



# Owl



## Teachers' notes

Written and illustrated by Anna Pignataro  
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Deep in a snowy forest, Owl and Frida live happily together. Each night they look out their little window at the moon and wonder what lies beyond the snow. Then one midwinter day, Owl starts to change. His dreams begin to fill with magic and nothing is ever the same again.

The style of Owl is reminiscent of a fairytale. It is a beautiful story about love and loyalty.

Anna Pignataro is the award winning author and illustrator of many picture books including the very successful Princess and Fairy series. She is also the author of a junior fiction series, The Butterfly Bunnies. Anna lives in Melbourne.

### Before Reading

What does the cover suggest the book may be about?

Can you tell from the cover, where the book may be set?

### After reading

#### For younger readers

Why do you think the author has used the symbol of an owl?

What do you think the owl represents to Frida?

What do you think the woman they meet represents?

Why do you think Owl has to go away?

Why do you think Frida closes the cottage window?

The morning Owl leaves, the window is open once again. Why do you think Frida has allowed this?

Why do you think Owl returns home?

Why is Frida cold and quiet when Owl returns?

Owls mean different things depending on culture and mythology. Can you find some of the different things that people have thought the owl represents?

### Writing

How might the story be different if it was told in first person from Frida's point of view?

Imagine Frida was writing a diary. What would some of her entries be? Write an entry about her feelings when Owl left.

Write an adventure that Owl had whilst he was away. You can use the illustrations as inspiration.

Imagine Owl was sending letters back to Frida. What might one of his letters say?

### Visual literacy/art

Why do you think Anna has chosen a white owl?

Why do you think Frida's dress is covered in images?

What do the illustrations of the snow globes represent?

Draw your own dress that symbolises your memories or feelings.



Look at different ways owls are drawn by artists and illustrators. How do they depict them as wise or thoughtful, all seeing? Create your own owl picture or model. What will you emphasise in your owl?

Make your own snow globe with an empty jar.

Use plastic figurines and glue them with waterproof glue on to the inside of the jar's lid. When the glue is dry, fill the jar with water and glitter and screw the lid on very tightly. Turn the jar upside down to reveal your snow globe.

### For older readers

Consider the quote from William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*.

*The owl that calls upon the night  
Speaks the Unbeliever's fright.*

What do you think Blake is trying to say here?

How do you think this representation of the owl links with the owl in this narrative?

Consider the idea that Blake is using the owl as a symbol of a human who is afraid of the unknown. How does this then relate to this book?

If the owl is merely a representation of Frida's fear of the unknown, or the outside world, then who does the woman they meet represent? What then is the symbolism of owl's journey and his return?

William Blake also said

*No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings.*

How do you think this would give a different interpretation of the story? Could this mean that Frida has nothing to fear from letting Owl go because if he goes on his own journey he will know his limits and when to return? Or does it mean that Owl will never be able to go too far alone, that he needs Frida?

What are some other interpretations of the text?

Consider the importance of the setting and the snow?

What is the significance of the hundred days and hundred nights?

What is the significance of the following line?

*Inside a little cottage, deep in a forest, Frida is cold and quiet.*

Read the text in the context of the quote

*If you love someone set them free*

Reflect on the visual representation of Frida and Owl. Why do you think Owl is white?

What is the significance of Frida's dresses?

### Notes from the author:

Fables and fairytales have always been among the most interesting and inspiring stories for me. The mix of myth, legend and symbolism make for an intriguing picture book for children of all ages.

My story, *Owl*, is inspired by a variety of many different things. Like peeling an onion, *Owl* has many layers.

The classic novels of the Bronte sisters: *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre* and the work of American poet Robert Frost are some of the written texts close to my heart. To illustrate the feeling of these texts using specific imagery was both challenging and joyful.

Below is part of the poem "Stopping By The Woods On a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost that is the essence of *Owl*, the character:

*"The woods are lovely dark and deep  
But I have promises to keep  
And miles to go before I sleep  
And miles to go before I sleep"*

Some of the symbols and techniques I used for *Owl* and why.

### The Snow:

I put Frida and Owl in a snowy place to symbolise their isolation from the rest of the world. The way they rely on each other for companionship, friendship, love and warmth is paramount to the story. It almost gives them



a false sense of security that they can look beyond the forest and share their dreams of what lies on the other side, at the same time believe that they are safe together only with one another; that they don't need anybody else. One aspect of snow is that you cannot see things very clearly and it can give the viewer a magical, otherworldly scene to view. Another aspect is that it is cold or numbing.

I love painting snow it is difficult and only works if you leave the right things out; I think that is true of a good story too.

## **The Owl**

The Owl is loosely based on some of my daughter's characteristics, she has very big expressive, dreamy eyes and is quite curious and free spirited but very loving and loyal.

The Owl fits perfectly into Frida's arms but because he has wings could fly away at any time, even though for a long time he chooses not to, Frida can never really be sure if Owl will stay forever.

The Owl has been a symbol for many things over the ages in many cultures.

