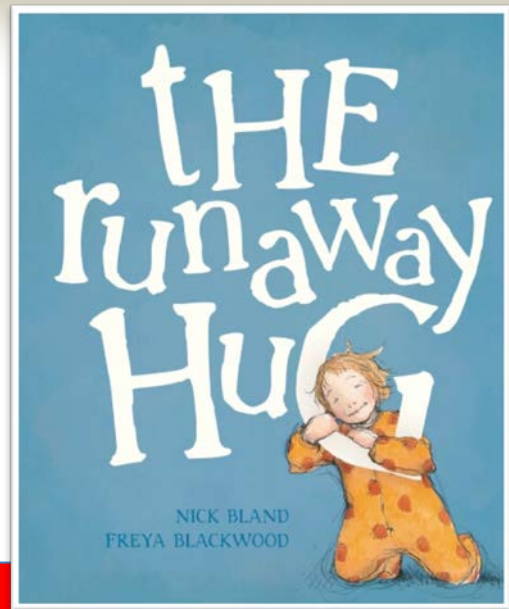


# The Runaway Hug

Nick Bland

Illus. Freya Blackwood



## Synopsis

*The Runaway Hug* is an endearing and funny picture book about family life for Early Childhood readers age 3+.

Lucy lives in a busy house: Mummy is doing the laundry at the end of the day, Daddy is watching football on TV, her twin brothers are fighting over a toy plane, Lily the baby has got into the kitchen cupboards and is about to paint the floor with peanut butter, tomato sauce and other interesting substances, and Annie – well, Annie is discovering how long a roll of toilet paper can be.

But Lucy has cleaned her teeth and is ready for bed. All she needs to finish the day off is a hug, and when Mummy says she has only one left, Lucy promises to bring it back. She runs through the house, passing the hug on to all the other members of the family in turn, and each of them gives it back, until Annie the dog takes off with it. Out the door, up and down the stairs, in and out of every room she goes, and just when Lucy despairs at having lost Mummy's last hug, Annie bounds out of nowhere and gives it back to her – all nice and slobbery.

Lucy gives the hug back to Mummy and asks if she can have a kiss in return. Luckily, Mummy has plenty of those, so she gives her one, just before it's time for Lucy to go to sleep.

## Activities

Although blurb writers would call the story of *The Runaway Hug* 'heartwarming', it avoids sentimentality – largely through Freya Blackwood's illustrations. The setting is clearly an ordinary suburban family home. The rooms are busy and messy; this is a child-friendly place, because there are toys scattered all over the floor, the baby is safe but free to explore the food cupboard and amuse herself with the peanut butter, and Annie is an indoors dog and allowed to run through the house.

Every member of the family is pursuing his or her own business, so the reader understands that they are all individuals. But the hug that Mummy gives Lucy is part of a contract: if you give love, you get it back and you keep passing it on. So *The Runaway Hug* is about the love that binds a family together. Although the basic sentiment is no different from the romantic emotions that sell millions of greeting cards, the comedy, the energy of the chase and the down-to-earth realism of the imagery create a wonderful balance in this picture book that seems typically Australian.

### The Writer

Nick Bland is probably best known for his illustrations. He is the author-illustrator of best selling books such as *The Very Cranky Bear*, *The Very Itchy Bear* and *Twinkle*, which have been published around the world. His funny and inventive *The Wrong Book* was an Honour Book in the Children's Book Council of Australia's Book of the Year Awards in 2010. For *The Runaway Hug*, however, this time Nick is the writer only, and Freya Blackwood is the illustrator. Nick lives in the Northern Territory.

### The Illustrator

Freya Blackwood has had an extraordinary rise to international success as an illustrator. Although born in Edinburgh, she grew up in Orange, NSW and lived in New Zealand, where she worked in the film industry, particularly as a special effects artist on the Lord of the Rings trilogy. Her award-winning picture books include *Amy and Louis* (with Libby Gleeson) and *Harry and Hopper* (with Margaret Wild). In 2010 she became only the third Australian ever to win the UK's top award for illustration, the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal.

