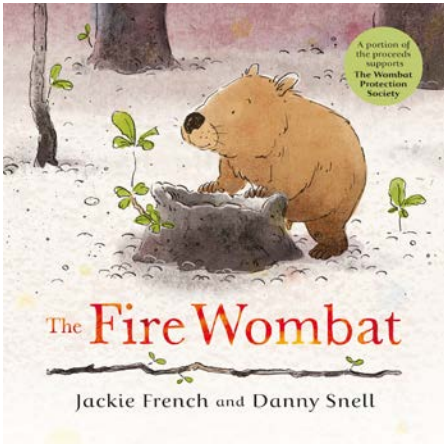


Classroom Resources



The Fire Wombat

Jackie French and Danny Snell

BOOK SUMMARY

As the flames of a bushfire approach, one small wombat shelters with other animals in her burrow. But that is just the beginning of their journey to safety.

Based on events witnessed by Australian Children's Laureate Jackie French during the 2020 fires, and co-created with award-winning illustrator Danny Snell, this is a story of courage, compassion and survival, which saw people across Australia come together to save our wildlife from devastation.

ISBN:

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NOTES BY:

Barbara Braxton

PUBLICATION DATE:

November 2020

KEY LEARNING OUTCOMES

- ACELA1478
- ACELA1488
- ACELA1496
- ACELA1498
- ACELT1596
- ACELT1599
- ACELT1604
- ACELT1605
- ACELT1607
- ACELT1791
- ACSIS053

THEMES

- Natural World
- Identity
- Resilience
- Belonging
- Sustainability

Recommended Ages: 3+

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Classroom Resources

Before Reading

Context and Prior Knowledge

Ask children about their experiences or memories of bushfires and invite them to tell their stories, share their responses and disclose their ongoing concerns.

- Ask students to draw images and write descriptions, as well as verbally share stories with the class.

Discuss with students that sometimes things happen that are outside of our control or that we can't change, and it is okay to be scared or anxious.

- What are some of the different things that we can do to feel better when we are scared or anxious?
 - For example: talk to an adult we trust; draw a picture; go to a place we feel safe; find a way to help.

Examining the Cover

Share the cover of *The Fire Wombat*. Discuss how it sets the context for the story that follows.

- Why might illustrator Danny Snell have chosen to portray a scene that shows new growth in such a barren landscape?
- How does that set the tone for the story to come?
- Do students think this cover comes from the beginning, middle or end of the story?
- What clues might the cover give us about what happens in the story?

During Reading

Words and Pictures

Compare the illustrations on the title pages and the opening pages of the story.

- What has changed in the landscape?
- How does the mood/feeling change between the pictures?

Explore and build vocabulary using appropriate words.

- Begin building a word bank that describes the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings and emotions of the fire experience. Add to it over time so students can use them in their own writing later.

The animals seeking shelter in the wombat's burrow is a pivotal point in the story, showing that in the very worst of times natural adversaries can come together for the common good.

- Ask students to find as many examples as they can in *The Fire Wombat* of humans and animals helping each other.

When the animals emerge from the wombat's burrow, they discover a very different landscape: 'Everything they'd known was grey — A crumbling ash and smoke-smudged day.'

- Using (or adding to) the vocabulary you are collecting, describe how the animals might have felt when they came out of the burrow.
- Select two other spreads in the book and complete the same exercise. For example: when the carrots are thrown from the helicopter, and when the bush begins to regenerate.

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Ask students to answer the following questions as they read the text:

- Explore and explain the term 'vast carrot migration' and examine how the use of humour changes the mood of the story.
- How do Jackie French's words complement what is happening in the pictures?
- How does her choice of language enrich and enhance the mood that is already portrayed in the illustrations?
- How does French's choice of rhyming text contribute to the sense of urgency?
- How do the choices made about the elements of the illustrations (such as focus, angle, distance, placement, framing and palette) enrich and enhance the text?
- Despite the devastation of the encroaching fire, at what point does the mood change from one of sadness to one of hope?
- Even though so much of the landscape has been destroyed, how do the words and illustrations support that change in mood so that the reader is left with a feeling of positivity?

