

Teachers' Notes (Primary)
by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

Alex and the Watermelon Boat

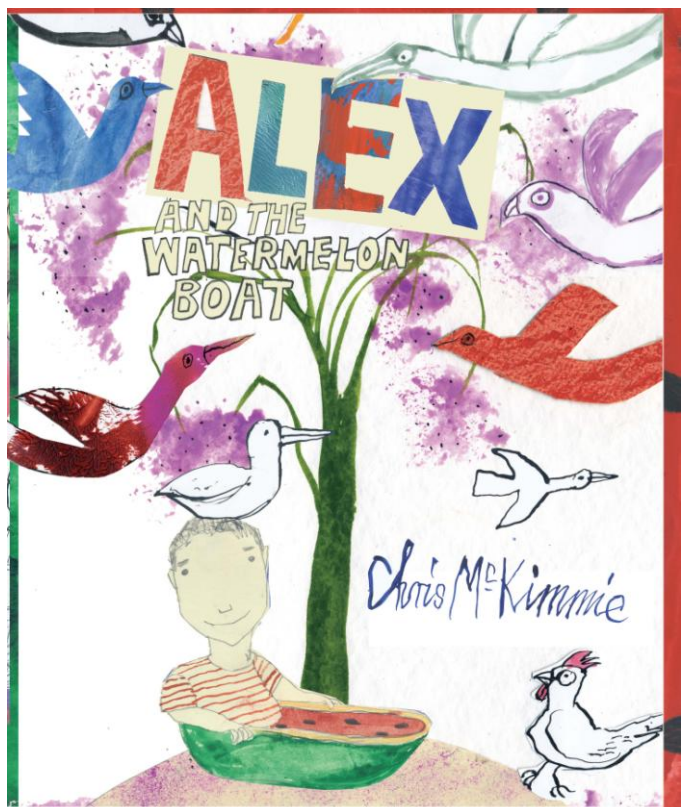
Chris McKimmie

ISBN 9781743310076

Recommended for ages 4-8 yrs

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INTRODUCTION

'The world was all topsy turvy. Pots and pans and memories were being washed away forever.'

Alex and the Watermelon Boat is the sixth in a collection of whimsical and delightfully childlike picture books by Chris McKimmie each of which have been critically acclaimed. Like his *Brian Banana Duck Sunshine Yellow, Maisie Moo and Invisible Lucy, Special Kev, Two Peas in a Pod* and *Good Morning, Mr Pancakes*, this story-is a tribute to friendship and community, and about the power of the imagination to transform even traumatic events into something rather magical.

This book imaginatively explores the experiences of people who endured the Queensland floods of 2010-11. It shows how the familiar world of a child's neighbourhood was suddenly transformed. In his characteristic fashion, though, Chris McKimmie shows that Alex's response was an imaginative one. Structured as a journey of discovery in search of Alex's lost Rabbit, it demonstrates how Alex's determination to find his favourite toy brooks no opposition, and that even though he passes scenes of destruction, he is forced to hurry on, propelled by the strength of that love.

When eventually Alex finds Rabbit, the reunion is touching and heartfelt. It also sends a powerful message that even out of chaos we each have the strength to re-build and to go on with life; and that this strength stems from the relationships we form with our loved ones and with the strangers we encounter in adversity.

STORY SUMMARY

Alex is at home listening to it 'raining, raining, raining! He's bored because he can't go outside, but just then Rabbit 'falls' out the window and Alex must go in pursuit of his toy. Sailing in a watermelon boat, Alex gets a view of the floods and of how they are affecting his neighbours. He also sees things which others might not, and the reader is given a unique perspective through the prism of Alex's perception. When he eventually finds Rabbit, the world has changed but one thing hasn't; they can go safely home again, secure in their love for each other.

THEMES

There are several key ideas or themes which flow through this work:

- Friendship
- Difference & Individuality
- Belonging
- Imagination
- Family

These themes could be considered in conjunction with the following school curriculum areas.

CURRICULUM TOPICS

1. Study of history, society and environment
2. English language and literacy
3. Visual literacy
4. Creative arts
5. Learning technologies
6. Mathematics

The notes which follow are designed to be used largely in pre-school and lower primary classrooms, although some activities might be useful for upper primary or even secondary students. Teachers should be able to adapt them to suit the demands of their particular curriculum.