### Nick Bland Says

*The Runaway Hug* was actually the first story I wrote—in about 2001. I was sitting outside a bookshop in Camberwell, Victoria, early for a rep's appointment. (I was a picture book rep for Walker Books at the time, but not very good at it.) I wrote the bones of this story and finished it when I got home.

It was another year or so before I sent Scholastic my first picture book text: *A Monster Wrote Me a Letter*. For some reason I didn't send *The Runaway Hug*, which was at that time titled 'The Last Hug'. After I had finished *Monster* and *Aussie Jingle Bells* I did send it to my (then) editor Margrete Lamond and she loved it. She was moving on to another job, however, and we knew the text should stay with Scholastic.

But I was involved with different projects and didn't really want to illustrate it myself. So my new publisher, Ana Vivas, and I decided to sit on it until the right person came along. I was in no hurry. And how fantastic that, when she was asked, Freya said yes! She was perfect.

Freya is the kind of illustrator I wish I could be: loose, confident, with a beautiful line and superb sense of colour. What an honour to have her interpretation of my words.

I do like the story when I read it now, but the illustrations are really what make it. These days I'm a very different kind of writer. Freya and I are keen to collaborate again (although we have never spoken) and I am writing a story as we speak that I think is just right for her touch. I hope to keep working with other illustrators, because there are so many I admire and who can achieve a finish I will never be able to. I will still illustrate some of my stories myself, but maybe slow down the pace a bit.

### Freya Blackwood Says

*The Runaway Hug* is the second book I have done that was written by another illustrator. It seemed strange, but quite an honour to be asked to work on a book written by someone who could have done the pictures himself. One day I'll ask Nick why he didn't, but as with most of my collaborations, I don't live near the author and in this case I have never met him or even spoken to him!

But I loved *The Runaway Hug* the moment I read it. That's generally a good enough reason for me to do a book. I adored the concept that Lucy's mum was down to her last hug and therefore needed it returned. I thought this was a lovely and unique idea. I enjoyed the repetition in the text and the surprise when you discover that Annie is actually a dog. Before I started work, I discussed with my editor whether the family were human or a family of cute animals, but I love drawing people, so humans they were to be. I was also keen to do a book that was different from the others I have done recently, many of which tell stories of loss.

In *The Runaway Hug*, I wanted to depict a chaotic household. Lucy has two brothers, a baby sister and a pet dog. The house they lived in was never going to be immaculate, so I could draw on personal experience.

My daughter Ivy has taught me many things, and one of these is what clutter looks like. I was also learning about the type of play she enjoyed and found I could introduce elements from her play into Lucy's world. Some of Ivy's special toys have been included in the book.

I had originally envisaged 24 pages, but I was keen to add a few more pages to the book to show how Lucy's hugs sort her family out. Her mum finds her skirt in the pile of dirty washing, her dad's football team scores a goal (the World Cup was on at the time), her brothers sort out their disagreement and Lily the baby manages to open the jar of Vegemite.

Designing the house was great fun. I wanted to be able to show the before-hug and after-hug views, to reveal the positive impact Lucy's hugs have on the family. So I sort of folded the house out and took out walls so we could see into rooms and around corners.

There was a bit of confusion as to whether the house is really like this, or if this is just a visual device. I don't think it really matters either way.

The more drawing I do, the more I appreciate the skill involved in drawing expressively and fluidly. I find it extremely hard to maintain a freshness in my drawing. So I guess this has become a bit of a quest for me. I felt that this story suited fresh and vibrant linework and I tried to pull this off.

The second last page, where Lucy returns to her bedroom to give the hug back to her mum was a challenge. In the text Lucy also gets a kiss from her mum here, and initially I thought I should be illustrating that. But when I couldn't find a satisfactory visual solution for the kiss, I decided instead to show that lovely moment when you look down at your beautiful little child on their pillow—that moment when they are tired, absolutely angelic and soon to be fast asleep! The following delightful moment of peace and quiet became the final page in the book.

