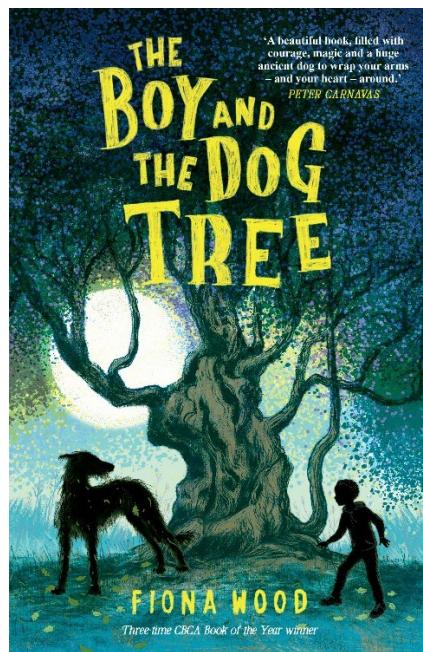


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# **THE BOY AND THE DOG TREE**

## Fiona Wood



### Teachers' Notes

Prepared by Christina Wheeler, who is a practising teacher librarian with a background in the Australian curriculum (English)

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**SYNOPSIS**

Moving to Melbourne is the last thing Mitch needs, other than starting at a new school that is. To make matters worse, his parents' work trip has been extended, and the class bully has wasted no time in targeting Mitch. If only he had a dog, things would be bearable.

Then one night Mitch feels called to the park near Gran's house. Drawn to an old tree resembling a dog, Mitch is certain he can hear growling from within its trunk. Eventually, Argos emerges – a strange dog-like creature who has come to help Mitch, but only for a short while. Rather than being Mitch's dog, Argos tells Mitch, 'you are my boy'.

Combining magic with themes of friendship, confidence and courage, *The Boy and the Dog Tree* is a warm and compassionate story about loyalty, integrity and finding your voice.

**THEMES**

- Friendship
- Belonging
- Confidence
- Courage
- Compassion
- Integrity
- Loyalty
- Perspective
- Prejudice
- Bullying
- Magic
- Dogs

**WRITING STYLE**

Told in third person, past tense, *The Boy and the Dog Tree* is a tender story about Mitch, a quiet boy who has longed for a dog for as long as he can remember. Lacking confidence as he starts at a new school, Mitch soon becomes the target of Seb's bullying. Strangely though, through 'History, mystery, magic ... chance', a dog-like creature, Argos, emerges from a peculiar tree in the park near his gran's house. Rather than Argos being Mitch's dog, it is Mitch who becomes Argos's boy, giving Mitch the courage to use his voice and put Seb in his place. With sub-themes of prejudice, fake news and an over-reliance on screens, this text quietly challenges the notions of preconceptions, public consensus and mob mentality. More than that, it is a story that celebrates compassion, perspective and true friendships. Through its use of magic realism, effective narrative structure and original figurative language, *The Boy and the Dog Tree* is an engaging and page-turning novel with true substance. It is suited to middle-grade readers.

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**STUDY NOTES**

- Examine the cover and blurb of *The Boy and the Dog Tree*. What are you wondering? Make predictions about the story.
- The text begins: 'Mitch was a quiet boy in a loud family' (p. 1). How has this changed by the end of the novel? How has it remained the same? How is being quiet often a good thing? When does it become problematic?
- Before the first day at his new school, Mitch wishes he were 'a bit taller, a bit louder ... a bit *more*' (p. 6). Why does he feel this way? In a reflection, share a time when you wished you were 'a bit *more*'. How have you learnt to accept the things you cannot change?
- Compare Mitch with his sister Regi. How are they similar and different? Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- Before his first day at his new school, Gran's advice to Mitch is to 'Take it easy and be yourself' (p. 7). What other advice does Mitch receive from Gran and Regi? What advice would you offer him?
- Why is Mitch wary of making friends with people who seem overly friendly on his first day? What would you say to him about this attitude?
- Mitch says he is good at 'Drawing, tree climbing, dog knowledge, brooding, [and] holding a grudge' (p. 8). As you read *The Boy and the Dog Tree*, find evidence of each of these character traits. If you were a character in this story, what would your traits be?
- Mitch is challenged by the differences between '*the plan*' to move to Melbourne with his family and '*the reality*' of living with Gran temporarily and starting at his new school without his parents around (see pp. 8–9). Why do you think the author has deliberately written Mitch's parents out of the country for this story? When have you had to pivot from a *plan* to a new *reality*? Share in a reflection.
- Before reading further, make predictions about Seb Anders and the role he may play in *The Boy and the Dog Tree* (p. 9).
- Although Mitch knows perfectly well what he should do on this first day, why does he find the following advice difficult to follow?