Character

Although the story is told throughout by a narrator with no dialogue, the wombat is clearly the pivotal character.

- How does the reader know that?
- What is it that makes the wombat the key character?

After Reading

Real Life vs Picture Book

The question that students ask authors most often is, 'Where do you get your ideas from?' There is often a story behind the story, and this one is based on the author's own experience of finding a small female wombat, coated in black ash, collapsed on her property in south-eastern NSW during the fires that consumed so much of the country during the Black Summer of 2019/20.

"Just that sight of her coming down the slope of the garden, step by step, just pushing herself, step by step, and she almost made it," French said. "You could just see her sniffing the water bowl but she couldn't quite make it. I still wonder how far she had come."

'Children's author Jackie French and the little wombat that could'
Melanie Kembrey, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4/7/2020

However, before writing a story about a real event, authors and illustrators need to research their subject. What would students need to know before they could write a story about wombats? Ask them to list the sorts of questions that would need answering before a story could be composed. Pose questions generated by headings such as:

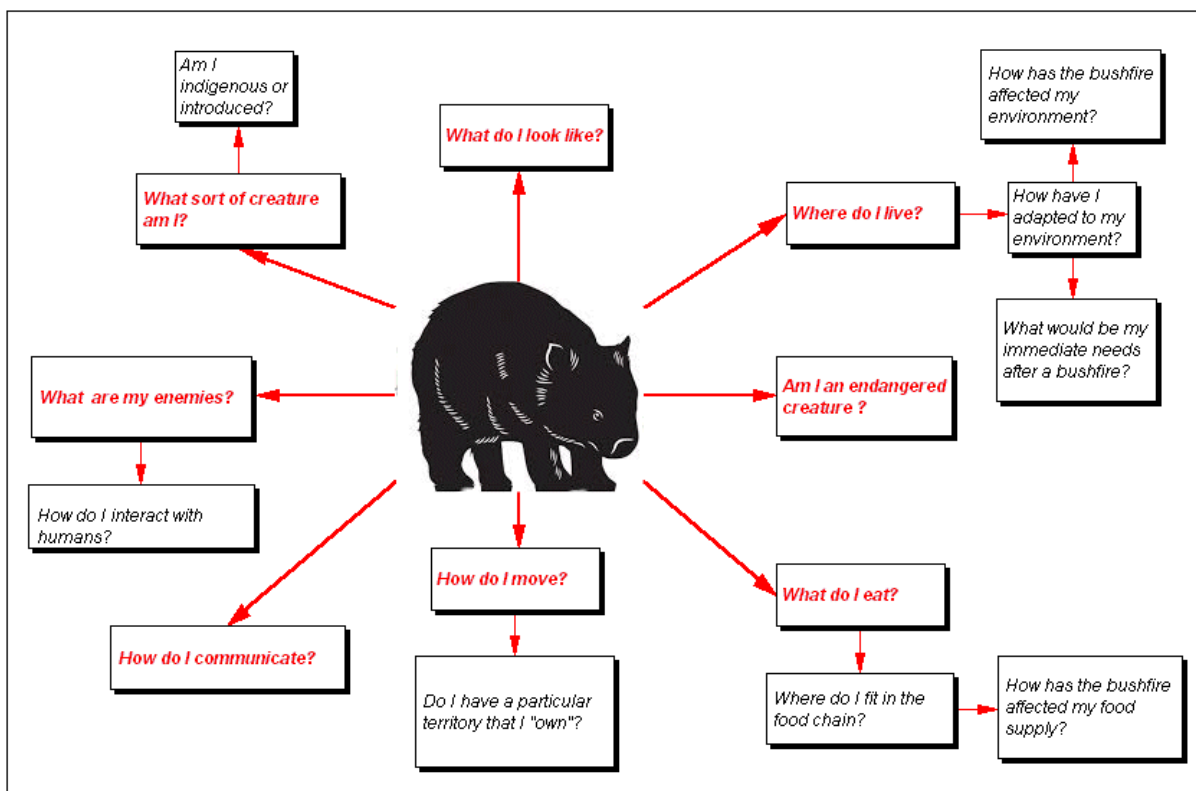
- appearance
- habitat
- habits
- food
- movement

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Classroom Resources

- communication
- friend or foe/predator or prey
- protection and defence
- families
- adaptations
- intelligence
- relationships with humans
- endangered status

Use a graphic organiser to organise the questions so they could form the foundation of an investigation that would give a complete picture of the wombat and thus a deeper understanding.