STUDY OF HISTORY, SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT

1) Floods!

This book draws on the experiences of people in Queensland during the January 2011 floods. McKimmie views the flood through the eyes of a child and shows how magical and adventurous such a disaster can seem.

- *Activity:* Research the floods in books such as *Flood* by Melanie Guile (Pearson 2010), *Flood: Stories and Images from the ABC of Survival, Loss and Courage During the Queensland Floods* by Scott Bevan et al (ABC Books, HarperCollins, 2011), and at sites such as the following:

Calligeros, Marissa 'Brisbane Flood Victims Confront the Disaster' Brisbane Times January 14, 2011 <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/environment/weather/brisbane-flood-victims-to-confront-the-destruction-20110113-19q04.html>

'2010-2011 Queensland Floods' *Wikipedia*
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010%E2%80%932011_Queensland_floods

'Queensland Floods 2010-2011' Queensland Government
<http://www.qld.gov.au/community/disasters/floods/>

[See also websites under **Learning Technologies** below.]

- *Discussion Point:* What causes floods? Have students research this topic.
- *Activity:* Read about the 'The Flood and Cyclone Mosaic Project' launched by State Library of Queensland in November 2011 which invites Queenslanders to contribute their photos of the natural disasters which occurred in 2010-11, in order to create an online mosaic which will be part of the Floodlines exhibition in 2012. <http://mosaic.slq.qld.gov.au/>
- *Activity:* Read Jackie French and Bruce Whatley's book *Flood* (Scholastic, 2011), Kim Kane and Sue deGennaro's *The Vegetable Ark* (Allen and Unwin, 2010), Nigel Gray and Elise Hurst's *The Flood!* (Windy Hollow Books, 2008), and *Noah's Boat* by Louise Elliott (Lothian, 2003) and compare the way they depict floods.

2) Water

Water is a vital topic in Australia's growth and development. Droughts and floods typify the extremes to which our environment is subject and how excess water or a dearth of it can change lives forever.

- *Activity:* Invite students to write about what water means to their lives, and to imagine what it would be like without it.
- *Activity:* Drought can be as catastrophic as floods. Have students list some of the outcomes of a drought.

3) Renewal and Growth

- *Discussion Point:* Can good things come from bad events such as floods? Name three things which are positive effects of floods.

4) Friendship

Alex and Rabbit are best friends.

- *Activity:* Write a sentence about friendship beginning: 'My friend is special because...'

5) Neighbourhoods and Communities

Every street and community is different.

- *Question:* What do the pictures tell you about Alex's neighbourhood?
- *Activity:* Describe your street and the people who live there. What makes your neighbourhood special? You might also like to draw a picture of the street in which you live.
- *Activity:* Create an alphabet about the streets in which the members of the class live. E.g. 'A is for Argyle Street which is where Heather lives; B is for Beacon Street which is where Ellie Lives; C is for Cameron Lane which is where Andrew lives' etc. Then have each child draw a picture to accompany it, and make a frieze to display, or a book to bind.
- *Activity:* Have students create an individual book about their street or suburb. Head each page: My House; My Street; My Local Shopping Centre; My School; My Park or Playground; My Doctor's Surgery; etc. Then have them draw pictures and write captions for each one.
- *Activity:* Discuss the idea of a community by reading other books which feature a street or neighbourhood in the plot. E.g. the Sesame Street TV series and books are one popular example, and another is 'And To Think That I Saw it on Mulberry Street' by Dr Seuss. Others include: *Stories from Our Street* by Richard Tulloch and Julie Vivas and *What Zeesie saw on Delancey Street* by Elsa Okon Rael and Marjorie Priceman. Discuss not only the things and people you see on the street but the things you hear and smell as well. E.g. Komninos Zervos's *High Street, Kew East* illustrated by Diana Reynolds celebrates the noises in a busy

Melbourne street.

<http://www.phatpoetry.com.au/tool-shed/videos/high-street-kew-komninos-zervos>]

6) Backyard Gardens

This book celebrates the traditional Queensland backyard where plants grow in wild abandon with watermelons, pumpkins and other plants on vines which might threaten to take over a garden at times!