*Take it easy.*

*Let people see who you are.,*

*Give yourself time to settle in.*

*Stay loose.*

*Go to the friendship bench.*

*Beware of anyone who seems too friendly.* (p. 10)

- Mitch wonders whether Ms Zwerger is a bee or a wasp (see p. 12). Which do you think she is? Give reasons to support your thinking.
- Why does Mitch say he's getting a dog soon, even though he's not?
- What motivates Seb's bullying of Mitch?
- What is your opinion of Mitch's theory that 'quiet, shy people need loud, confident friends' (p. 23)? Discuss his comment that 'Loud, confident people

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[are] friendship catalysts' (p. 23). Why does Mitch think that Regi and Seb are friendship catalysts?

- How does crying help Mitch? How does it help you? How do you know when it is time to cry and time to stop? How does Mitch show this understanding?
- Why does Mitch see Regi as someone who floats 'above whatever [comes] her way' while he is 'always going under and coming up just in time to get smacked down by the next wave' (p. 28)? How does his confidence improve as the novel progresses?
- As you read, take note of the references to flying. Why does Mitch dream of flying so much? How does this concept help connect important parts of the storyline?
- Discuss the author's use of imagery in the following excerpt: 'Colours were sleeping. Everything was black or silver, or strange dull shades of brown. Green appeared only in splodges where path lights hit the grass' (p. 36). Why is this description so effective?
- What does Mitch mean when he says, 'at home [...] everyone could happily ignore each other a bit' (p. 44)? How are families able to have these comfortable silences? Why does Mitch feel different when he's with friends?
- Discuss Mitch's comment that 'Talking and laughs came from hanging out together – kicking a ball around, skating or taking Sami's dog for a walk' (p. 45) as opposed to chatting online. What other comments about the use of devices are made in *The Boy and the Dog Tree*?
- Mitch observes the way his new classmates speak to their dogs, saying, 'He'd never talk down to a dog like that' (p. 50). He goes on to say, 'Dogs deserve respect. They need a firm voice. They like to know who's boss. The owner is the top dog in the relationship' (p. 50). After meeting Argos, how do Mitch's ideas change?
- What makes Mitch feel 'a little zap of connection' with Dido (p. 54)? How does her 'rundown on the class' open a door for him (p. 56)? How does their friendship develop as the story progresses?
- Why does Mitch think that 'everything would be easier, and more fun, if only he had a dog. Without a dog he was never going to feel settled in the world' (p. 57)? Have you ever felt the same kind of pang as Mitch? Share in a reflection.
- In the role of Mitch, write and perform a monologue about the moment you first saw, and then met, Argos (see Chapter 16).
- Argos says he is '*of the tree*' as the result of 'History, mystery, magic ... chance' (p. 64). Explain to a friend what he means by this.
- Argos says, 'I go wherever I wish, whenever I wish' (p. 65). How is he unlike other dog characters you know? How is he a role model for Mitch? How does this mantra help Mitch to slowly grow in confidence? Share in a journal entry.

