are the characters in the story weaving?
- Why do you think the book is called *Afloat*?
- There's a line in the book that says 'we are here to brave the storm'. What do you think 'the storm' is? What are some of the storms currently faced by communities across the world?
- How would you describe the relationship between old and young people in the book?
- The illustrator says that she loves *Afloat* because it made her feel something emotionally. What emotions does the book make you feel? Why?

AUTHOR OF NOTES  
**KIRLI SAUNDERS**

AUTHOR OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES  
**KYLIE CALDWELL**