- *Activity:* Have fun with your students developing a class garden and then eat the produce, or enjoy cooking together!
- *Activity:* Learn how to grow watermelons by consulting books or websites such as:
'Growing Watermelons' Tropical Permaculture <http://www.tropicalpermaculture.com/growing-watermelons.html>
'Fact Sheets 2UE Watermelon Tips and Recipes' Burke's Backyard
<http://www.burkesbackyard.com.au/factsheets/Food-Health-and-Nutrition/2UE-watermelon-growing-tips-&-recipes/6053>
- *Activity:* Make a Watermelon Basket. Cut a handle in the side of a watermelon so that it resembles a basket. Then carefully scoop the fruit out in melon balls. Drain excess juice into a container for drinking and replace the balls in the melon. This makes a lovely party centre piece.
- *Activity:* Plant a tree like Alex does and watch it grow!
- *Activity:* Have fun drawing watermelons and other fruits and vegetables. See *'Colouring and Drawing Worksheets: Fruit and Vegetable' Enchanted Learning*
<http://www.enchantedlearning.com/themes/fruit/drawing.shtml>
- *Question:* What other plants grow on vines apart from watermelons and pumpkins?
- *Activity:* Make a 'Watermelon Cake'. Do an internet search by typing in the words and several images will appear, for example, 'Recipe: Watermelon Cake'
<http://www.whataboutwatermelon.com/index.php/2009/08/recipe-watermelon-cake/>

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

- 1) The **language** in this book is like that used in all the books by Chris McKimmie, **full of rich and childlike description**.
 - *Question:* Ask your students to describe being lost (as Alex is) in an original way.
- 2) **Structure in this book follows that of the traditional cumulative tale** by having Alex meet various people on his journey but each time deciding not to stop to help because he has to find Rabbit. This sort of repetition and the use of questions such as 'Where was the other Kafoops twin? And where was Rabbit?' encourages participation and the engagement of his readers.

- *Activity:* Write a simple story using this sort of cumulative structure. Read some folk tales to give the class a further idea of how to go about this.

3) Commonly-used two word phrases are included in the text. E.g. Fish Fingers.

- *Question:* Some pairs are not so common. e.g. 'Possum Party'. What other unusual pairs of words can your students think of? [See also **BLM 2 - PAIRS** at the end of these notes.]

4) Expressions of Speech or Idioms are often used to describe something else. This **playing with words** is just one aspect of what we might call the '**sub-text**', or what some people call '**intertextuality**'. [See also **Visual Literacy** below.]

- *Question:* Alex says that Marilyn Kafoops is 'cooking up a storm'. What does this mean?
- *Question:* When Alex is lost he is in 'the middle of nowhere.' What does this mean?
- *Activity:* There are several words and many images in this book which indicate that Alex feels his world has been overturned or changed. Write a poem headed 'Topsy Turvy' or 'All the Shops Were Empty' in which each line describes something odd which happens during a flood.

5) Humour is always evident in Chris McKimmie's books.

- *Activity:* Wayne Presley is with a Kafoops twin at Prawnview Park. The idea of naming a park after the view of a giant prawn is quite an amusing idea! What else did you find funny in this book? (In a humorous intertextuality, Wayne Presley also appears in an earlier book, *Brian Banana Duck Sunshine Yellow*, parked at the Big Duck.)

6) The Conclusion of a story is important in cementing its themes.

- *Activity:* This story ends with the words: 'when it grows big all the birds will come back.' This is a story about the cycle of life; a flood comes and destroys things and then new life begins. Discuss.

VISUAL LITERACY

1) Chris McKimmie's images of Alex's flooded world are child-like and impressionistic.

They might be called 'naïve' in being suggestive of a child's drawing and actually do include some drawings by Chris's grandchildren.

- *Activity:* Have children respond by drawing their own view of a flood. Create a class display of the individual interpretations.

2) The Typography and lettering is like a child's drawing as well.

- *Activity:* Take the picture of your street (which you've drawn above) depicting all the people who live in your neighbourhood. Use speech balloons to show what they might be saying to each other. Colour it in, in your favourite colours.

- *Activity:* There are several animals lovingly drawn in the book, e.g. dogs, a chicken, a cat and a cow. There are a number of birds as well. And there's even a shark! Invite the students in your class to draw one of them in their own style. [See also **Learning Technologies** below.]

3) Medium is described on the back page in great detail! Some of the materials were selected by Chris McKimmie's grandchildren.