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- Make predictions about the Pet Parade. Is this something Argos will readily agree to? Why?
- What is the connection between Seb's mother being elected as mayor and his behaviour?
- Try to convey the following sentiment in a single look: '*I didn't mean to make trouble for you, but you wouldn't believe it if I said it, and anyway I don't like you enough to give two hoots that I did make trouble for you, even though what I did really was an accident*' (p. 75).
- Why, even though Mitch 'knew bullies could turn your life into a misery', does he find the advice and lessons about handling bullies unhelpful 'in the day-to-day life of someone being bullied' (p. 76)?
- Argos tells Mitch, '*You are the boy*', and Mitch wonders, 'The boy for what, though?' (p. 79). In the role of Mitch, write a journal entry to explore your thoughts about this.
- Although Argos saves the life of the toddler, Clare, he is described as 'unleashed, living wild, unvaccinated, a public risk, a fox, a lone wolf, a dingo' (p. 106). Later in the text, there are other examples of fake news about him (see p. 114). What comment is the author making about prejudice and fake news through the book?
- Mitch wonders what it might mean for Dido 'to be a witch in real life' (p. 126). Imagining there is a book about Dido and Clarke, write the first chapter with her as the protagonist.
- Why does Mitch say, 'Being with Argos was like having his neural pathways continuously rerouted' (p. 126)? How is this a positive thing for Mitch?
- Why do tears spring into Mitch's eyes when he feels 'so well understood' (p. 128)? What does this share about the importance of acceptance and belonging? How does this experience give him courage and confidence?
- Why does Argos sound weary when he says, 'I transform others [...] All I can become is myself. Again and again and again' (p. 133)?
- What fuels Mitch's 'hunger to get this sorted, a refusal to let the bully win' (p. 136)? How did you feel to hear Mitch speak in this way? Share in a reflection.
- Discuss Mitch's comment that 'it was easier to think things than to say them' (p. 140). Share a time when this was true for you.
- What does Dido mean when she says, 'Better if Seb is mean because you're good, not because you're weak' (p. 147)?
- Discuss Gran's character in *The Boy and the Dog Tree*. Describe her character traits. How would the story be different if Mitch's parents were home?
- Argos says that Seb would 'dominate every creature he encounters' (p. 162). Is this the same at the end of the story? Give reasons to support your thinking.

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- How does Argos's punishment of Seb 'fit the crime' (p. 172)? Discuss the notion of justice in this story.
- Re-read and then make sketches of 'the stages of Seb's transformation into a duck' (see pp. 167–168). In the role of Seb, write a journal entry about this night and the next morning.
- Seb's mum commands Seb in 'the way you'd speak to a dog, not to a kid' (p. 184). How might this help explain Seb's character?
- When the ranger tries to capture Argos, Mitch says, 'Let go of him, you bully' (p. 191). What is he angry about?
- When Mitch asks Gran why 'people make things up', she wonders whether it's 'To make themselves feel important? To create some drama?' (p. 197). What are your thoughts? Share in a circle time.
- What makes a good friend? How do Mitch, Dido and Argos show these virtues?
- Why does Argos complain that Mitch's phone is 'a swarm of fireflies' (p. 223)? What are his other observations about devices and the modern world more generally?
- Discuss Regi's observation that Mitch has 'really grown a backbone since [he] met Argos' (p. 231). How does he do this?
- Using evidence from the text to support your thinking, explain how Argos is 'a creature of complete integrity' (p. 231).
- In the role of Mitch or Dido, write a first-person recount of your transformation into an owl and the impact this had on you (see pp. 233–238). Why 'might [it] take a whole life to understand such a transformation, such a shift in point of view' (p. 237)?
- How, throughout *The Boy and the Dog Tree*, has Mitch been Argos's 'boy' (see p. 243)?
- Why does Argos say, 'Quests do not always announce themselves' (p. 246)? What is the true quest in *The Boy and the Dog Tree*?
- Regi says to her parents, 'This is the new Mitch [...] Get used to it' (p. 250). Explain Mitch's character development in *The Boy and the Dog Tree*.
- Explain the significance of Mitch's comment to his mum: 'don't be so prejudiced. There's no bad dog – there are just bad owners' (p. 252).
- Using the drawing of Mitch and Calli on the final page, write a journal entry in the role of Mitch about this day and all you have experienced in this story.
- Using the following opening line, continue this story: *Once upon a time, a dog came out of a tree* (p. 4). Alternatively, write a story using a variation of this sentence.
- Find out more about the origins of the name Argos, particularly with reference to Homer's *Odyssey*. Likewise, explore Calliope and Cerberus in classic literature. Why has the author included these names and references in her story?