In my story Owl represents mystery, wisdom and guidance, a watcher of the dark and the unknown, a protector and helper, a shape shifter that flies between two worlds. I used a white owl because it symbolised the purity of spirit and the connection with the snow visually and emotionally. So although Owl has human qualities, he also has the qualities of the elements around him.

In Aboriginal culture the Owl represents the soul of a woman. I also used this idea to represent an aspect of Frida.

## **The Forest/ the elements.**

There is something magical about every forest. I love trees and they are my greatest inspiration of all. I try to put them into every illustration I do. The forest can be many things, it can be a dangerous place or a refuge, it can be a place of adventure and enchantment.

In this story it also acts as a shield or a barrier to the outside world keeping them safe in their little cottage. Trees have sounds and sometimes it might seem like they are talking or whispering. This is a part the story too, is it magic or is the magic inside Owl?

I have always been extremely influenced by the weather around me, I love the tapping of rain and the sound of the wild wind outside, always takes me away and inspires me to write and paint. I used these environmental elements in the story to create mood and feeling.

## **The Woman they meet.**

At first Frida is confident of Owl's love and loyalty until doubt and fear are placed into her mind like a seed being planted.

The woman represents vanity, trickery and sly false flattery. The woman causes jealousy, change and danger. Her words frighten Frida and make her worry, make her selfish. Those same words flatter Owl and make him restless, selfish and vain. On the other hand the woman also reminds Owl that he has a magic of his own that he hasn't discovered yet. From this meeting everything changes. Owl realises his own magic in a dream and finds that he needs to be his true self.

This woman is also dressed in the attire of a wolf.

The feelings that the woman represents are felt from the schoolyard and into adult life. Maybe you are scared that your best friend will like someone else better than you.

## **The Dresses**

Through out the book there are dresses that hold pictures inside them. For me as an artist it's a technique I developed to symbolise the memories of feelings. These are scenes that are in the wearers' minds, things that the wearers have experienced or dreamt of so in this case Frida's mind.

The knitted hats and clothes in the book show Frida's loving care in looking after Owl. My own mother is a great knitter and this is a tribute to her.





## The Burgundy Dress

There is a burgundy dress in the book that was a great inspiration to me and a very important process of the book.

For a while I owned the dress of a very famous person. The singer Kate Bush wore this dress in one of her music videos for her album *The Sensual World*. As I worked on this book the dress was in my studio, it was a part of

the story from the very beginning and in my imagination it was Frida's dress and it served to form Frida's character and the visual literacy, feelings and colours for the entire book.

When I finished the book something happened, the dress no longer belonged to me. In a way I had to give the dress up like Frida had to let Owl go.

The dress is now a part of a museum for music in London.

## Visual Literacy - technique and materials.

Most people know me as a watercolourist and it is my first love. In *Owl* I used watercolour as my primary medium.

I had to remember to leave lots of white paper for the snow and for *Owl*. It's easy to overwork this medium and I had to be careful not to do this when I added the very subtle variations of tone and texture.

To add to the visual texture of the story I used collage. I painted the feathers and then did scans of them, cut them out and layered them onto the paper to give the feeling of depth and strength that feathers have.

I layered snow onto the trees to form patterns and variation of contrast so that your eye recognises that the snow is the same snow in the same faraway place.

When I scan and layer things like the eyes of the characters, it serves to make you recognise that character again and again.

I also used layering in the images around Frida, the inside of the dresses and the flowers, the natural objects in the

forest and around Frida's head. This gave a patterned effect I visualised, like tapestry or fabric. I wanted the story and the pictures to be connected like a quilt, a story quilt.

I love working in this way and started to develop this technique first in my *Princess* and *Fairy* series of books and now use it in other but not all of my picture books.

I love to draw from life and nature. In *Owl* I exaggerated every aspect of every character of the story. Frida and Owl have exaggerated features, limbs and eyes, the trees and the moon and even the objects of the forest are exaggerated. I particularly like working in this way and hope to do more of this sort of style.

It really helps to make my characters other worldly and easier to relate to because they don't look like real people or animals but more like puppets and dolls in a play and the scenery looks like a stage set. This is probably influenced by my great love of movies, theatre and drama.

## Naming the character.

How did I decide on the name Frida? I took the name of the inspirational Mexican woman artist Frida Kahlo. Her dramatic symbolism, long skirts and colourful headgear all influenced the character of Frida.

Some people say I keep painting myself...perhaps that is true too!

There were a lot of what if's when I was writing for example what if Owl had once been Frida's husband but was enchanted by the wolf woman to live as an Owl forever. Owl could not remember this. Would Frida still love him if he were? How could the spell be broken? In the end I decided to keep only the true essence of the story.

Most of all in the fable "Owl", I took all the elements that I love dearly and put them together. I wanted to create a haunting and magical tale but one that can be seen and felt from many different angles.

*Owl* can be a love story, a story about true friendship, a story about being true to yourself no matter what or even a visual diary that may not even need words.