- *Activity:* Try to paint a scene, or make an object in any of the media mentioned here, or in a combination of them, depicting the people in your neighbourhood.

4) The pictures in this book have **emotional impact** too.

- *Question:* On the pages beginning with the text 'Rabbit was not on the freeway', what feelings does the very crowded double page spread suggest?
- *Question:* On the pages including the text 'And then all the lights in the world went out', how does the colour and use of space on this page reflect the text's meaning?

5) Each of Chris McKimmie's books contains **intertextual references** and jokes in the pictures.

- *Activity:* For example, three of the neighbourhood businesses floating away are called **Horses R Us, Pisa Pizza** and **Le Grand Prawn**. Make up some funny names for businesses such as a butcher, baker or car dealer. Then design a sign for the business as well.
- *Question:* What other 'sub-texts' did you discover in the images in this book?

6) Colour plays an important part in the meaning of Chris McKimmie's images.

- *Activity:* Why do you think the opening double page spread lacks the colour of the other subsequent pages?
- *Discussion Point:* When Alex is lost the colours change. Why?

7) Design encompasses every aspect of a picture book's construction, and includes the front and back cover image, the endpapers, a dedication page, a title page, 16 double page spreads, and a final imprint or publication details page. The juxtaposition of images and words on each page contributes to meaning in this and in other books.

- *Question:* The **front endpaper** depicts Alex and Rabbit and the watermelon against an embroidered tablecloth with a crocheted lace edging. The **back endpaper** contains a child's handwriting saying: 'Instructions 1. Water the plants every day. 2. Let the sun shine on the plant. 3. The plant will grow and you will be happy.' Both images and texts relate to the theme of renewal contained in this story of floods and the re-building. How? Discuss.
- *Activity:* Examine the **front and back cover**. What meaning do you make from the images? What other information is contained on the back cover?

- *Activity:* Test your students' observation skills. Have them write down all the vehicles in the double page spread which begins with the words 'Rabbit was not on the freeway.'

CREATIVE ARTS

This text might encourage students to explore it through other forms of creative arts.

DRAMA

- *Activity:* Act out the story of Alex's journey. Create a watermelon boat for him to sail in. Make it as imaginative a production as you can.

MUSIC

- *Activity:* Make up your own simple rhymed song about Alex and Rabbit, including the people Alex encounters on his journey.

DANCE

- *Activity:* Create a special dance for Alex and Rabbit to perform.

CRAFT AND DESIGN

- *Activity:* Have students make individual hanging light shades like the ones Alex sees above when he says 'and then all the lights in the world went out'. Give them materials such as card, cellophane, rope, tassels, in order to create unique lights to hang in your classroom. Use some interesting materials to stimulate their creativity such as drinking straws, colanders, teapots, disposable drinking cups, You can find some interesting ideas on the internet such as:

Hanging Colander Lamp Shade

<http://www.instructables.com/id/HangingColander-Lamp-Shade/>

Illuminating Re-use: 15 Recycled Lights and Lamps

<http://webcoist.com/2009/03/08/reuse-recycled-lights-lamps-designs/>

Universal Lampshade Polygon Building Kit

<http://www.instructables.com/id/Universal-lamp-shade-polygon-building-kit/>

Make an Egg Pendant Lamp

<http://dollarstorecrafts.com/2011/04/make-an-egg-pendant-lamp/>

LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

This book might be used as a tool for investigations on the Internet.

- *Activity:* Explore **website links to related topics** such as:

Drawing Animals:

'Category: Drawing Animals' *WikiHow* <http://www.wikihow.com/Category:Drawing-Animals>

'How to Draw Animals' *How Stuff Works* <http://home.howstuffworks.com/how-to-draw-animals.htm>

Floods:

'Queensland Flood Crisis Map' ABC
<http://queenslandfloods.crowdmap.com/>

'Floods, Queensland Dec.2010 - Jan. 2011 – Australian Internet Sites' *Australia's Web Archive*

'Floods Lesson Plan: Emergency Management for Schools' *Australian Government Attorney-General's Department*
http://www.ema.gov.au/www/ema/schools.nsf/Page/TeachLesson_PlansFloods

MATHEMATICS

Students will find many objects, animals and people to count in this book.