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- Create a story map that traces the main characters, settings and events in *The Boy and the Dog Tree*.
- As companion texts to *The Boy and the Dog Tree*, consider reading Peter Carnavas's *A Quiet Girl* (UQP) or Carla Fitzgerald's *How to Break a World Record and Survive Grade Five* (UQP).
- As a class, create a book titled *The A–Z of Dogs*. Include illustrations and information about the following: 'dog breeds, dog care, dog news stories, original dog art, dog history, dog training, dog grooming, dog accessories, dog illnesses, lists of dog films and dog books, recommended dog boarding facilities and [...] favourite names for dogs' (see p. 18).
- Try the following in your classroom:
  - An 'unplugged term' using low-tech methods
  - A 'Highlights of the Week' gallery to share your class's talents
  - *Off the Cuff* sessions in which students give short talks about issues of interest
  - Fast Five writing and drawing sessions
  - Sketching outside
- Mitch's family has a rule to not clear the search history from their devices. Why is this a good idea?
- Discuss the contribution of figurative language in *The Boy and the Dog Tree*. Examples include:
  - A low rumble, like distant thunder (p. 2)
  - Mitch was spinning in the name salad: Leah, Mia, Ava, Bentley, Bailey, Buddy, Clarke and Dido (p. 16)
  - The sounds of steel tapes zipping in and out and quiet talk filled the room (p. 20)
  - the school exploded with end-of-the-day noise (p. 25)
  - His backpack jolted along with his worries (p. 25)
  - Branches met and meshed overhead. Only an occasional snip of blue sky blinked between thickly layered leaves. (p. 25)
  - A bank of low clouds parted, letting the moon elbow through to brighten the night sky (pp. 35–36)
  - A wave of goosebumps shivered across Mitch's skin (p. 37)
  - he felt flooded with adrenaline (p. 38)
  - Mitch's dream trailed after him down the stairs (p. 40)
  - A palings fence with missing teeth (p. 42)
  - Dido was already looking forward to being plunged into a new pool of people at high school (p. 56)
  - Fur black as liquorice, tangled and long (p. 61)
  - he was wide awake – electric-shock awake, world-upside-down awake (p. 66)
  - He still had emotional whiplash from the whole idea of moving (p. 82)
  - a blue sky striped with whispery clouds (p. 94)

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- 'Whoa,' said Dido, her eyes like saucers (p. 115)
- obedience was an alien concept to him (p. 120)
- It opened with a creak and a waft of stale lavender (p. 122)
- Mitch and Seb entered the classroom, looking poisonous daggers at each other (p. 136)
- Seb and Ryan emerged from the dark into a pool of yellow path light (p. 138)
- Mitch looked up through the burnt-out skeleton of the building where they stood (p. 139)
- Moonlight threw a wobbly white stripe across the water (p. 141)
- Argos snarled, gnashing his huge fangs and breathing out a fierce, fiery breath (p. 144)
- Argos gave himself a whole-body shake that created a breeze strong enough to lift Mitch's hair (p. 149)
- Shadows were monsters (p. 155)
- burglars, zombies, assassins and aliens looking for a human boy specimen shrank from heart-pounding probability to pea-sized thoughts that rolled away (p. 156)
- anticipation building inside him like a hundred sherbet bombs (p. 164)
- Diamond-sharp stars made pinpricks through the dark sky. Mitch started as a bat flew from a tree silhouetted against dim mauve clouds. As his feet sank into the grass with each step, he felt the earth hum with the energy of the night. (p. 165)
- his eyes glowing like flames (p. 166)
- Mitch felt a terrible power uncurling inside him (p. 166)
- The strong language Mitch had spoken still coursed through his body like an elixir (p. 168)
- He looked as though he'd walked through a wind-tunnel (p. 169)
- Marquees had popped up overnight like mushrooms, large and small, on the damp green oval (p. 181)
- The sky was a blue dome and the air already smelt of popcorn and sausages and satay (p. 181)
- A fleet of clouds had scudded across the sky, and a spring shower pelted down (p. 188)
- Mitch felt a cold twist in his guts (pp. 197–198)
- he felt a rush of fearlessness he had never before known (p. 198)
- a tornado of fury or tears (p. 212)
- She looked like a powerful wizard (p. 214)
- He'd always loved the colour of the living-room rug; it was such a dark purple that it looked black, like an eggplant. When he was little, he thought it looked like dirt from which the green sofas had sprouted. (p. 221)
- he tumbled into sleep (p. 224)

