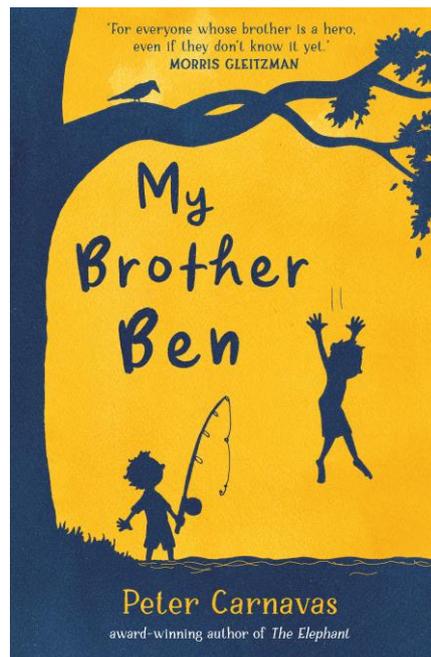


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MY BROTHER BEN

Peter Carnavas



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

Luke and Ben dream of owning a boat so they can explore every inch of Cabbage Tree Creek. To Luke, Ben is everything he is not – courageous, confident and strong, especially now their dad has left.

Bird watching with Aunty Gem and quietly sketching these feathered friends distract Luke from the changes swirling around him, including the fact that Ben is about to start high school. Why is Ben sneaking out at night, and why does he prefer being with his new friend, Frankie?

My Brother Ben is a coming-of-age story that is as timeless as it is beautiful. It captures the unbreakable bond between brothers and the importance of trust, acceptance and hope.

THEMES

- Brothers
- Trust
- Hope
- Birds
- Boats
- Coming of Age

WRITING STYLE

My Brother Ben is a tenderly written story that shares the unique bond between two brothers, even when it is tested by doubt and change. Written in first person, past tense, the text has beautiful figurative language and rich description, affording it a literary quality that is as evocative as it is enduring. Luke's sketches of birds throughout give the story authenticity, especially the bird on the very last page. It is suitable for middle and upper primary readers.

STUDY NOTES

- Discuss the opening sentence of the novel: 'Last year, I found a dead bird on the road outside our house' (p. 1). After completing the novel, come back to this first line. How does this beginning help to shape the whole narrative?
- What do we know of the relationship between Ben and Luke from reading the prologue? Give evidence from the text to support your ideas.

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- How do Luke and Ben feel towards one another? How do we know? Create a graphic organiser, collecting evidence to add as you read.
- In the prologue, Ben tells Luke to ‘trust me’ (p. 3). How is trust a central theme in *My Brother Ben*?
- Discuss how Peter Carnavas has developed Luke’s ‘voice’. Why is a genuine sense of ‘voice’ important? Examples include:
 - I still didn’t know if we had made a nest or a coffin (p. 3)
 - My voice cracked with sleep (p. 3)
 - I whispered so that only the bird could hear (p. 4)
 - This strange feathered thing reborn in a cardboard box (p. 6)
 - I didn’t ask him. I knew he’d tell me (p. 15)
 - I’d follow him anywhere (p. 16)
- Luke says of Maggie that ‘all it wanted to do was fly’ (p. 1). In what ways are Maggie and Luke similar?
- Discuss the recurring words of Auntie Gem’s: ‘when you open your eyes to birds, the world opens itself in return’ (p. 4). How is this realised throughout the novel? How is this as true for other characters in the story besides Gem and Luke?
- Create a story map of *My Brother Ben* using the chapter headings as a guide. Consider plotting the graph along a mud map of Cabbage Tree Creek.
- As you read, keep a list of the birds mentioned in the text. Choose some of these birds to investigate further. Try sketching some of these birds, either by viewing them for yourself outside, or from photographs.
- Peter Carnavas uses descriptive language throughout *My Brother Ben*. Ask students to select descriptive passages to annotate, identifying the language features used to create such vivid depictions. The following passage describing Maggie is one such example: ‘Its beak was sharpened to a dark point, thin feathery trousers grew halfway down its legs, and one scaly toe was bent’ (p. 5). Compare this description with an image of a magpie.
- When Ben leaps from the Jumping Tree, why does Luke describe his brother as being ‘a king parrot, a dancing brolga, a wedge-tailed eagle taking flight’ (p. 12)? How would Luke describe himself at this point of the narrative?
- Luke says that he and Ben ‘were two stars spinning slowly on the surface’. How would you describe the relationship you have with your sibling/s?
- How is the Jumping Tree used to show the personal growth that Luke experiences from the start to the end of the story?
- Peter Carnavas uses figurative language throughout his novel to enhance the reading experience. Discuss the impact these devices have on the text. Examples include:

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- Wind tickled the tiny feathers on the bird's breast, its leg stuck out like black twigs and the back of its neck glowed pink in the setting sun (p. 1)
- He cradled it, like he was nursing a bowl full of jelly that hadn't set (p. 3)
- A thought sailed into my mind (p. 4)
- It was ... more like a cross between a river and a lake, a band of salty brown water that snaked behind the houses and breathed up and down with the tides (p. 11)
- A white-headed pigeon cut across the sky and the rattling song of cicadas swelled around us like a drumroll (p. 12)
- I twirled the spaghetti around my fork to make a pasta whirlpool (p. 24)
- She looked a bit like a bird herself, a kind of cockatoo with a funky crest of dark red hair (p. 32)
- It was beautiful, like the deep note of a clarinet (p. 48)
- It darkened my words, the way a storm cloud blackens the sky and cuts short a game of backyard cricket (p. 51)
- I crossed my arms to squash the pounding in my chest (p. 52)
- Plovers scurried around like little kids in a sandpit. Whimbrels poked the ground, up and down, like they'd been told to pick up rubbish (p. 52)
- It hung in the air, watching for a flash of silver in the water. Like a school principal, looking for troublemakers (p. 53)
- Dragonflies hovered about like miniature drones. A spangled drongo flew to meet its own shadow on a branch (p. 56)
- They disappeared into classrooms, like hundreds of soldier crabs suddenly sinking into sand (p. 59)
- Kids flocking to the game like ants to a biscuit (p. 64)
- I faded, like my uniform (p. 67)
- His voice bounced up and down like a handball (p. 67)
- His voice wasn't bouncy now. Flat as the creek on a still day (p. 68)
- Mum's words hit me like a footy in the guts (p. 77)
- But [the joke] hung in the kitchen like thick smoke until my eyes watered and a lump scratched in my throat. Mum tried to fold me up in a hug (p. 80)
- She pushed herself off the branch, landed with a thud and saluted like an Olympic gymnast (pp. 81–82)
- My face felt hot and my whole body burned with hurt (p. 87)
- They looked like feathered superheroes, with sleek blue masks and wings for capes (p. 93)
- Leaves danced and the tree groaned, like it wanted to shake me off. Everything rocked backwards and forwards like I was swaying on a playground swing (p. 100)

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- A sword of sunlight hit me in the eye (p. 102)
- I ... scuffed along the streets that twisted like eels (p. 104)
- The ocean in the sky started to fall, sheets of rain drenching our clothes (p. 105)
- Ben's words hammered in my head like the rain on the roof (p. 106)
- I rode home as fast as a falcon (p. 111)
- The chill of early autumn seeped into the house like a slow-moving tide (p. 115)
- My days were empty, like a dried-up creek (p. 120)
- Every room was holding its breath (p. 121)
- A salty breeze swam by, like the creek's final sigh before dark (p. 122)
- Stars appeared above the neighbours' trees, like candles in the sky (p. 125)
- It was like I'd hooked a huge barramundi and couldn't reel it in (p. 132)
- Its long tail dragged behind like kite strings as it wove through the trees (p. 145)
- She stood on the bank, hands high on her hips, face like a thundercloud rolling in from the west (p. 168)
- On p. 26, we are told that 'the lure of birds pulled me outside, opened my eyes and dragged me clear of the Dad-shaped shadow he'd left behind'. How do birds help Luke to deal with his home situation?
- Discuss the 'unexpected gift' that Luke receives for his birthday. Does he receive more than one unexpected gift? Discuss, especially considering what happens at the end of the novel.
- Why is a character like Frankie included in *My Brother Ben*? How would the story be different without her?
- How is Luke's dad a 'powerful owl' (p. 51)? How is he *not* a 'powerful owl' (p. 161)? Why and how does Luke's opinion of his father change?
- How are birds used as metaphors throughout *My Brother Ben*? How do different birds represent different parts of this story?
- How is the concept of a 'vagrant' (p. 53) used throughout *My Brother Ben*? In what ways does Luke consider himself a vagrant? Why is Luke so determined to find the vagrant? How might finding it help Luke to find himself?
- Why does Luke say that his soul bird would be a 'brown thornbill' (p. 54)? What is your soul bird? Why is this your soul bird? Share with a friend.
- In what ways has Ben taken over the role of his father? Is this something he will continue to do? Why do you think this?
- How do Ben and Luke help one another?
- Why does Luke think that without Ben at school, no-one will notice him (p. 67)? Is this true? Discuss.
- Mr Knight asks his class to draw 'something useless to everyone else ... but important to you' (p. 69). Why does Luke find this difficult? What does

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he eventually decide to put on the back wall? What would you draw? How does this 'show who we are' (p. 108)?