### With Your Students

- Show your students the front cover of the book. Ask them what they think this story might be about. How could a hug run away and where might it go? Now show them the back cover. How do they think the girl is feeling here? Why might her mood have changed? Now read the back cover blurb to them. Ask, 'Is there a way Lucy could get her hug back? How might she do it?'
- Tell them that this is a book about a family. Ask, 'What is a family?' (A group of people who are related to one another in some way, either by birth or by law or because they live together.) Ask, 'How do the members of a family show they care about one another?' (Kissing, cuddling, hugging, sharing, being kind, doing things for one another, feeding, washing one another, working or playing together.)
- In our culture we give kisses and hugs. Ask your students whether they know of any different ways people show affection in other cultures. Maybe some of them are used in our culture too. (holding hands, shaking hands, rubbing noses, rubbing hair, giving gifts, washing, giving water or food, inviting them home, playing games or dancing with them, tattooing – there are lots of ways, but be ready to sidestep the odd cheeky one. You can set the right tone to avoid this.)
- Show your students the half-title page and the following double spread. Ask them what is happening here. (On the half-title page she could be getting ready for school or getting ready for bed. When we turn the page, it is clear that she is getting ready for bed: she is putting on her pyjamas.)

- Max's jumpsuit in *Where the Wild Things Are*; some might think that the big polka dots remind them of a clown in the circus. Either way, it looks like she is putting on a costume and we are ready for a game!)
- Read the text on the next two double spreads. 'What is Mummy doing?' (sorting through the washing) 'Why?' (Some people will think she has just got the clothes out of the machine, but ask them to think again. If they had just been washed, she would not have dumped them on the floor. She is sorting through the dirty clothes before they are washed.) Ask, 'Why is Mummy doing the washing so late in the day?' (She has a big family and has had a lot of housework to do, so she is only getting to it now. She has been out to work and this is the only time she has. The children are ready for bed, so now she can get her work done.)
- Read on to the end of the scene with Daddy. Ask, 'Why has Daddy got his hands up in the air?' (His team has just scored a goal on TV and he is happy.) Now ask your students to think back to what Mummy is doing when Lucy leaves her. (She is holding up a skirt.) Why? (She hasn't got any other clothes to wear to work tomorrow, so she is seeing whether this one is clean enough. She thinks she left some money in the pocket, so she wants to get it before it goes into the machine. There is a dirty spot on the skirt and she wants to spray it before it is washed.) In both scenes, when Lucy gives them a hug, she leaves a happy feeling behind her.
- Read on to the scene with her brothers. Why do they say 'yuck'? (Because many boys think it's too girly to give hugs and show you love someone.)
- Ask, 'When Lucy goes off to find Lily, the boys look different. Why?' (They have stopped fighting over the plane. It looks like they might be going to share.)
- Ask what they think Lily has been doing. (drawing on the walls, getting food out of the cupboard, peeling a banana, eating peanut butter, trying to get the red lid off the jar)
- Ask what all these scenes so far show about the effect Lucy has on the members of her family. (She makes them happy, helps them sort things out, it seems like she has a magic touch.)
- Before you turn the page, ask them what they can see in the bathroom. (toilet paper all over the floor) Ask, 'Who do you think Annie is?' (another baby—she is like the baby in the TV ad, pulling toilet paper or tissues out and making a mess. You could also refer to a scene in *Shrieking Violet* by Emma Quay.)



- Turn the page. Ask, 'Did you guess who Annie was? How did you know she was a dog?' (because there is already one baby, because there would be too many children, because sometimes dogs get up to mischief with toilet paper or tissues when they are left alone)
- Stop for a moment at the double spread with all the stairs. Although it won't interest the students, you might have noticed that it reminds you of an engraving by the famous Dutch artist MC Escher, who often drew surreal puzzle pictures, where there was no visual escape for any character who might wander into them.
- Ask, 'What do you notice about this picture of Lucy's house?' (it has lots of stairs, the stairs go up and down, the house is a mess, it looks like one of those playgrounds you put pet mice in, if you ran up and down you would end up where you started, it looks like a game) If someone suggests that it looks like a game or a circus, remind the class about the echoes of the clown costume in Lucy's big polka dots.
- Finish reading the story and ask your students what they see on the last page. (Everyone is in bed or asleep, except Mummy and Daddy, who are having a quiet cuddle with the baby.) Ask them, 'If you had only seen this one picture, what would you think a family was like?' (Quiet, peaceful, relaxed, untidy, all in separate places, but all doing similar things.)