



THE BLACK SWAN

Written & Illustrated Celia Briddle

Published by Windy Hollow Books 2010

Teachers' notes

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About the author

Melbourne-based artist Celia Bridle spent the first twenty years of her life in tropical Africa, then studied and taught art in high school before working as an illustrator for many years both in the UK and Australia. Later she lived beside a volcano. A fascination with the splendour, and terror, of the natural world has been an inspiration for her artwork, as has her admiration for the poise and beauty of our black swans. The Black Swan is her first picture book.

Outline

A black swan is kept by a group of villagers as a mascot, well treated but in a cage. When fire comes to the village, she escapes and flies away to another land. There the people of a village call out to her, urging her to come down and settle with them. She is welcomed warmly and stays. To these people the swan is a special bird. They believe that birds bring messages from the heavens, and each year they build nests beside the lake. They ask the swan to incubate an egg which has been found in one of the nests. The swan sees that they are not going to put her in a cage and agrees to stay and look after the egg.

Some days later, the ground shakes and everyone is afraid. The swan pleads with the people to leave their valley, but they say that they should stay to

look after the egg. The swan grows more and more agitated, and forces them to follow her to safety. She signals to them to follow her by plucking feathers from her tail as she flies, showing them the way.

A volcano erupts in their valley, but the villagers are safely out of reach. The swan leads them to a new, peaceful valley, where they settle, the precious egg hatches to provide them with a new swan, and there is much happiness. It's a new life in a new place, brought about by the wisdom of a bird. The black swan is now free to fly away on her annual migration, but returns each year to visit the villagers.

Author's Rationale

One of the ideas behind the story in my picture book, 'The Black Swan' is the fact of being trapped by circumstances and physical danger, but managing to escape through courage and ingenuity. The image of a bird in a cage is a powerful reminder of being trapped. Symbolically the bird represents the freedom of flight, physically free, and to be in a cage is to be denied a natural freedom.

The story promotes the value of courage, and thoughtfulness. Through an experience of the danger of a fire, caused by conflict, the black swan escapes and flies away to an unknown land. She is watchful when surrounded by the people who live there. She looks to see if there is a cage, but there is no cage, so she stays.



I respond to the mystery, poise and beauty of black swans. If the drawings help children to appreciate the beauty of the natural world, then this is a favourable outcome. There are many swans living here on our lakes and waterways, and therefore familiar to the children in Australia. In many cultures there are birds of totemic significance. In my story the black swan is given a status of totemic importance. The mystery of the egg in the nest is an additional aspect.

Another thread in the story is the fact of migration, and of the links between children from other places and Australia, as a place of refuge.

We are living in a world where conflict, wars and natural disasters are part of the everyday experience of some children

The story is based on the connection between the animal and human world when faced with the terror of a natural disaster, and a rescue.

My personal experience of the natural disaster, the earth tremors and terror, were an impetus for the story. (I lived beside a volcano in East New Britain, Papua New Guinea). However, this is a story for those who live in dangerous places everywhere.

Reading

Before reading

What do you think this book may be about?

Why do you think the cover is dark?

After reading

What do you think was the main message of the book?

Why do you think the role of the black swan was?

What might have happened if the swan had not flown away and left a trail of feathers for the villagers to follow?

What was the significance of the egg?

Themes

The themes or 'messages' of the story are:

- Freedom and rescue
- Migration and refuge
- Courage, Thoughtfulness
- Respect for the beauty and terror of the natural world

Context and further research

Where do you think this book may have been set?

What do you think the villagers' daily life may have been like?

In the beginning of the story the swan is kept in a cage and treated like something special. Why do you think the villagers chose a swan to revere? What other examples are there of sacred animals?

This story is told in the style of a folk tale, can you find other examples of folk tales where an animal is used as a protector of the village.

How can you translate this use of animals as a symbol of hope and protection to contemporary life?

The villagers are displaced from their home by a volcano. What do you know about volcanos?

Illustration

What do you notice about the style of illustration?

What do you think Celia has used to do the artwork?

Why do you think there is no colour, what feeling does it give the book?

