



## Teachers' notes

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Published by Windy Hollow Books

### ABOUT WRITING AND ILLUSTRATING CASPAR AND THE NIGHT SEA

The book began as a short story written for my then three-year-old son Caspar. I wanted to offer him a story, with himself as the central character. And I wanted him to be brave and adventuring, and free from parental control. The idea of a small boy sneaking from the house at night, alone and on his own secret mission still captivates me. The key image, which came to mind early in the process, was that small boy, aboard a small boat, heading out across darkened waters towards an unknown destination. I sketched that picture very early on. And for some time the destination was unknown, even to me.

### FROM THIS BEGINNING THE IDEA GREW.

The spirit of adventure was the key to both story and illustrations from the start. Inspired by stories of childhood secret missions, bravery, and encounters with a world that was beyond parents' control, the narrative developed. At a time when children are less and less free to roam, to be exposed to nature or to create their own adventures I wanted to allow my readers to enter a world with more freedoms, in their imaginations at least. The appeal of the computer game is currently so predominant, in which the game maker sets the parameters. My desire for my own and other children is to experience adventures of their own making – to take back some control from the grown-ups. And through stories we learn to dream bigger. Young children gain their first taste of other worlds, other possibilities, from stories. They carry them into their imaginative realm, and the very best of them live in their subconscious, and help to build the characters they become.

My hero, Caspar, demonstrates a competency and a courage, both of which I feel have fallen out of favour in parenting circles today. Such are the dangers, real and perceived, of our densely populated communities, that parents tend to reel in their children more and more. And as we seem to carry our children along with us in a whirlwind of busyness, they may be exposed too much of the adult world, but are they given the opportunity and time to really master a skill at a young age? Somehow my fictional Caspar has mastered sailing a small craft, and with this comes a freedom many children never get close to.

The final aspect of the narrative – the whales – carry a gentle environmental message, intended to be a small nudge to children to consider the care of our world and its creatures. It is not overt and I hope suggests an almost subconscious response. It is another layer of understanding for a child who reads the story, to build slowly towards a realisation that the natural world is a precarious and precious thing. It may take many more years before they understand this, but with everything we teach our children I believe we should be suggesting this message. Much depends upon this generation of children to understand our place within the world with more subtlety and insight than their parents.

The illustrations in the book grew from that initial idea of the small craft on the vast and dark sea. The challenge was to create the mood and feel of night time without creating a book that was too 'dark'. I looked to the classic pen and watercolour illustrations of artists such as Robert Ingpen (particularly I pored over his volume of *Wind in the Willows* and the mood, mists and shadows of the river and the underground burrows).



Ron Brooks was also an influence in his drawings in *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek* and *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat*, which very effectively illustrate the darkness and the 'fuzziness' we both feel and see in the night. I did intend a nod to tradition with my use of pen and wash, as the concept is a nod to the adventurous innocents who once peopled children's literature. I also felt the night time setting leant itself to black ink line work — shadows and shapes in the moonlight — working in with the mystery of the story.

The figure of Caspar came directly from reality – his white blonde hair which was cut slightly long so that with his cherub face he was sometimes mistaken for a girl. And a pair of striped pyjamas he loved. The brown of Dog (who is directly modelled on our dog Hedda) and the timber boat are a foil to all the inky blues and greens of the night time sea. Reflecting moonlight and torchlight here and there provide the warmth and the sparkle.

It is my hope that children will be carried along by the mystery of this adventure, and that they will be inspired to dream beyond the walls of their safe houses, of a world where they can harness the breeze, and discover the grand creatures of our planet while they still exist.

## Activities

### BEFORE READING

What does the cover tell you about what this story may be about?

### DURING READING

*Predict:*

Where do you think Caspar and Dog are going?

Who are the dolphins referring to when they say 'They're there'?

### AFTER READING

What do you think are the main themes of this story?

Do you think Caspar really sailed in to the night?

How do you explain the sandy footprints that Mum finds?

Where would you go if you snuck out at night?

Where in Australia would you see whales and when?

What do you know about whales and what can you find out about them?

Make your own sea life mural

Make a class map of where whales are found and when you can see them.

Write a story about your own make-believe night adventure.

As a class look at some other picture books which also have their characters going on adventures that their parents do not know about and that may or may not be real. For example John Burningham's *Oi, Get off Our Train* and also *Time to Get Out of the Bath*, Shirley and *Come Away From the Water*, Shirley, or Jane Tanner's *There's a Sea in My Bedroom*.

Discuss this as a literary device. Why is it important that the parents not know what is going on?

Why is water important to these narratives?

What other similarities can you see between these books?

Why do you think Alison and John Burningham use child characters to highlight environmental messages?