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- Seb jumped up as though he'd sat on a pin (p. 227)
- News about the increased reward would be spreading around the playground like wildfire (p. 229)
- Mitch and Dido looked at each other, eyes shining, incandescent (p. 233)
- They flew through the city, between sparkling towers of light, across suburbs with their electric-striped grids, over eucalypt-scented bushland where the moon and stars shone bright along a rushing creek. (p. 235)
- Mitch pulsed with coiled energy (p. 235)
- Mitch felt himself fading into a shadow, or an observer of a truer self: the owl (p. 235)
- The oneness of himself and sky, the unity of senses, gone. The mighty lift of wings, razor talons, tearing beak, clarity and length of vision, all gone (p. 236)
- Mitch sat up, his blood running like ice (p. 240)
- Argos's voice now sounded like wind rustling through leaves (p. 242)
- Mitch had a painful lump in his throat (p. 243)
- The wind howled once more, branches of lightning ripped the sky into ribbons and the world fell silent (p. 244)
- He rested his head on Argos's bed and cocooned himself in a doona (p. 246)
- the sadness rushed in (p. 247)
- Tears of understanding and sympathy shone in Gran's eyes (p. 247)
- Mitch curled up on his side, knees to chest, head in a pillow sandwich (p. 248)
- Mitch felt waves of relief washing over him (p. 249)
- Mitch was light-headed with excitement (p. 251)
- Mitch's heart bumped uncomfortably in his chest (p. 253)

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

Ideas for books can appear from anywhere – dreams, memory, subconscious, observation – in any order, at any time. As the ideas gather and grow, they start forming intersections that I want to explore.

Often a story will start with one character. In this case it was Argos, prompted by an odd-looking tree that I walked past frequently. The gnarled and twisted trunk had a shape that reminded me of a dog. So I started wondering idly, *Who are you, how did you get into that tree and what is your story?*

Layers of story accreted until I knew who Argos was – an ancient dog whose spirit had been entwined with the tree and who could be called forth by a child in

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need. Argos was imperious, wilful and wild. The child in need was Mitch. Their friendship gave me the opportunity to explore identity, growth and confidence via absent parents, a new school and the resident Grade Five bully.

Mitch's friendship with Argos offered great scope to look at the way in which our expectations can be challenged. Mitch's expectations about finally having a longed-for dog, and the somewhat problematic reality of Argos, often collide. Much of the book's humour comes from this. I also wanted to look at friendship from two sides: what it means to have a friend, and what it means to be a friend.

The idea of magic in middle-grade fiction is irresistible. It opens a world of imagination for readers, which in turn supports their own creative freedom. In particular I love magic that intrudes into real life, as opposed to entire fantastical worlds. As an early reader I drank in stories where children walked through the back of a wardrobe into Narnia, or climbed a magical tree in the Enchanted Wood or were granted wishes by a grumpy Psammead.

My books always include some political content and food for thought. In this case Argos is the subject of rumours and lies that people are quick to believe. Mitch has his truth dismissed as 'fake news' and sees with horror that prejudice results in a grave injustice to Argos, which Mitch is then challenged to redress.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fiona Wood loves writing fiction for young readers. Her books have won several awards and been shortlisted for many more. They are published internationally. Fiona lives in Naarm Melbourne. [www.fionawood.com](http://www.fionawood.com)