Search for examples in the story of where the author and/or illustrator have used what they have learned to enrich and enhance the story, either directly or indirectly.

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Classroom Resources

Narrative Perspective

The story has been told from the perspective of a narrator who is an eye-witness to the events of *The Fire Wombat* so that the choice of words and phrases is invested with emotion.

Challenge students to retell the story from the perspective of the wombat or one of the other creatures caught up in the fire. For students who would benefit from extending, ask them to retell it from the point of view of the fire.

- Have students consider what they would need to know, understand, appreciate and value before they could assume the mantle of their storyteller, and encourage them to draft their ideas before they craft their response.
- If they choose the wombat's perspective, ask students to answer the questions that have been posed in the previous activity so they have a greater understanding of wombats, their habitats and habits.
- Similarly, if they choose one of the other creatures, ask students to identify which creature they could be (either from that part of south-eastern NSW or their local area) and have them build a database of questions and answers so their story has more depth.
- If they choose the fire's perspective, have them develop and investigate a series of questions such as:
 - How did it start?
 - How did it grow so quickly?
 - What environmental conditions existed to allow it to spread?
 - How did it feel when it was finally extinguished?
 - Students choosing this option may be ready to learn about personification.

We Can All Help

In the Author's Note, Jackie French writes, 'If you want to help wildlife after disasters, donate to a wildlife charity ...' A portion of the proceeds from the sale of the hardback edition of *The Fire Wombat* will be donated to the Wombat Protection Society, of which she is patron. This is part of the way French is helping wildlife recover from the bushfires she writes about in *The Fire Wombat*.

The Fire Wombat, and all the other creatures, were dependent on the help of humans during this time, such as the water stacks made by Men's Shed groups, the thousands of pouches made so baby animals could be snug and safe, and the donation and transportation of food for the 'vast carrot migration'.

- Examine how Danny Snell has depicted the human help in just two strips of illustrations, and discuss the interdependence of words and text to summarise this huge outpouring of assistance.
 - Discuss how illustrating is much more than being able to draw well. What other skills does a book illustrator need to be able to tell a story through their images?

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Just as the wombat instinctively knew that it needed help, reaching out to help others in need is a human instinct.

- Have students identify, contact, invite and interview a local wildlife carer to learn more about local activities and needs and investigate how they can help.
 - Ask them to prepare a set of questions that will elicit targeted, practical information.
- Guide the students in planning, preparing, advertising and holding a fundraiser from which they could donate the profits to support the work of that local organisation.

About the Authors

Jackie French AM is an award-winning writer, wombat negotiator, the 2014–2015 Australian Children’s Laureate and the 2015 Senior Australian of the Year. In 2016 Jackie became a Member of the Order of Australia for her contribution to children’s literature and her advocacy for youth literacy. She is regarded as one of Australia’s most popular children’s authors and writes across all genres — from picture books, history, fantasy, ecology and sci-fi to her much loved historical fiction for a variety of age groups. ‘Share a Story’ was the primary philosophy behind Jackie’s two-year term as Laureate.

jackiefrench.com

facebook.com/authorjackiefrench

Danny Snell has been working as an illustrator for over 20 years and in that time has illustrated over a dozen children’s picture books. Working in a variety of media and with a focus on simple compositions, Danny brings a gentle whimsy to his book characters and settings. His books have won a number of awards over the years including the 2014 CBCA Eve Pownall Award for *Jeremy*. His first book as both author and illustrator was *Seagull*, which in 2016 won the Wilderness Society Environment Award for Children’s Literature. And more recently *Little Chicken Chickabee* was a 2017 CBCA Notable. Danny’s most recent book with Working Title Press is *Ozzie Goes to School* by Jocelyn Crabb. Danny lives in Adelaide with his partner and two daughters.

dannysnell.com

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