



Teachers' Notes

Fox and Fine Feathers

Written and Illustrated
by Narelle Oliver

OMNIBUS BOOKS

Category	Picture Book
Title	Fox and Fine Feathers
Author/Illustrator	Narelle Oliver
Extent	32pp
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Previous publications

Home (Omnibus Books, 2006)
Dancing the Boom-cha-cha Boogie
(Omnibus Books, 2005)
The Very Blue Thingamajig
(Omnibus Books, 2003)
What a Goat!
(Omnibus Books, 2003)
Mermaids Most Amazing
(Omnibus Books, 2001)

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About the Story

The forest can be a dangerous place, but deep in the centre are special spots where groundbirds can hide away. They must be forever watchful, however, for the birds of the forest floor are easy prey.

One day, the birds forget the risks and come out to play. Lyrebird, Coucal and Pitta are quickly enchanted by their own beauty and parade about, whistling and warbling, showing off to the forest's creatures. Only Nightjar stays silent, for his feathers are dull – the same colour as old leaves – and they will not impress his friends.

On this particular day, while the birds are parading and preening and Nightjar is watching quietly, a fox has made its way to the secret place. So enticed by the three on display is the fox that he doesn't immediately notice Nightjar's closeness. Seeing the danger to his friends, Nightjar reveals himself and draws the fox's attention away, leading him out of the forest. The bird's dull feathers provide the perfect camouflage and protect him from the fox.

Though the groundbirds are safe today, this is a warning: they must be ever vigilant and look out for one another for theirs is a vulnerable existence.

About the Author

Narelle Oliver was born in 1960, and grew up in Toowoomba, Queensland. Her father was a keen amateur photographer and her mother was a watercolourist and art teacher. As a child Narelle was constantly exposed to the delights of artistic creativity, and not surprisingly she herself enjoyed drawing, painting and reading. A highlight of her childhood was regular family trips into the countryside to gather ideas and material for various artworks.

When she began to study for a Bachelor of Education degree, Narelle majored in design and printmaking. It was during this period that she discovered the world of contemporary children's picture books. After graduating she taught for several years at the Queensland School for the Deaf, 'living and breathing picture books and sign language'. She also tutored in the Language and Children's Literature courses offered by the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland.

Narelle's first book, *Leaf Tail*, the story of a lizard, was published in 1989. The project took her more than three years to complete. Like most of her books, it was inspired by natural environments she has explored, and her interest in natural history. It was followed in

1991 by *High Above the Sea*, a CBCA Notable Book, and *The Best Beak in Boonaroo Bay*, which was shortlisted for the CBCA's Picture Book of the Year in 1994. In 1995 *The Hunt* was published: it won the Picture Book of the Year award in 1996, and was also shortlisted in that year for the Wilderness Society Environment Award for Children's Literature. *Sand Swimmers*, published in 1999, was also extremely successful, being shortlisted in 2000 for the Queensland Premier's Award and the CBCA's Eve Pownall Award for Information Books, winning the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales Whitley Award (Best Book for Older Readers, 1999), and winning the 2000 Wilderness Society Environment Award. *Mermaids Most Amazing* was a CBCA Notable Book in 2001, and Narelle's *Baby Bilby, Where Do You Sleep?* was judged an Honour Book in two sections of the CBCA's 2002 awards – a rare distinction. *The Very Blue Thingamajig* won the BILBY Award, an Australian children's choice award, in 2003, and more recently *Home* won a NSW Premier's Literary Award and was shortlisted in the 2007 CBCA Awards, the 2006 Queensland Premier's Literary Awards and the 2007 Wilderness Society Environmental Award for Children's Literature.

Narelle is unusual among Australian illustrators in that she writes all her own books. Interestingly, she has published a book that she has written but *not* illustrated! – a title in the Omnibus Solo series, *What a Goat!*, illustrated by fellow Queenslander David Cox.

Narelle lives in Brisbane with her husband Greg, an environmental scientist, and their children Jessie and Liam.