- Why do the boys begin to feel *The Birds of Cabbage Tree Creek* will be very ordinary?
- In the role of Luke, write a recount of the day you wait for Ben at the shops after school, only to find him at home with Frankie (see chapter 15).
- In a role play, have a conversation between Luke and Ben about why you want to win the boat more than anyone else. What will it mean to you both to win it?
- After reading up to chapter 20, make predictions about Ben and what he is up to. Compare your predictions with what happens at the end of the novel.
- What is that finally prompts Luke to speak with his dad? In what ways is growing up a gradual thing? Discuss in context with *My Brother Ben*.
- Why does Luke throw *The Birds of Cabbage Tree Creek* into the bush? How did you feel when you discovered Ben had rescued it?
- In the role of Luke, describe what it is like now that Ben and Maggie have both moved.
- How are the two baby tawny frogmouths like Ben and Luke (see chapter 28)?
- How does finding out the truth about the princess parrot help Luke to move forward with his life? Why does he say 'I thought we had a connection, the bird and me. Like we were both lost and out of place' (p. 147)?
- Why, when jumping from the tree, does Luke say 'I was all birds at once. A brown thornbill. Brahminy kite. A powerful owl on silent wings' (p. 143)? Why has he included the powerful owl?
- Why, when Luke jumps from the tree, does he call it 'a Ben thing to do... A Luke thing too' (p. 145)?
- Why does Ben release the princess parrot from the cage? What does this tell us about his love for Luke?
- In chapter 35, Luke thinks about the night in reverse. Try doing this with one of the other chapters.
- Discuss the following thought of Luke's: 'Where there were birds, there was hope' (p. 151). In what ways is hope a central theme of *My Brother Ben*?
- What adventures have you and your siblings had? Write a short recount to share.
- We find out that Ben has won the competition. Before reading about how, make predictions about his entry.

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- In what ways do Ben's photos give the 'memories ... a new shape now, a different colour, like the gold that fell the trees at sunset' (p. 159)?
- How has Ben opened his eyes to birds to allow the world to open itself to him?
- What is the significance of Ben using Luke's birthday present to help him accept his parents' separation? How is the camera like a 'bird in a cage' (p. 160)?
- Re-read p. 165. How is what is *not* said just as powerful as what *is*?
- What is the symbolism of Maggie's return to the family, this time as a mother? How does this complement the other themes of the text?
- What makes the ending of *My Brother Ben* so powerful? Discuss the planning involved to lead the narrative to this conclusion. Why, knowing this ending, is the book called *My Brother Ben*?
- Hold your own competition that will instill community pride in your local area. Choose how you would like to present your entry.
- How is the motif of the apostlebird used in *My Brother Ben*?
- What role does Aunty Gem play in *My Brother Ben*? How important is it to Luke that he can share his passion for birds with her? What advice does she give Luke to help him? Create a character profile of Gem, including quotes from the text to support your ideas.
- How does Luke's book about birds help him to cope with his father's leaving?
- Compare *My Brother Ben* with the picture book *Fox and Fine Feathers* by Narelle Oliver or the novella *Fog-a-Dox* by Bruce Pascoe.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I wrote *My Brother Ben* because I wanted to create a story about brothers – especially what it's like to be the younger brother (I have two brothers and a sister and I'm the youngest in my family). Brothers frustrate each other, compete with each other and make each other laugh like no-one else. Throughout all the tension and joy and begrudging admiration, brothers stick up for each other. That's the main idea I wanted to express in the story. I also wanted to explore several sub-themes that are important to me – an appreciation of nature, a love of birds, and a place called Cabbage Tree Creek. This creek, on the northern edge of Brisbane, is where my mum grew up. My descriptions don't always match the real creek, but I thought the mangroves, mud and childhood fun connected to this creek would make a great setting for a story.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Carnavas writes and illustrates books for children. He has made many picture books, such as *The Children Who Loved Books*, *Last Tree in the City* and *A Quiet Girl*. His novel *The Elephant* won a Queensland Literary Award and was shortlisted in four other national awards. He has won an Australian Book Industry Award and a SCBWI Crystal Kite Award, and his books have been published widely across the world. Peter lives on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, with his wife, two daughters, a dog and a cat.