Author/Illustrator Inspiration

Narelle says, '*Fox and Fine Feathers* continues my interest (obsession?!) with camouflage, which underpins several of my earlier picture books such as *Leaf Tail*, *The Hunt*, *Twilight Hunt*, *Baby Bilby*, *Where Do You Sleep?* and *Sand Swimmers*.

'At the age of eight, I encountered a Tawny Frogmouth camouflaging as a broken branch in a tree near my aunt's farmhouse. I waited and waited, watching this 'broken branch' until it finally opened its golden eyes to look at me. That began my lifelong interest in animal adaptation and the strategy of camouflage in particular. Many years later, when I was researching the Tawny Frogmouth for my picture book *The Hunt*, I came across another nocturnal bird – the Nightjar – with its amazing ability to camouflage amongst leaf litter. That discovery, and a later sighting of a Nightjar, planted the seed of a story idea, which became *Fox and Fine Feathers*.

Fox and Fine Feathers is also inspired by my love of fables, especially the old Aesop's fables where the fox is tricked or is able to trick. I wrote *Fox and Fine Feathers* as a fable with the European Red Fox as the villain. In Australia, the villainous nature of the fox carries an extra sting because this introduced creature has brought about the decline in numbers of many Australian native animals, especially ground-nesting birds.

'It was exciting to set the story in a favourite forest area which I have explored over the years – the Border Ranges region, which straddles the border of New South Wales and Queensland. The forests of this area are a distinctive mixture of white-barked Coachwoods and giant buttressed Strangler Figs and are home to a wide variety of birds, including the iconic Lyrebird.'

About the Illustrations

Narelle Oliver used linocuts, coloured pencils and pastels to illustrate *Fox and Fine Feathers*. Her intricately detailed pictures reflect not only great artistry but the keen eye of observation and the accuracy acquired from thorough research. Children will love searching for Nightjar, often camouflaged in the foliage.

Study Notes for Teachers

1. *Fox and Fine Feathers* is an ideal book for introducing concepts of environment and the impact of introduced species on Australia's flora and fauna. Here are some possible topics for discussion and/or study:

- Discuss the main effects of introduced species on the natural environment. Visit <http://www.feral.org.au/content/feral-focus/index.cfm> for activities and information.
- Discuss the varying ability of wild creatures to protect themselves from predators. Why do you think some species are born with unique ways to hide, while others seem designed to attract the attention of prey?
- Make up 'food chains' to show hunters and prey in the wild.
- Research the life cycle of one of the five animals in this book (or any other wild creature).

2. *Fox and Fine Feathers* can be used as a starting point for creative play:

- Imagine you are a Nightjar and describe what you see as you move along the forest floor. Think about the way a bird sees things, and how it interprets what it sees.
- Make a paper-mâché bird, using the instructions from these websites:
http://www.ehow.com/how_2248880_make-papier-mache-birds.html
http://www.diynetwork.com/diy/cr_diy_people/article/0,,diy_13752_2277878,00.htm

You may choose to decorate your bird like one of the characters in *Fox and Fine Feathers*.

- Using paper and crayon, create a rubbing from a natural object you find in the schoolyard. Look for objects that have interesting texture, like bark or leaves. Hold your paper over the object, and using the side of your crayon or pencil rub across the bumpy section.

3. *Fox and Fine Feathers* can be used to show how valuable individuality is, as well as being a reference to start a discussion on human weaknesses:

- Discuss the importance of being different, and how everyone has something unique to offer. What can you do that the person sitting next to you can't?
- Discuss the perils of vanity and pride. Why do we value modesty? Come up with a list of children's stories that share similar themes to *Fox and Fine Feathers*.

4. If you liked *Fox and Fine Feathers*, write and tell Narelle Oliver why. Or if someone in your class comes up with a question about the book that no one can answer, write and ask her about it! Don't forget to include a stamped, self-addressed envelope for your reply. You can send your letter to the following address:

Narelle Oliver c/- Omnibus Books, 335 Unley Rd, Malvern SA 5061

5. For information about Narelle's other books, visit her website:

www.narelleoliver.com/