- *Question:* How many times does the word 'raining' appear in the opening double page spread in the book? (Answer: Eight.)
- *Question:* How many birds appear on the double page headed 'But I had to go outside.' (Answer: Four.)
- *Question:* How many red misty mountains appear in the picture? (Answer: Four.)
- *Question:* How many hanging lights appear in the picture? (Answer: Ten – there are also two spot lights fixed to the 'roof' of the page.)
- *Question:* How many birds appear on the last page? (Answer: Ten, plus one chicken.)

CONCLUSION

Chris McKimmie has created another warm and touching journey into the heart of the child's imagination. Alex is a faithful friend to Rabbit and even the terrors of the flood can't keep these two apart. This is a story about friendship, love and community told in a whimsical manner which is utterly charming.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

CHRIS MCKIMMIE

Chris McKimmie was the convenor and originator of the illustration program at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. He wrote, illustrated and designed a series of 8 children's books in the 70s, and has designed many covers for the University of Queensland Press. Represented in the *Graphis Annual*, he has worked as a graphic designer and publications designer for the ABC, the National Parks and Wildlife Services and the University of WA Press. He was production designer for the award-winning short film 'Stations' and the feature-length film 'Australian Dream', and wrote the lyrics for the songs in both films. He exhibits paintings and drawings. To see more of his art and read more about him, go to his website at www.chrismckimmie.com

Previous books by Chris McKimmie:

apple to zoo Hicks Smith 1975

Two friends Hicks Smith 1975

The shape I'm in Methuen 1977

The caught bird Methuen 1977

The painted bird Hicks Smith 1975

One day Hicks Smith 1975

One rainy day Methuen 1977

The magic day Methuen 1977

Brian Banana Duck Sunshine Yellow A&U 2006

Maisie Moo and Invisible Lucy A&U 2007

Special Kev A&U 2008

Two Peas in a Pod A&U 2010

Good Morning, Mr Pancakes A&U 2011

ROBYN SHEAHAN-BRIGHT

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates *justified text writing and publishing consultancy services*, and publishes regularly on children's literature, Australian fiction, and publishing history. She was inaugural director of and is a life member of the Queensland Writers Centre, and was co-founder of Jam Roll Press. Her latest publications include *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia (1946-2005)* (2006) co-edited with Craig Munro, *Kookaburra Shells Port Curtis Literature* (2006), and *Hot Iron Corrugated Sky: 100 Years of Queensland Writing* (2002) co-edited with Stuart Glover. She has chapters in several textbooks including *Making Books* edited by David Carter and Anne Galligan (UQP, 2007) and *Crossing the Boundaries* edited by Michelle Anstey and Geoff Bull (Pearson Education, 2002). Her PhD thesis traced the development of the Australian children's publishing industry, and she has taught for a number of universities. She is coordinating judge for the *Somerset National Novella Writing Competition for School Age Writers* and chair of the *Queensland Premier's Literary Awards YA* judging panel.

BLACKLINE MASTERS – INSTRUCTIONS AND ANSWERS

BLM 1 - COLLAGE

A dotted outline of Alex in his boat is provided for students who may need help making a collage. Blow this page up to A3 size.

BLM 2 - PAIRS

Two pairing exercises are provided for idiomatic phrases.

a) 'mixed-up pairs' answers

baked beans, watermelon boat, spring rolls, possum party, party pies, topsy turvy, fish fingers.

b) 'linked pairs' answers

1. here and there/now. 2. bits and pieces/bobs. 3. life and death. 4. pins and needles. 5. rise and shine/fall.

BLM 3 - QUIZ

Comprehension quiz

Answers:

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| 1. Birdvale Street. | 7. A boot. |
| 2. Bob. | 8. Somewhere between here and there, in the middle of nowhere. |
| 3. Binky. | 9. Wayne Presley's car. |
| 4. Merilyn Kafoops. | 10. Because Rabbit is too tired |
| 5. Goggles. | |
| 6. A motorbike. | |

BLM 4 – 'I SPY' WITH ALEX

Matching different pictures of the same object – one on the BLM with one or more in the book.

BLM 5 – NAME THAT OBJECT

Using pictures to identify images from the book and then write their names.

Answers:

Lamp	Policeman	Helicopter
Whisk	Bath	Frying pan
Barbecue (BBQ)	Fork	Koala
Crown	Saucepan	Clown

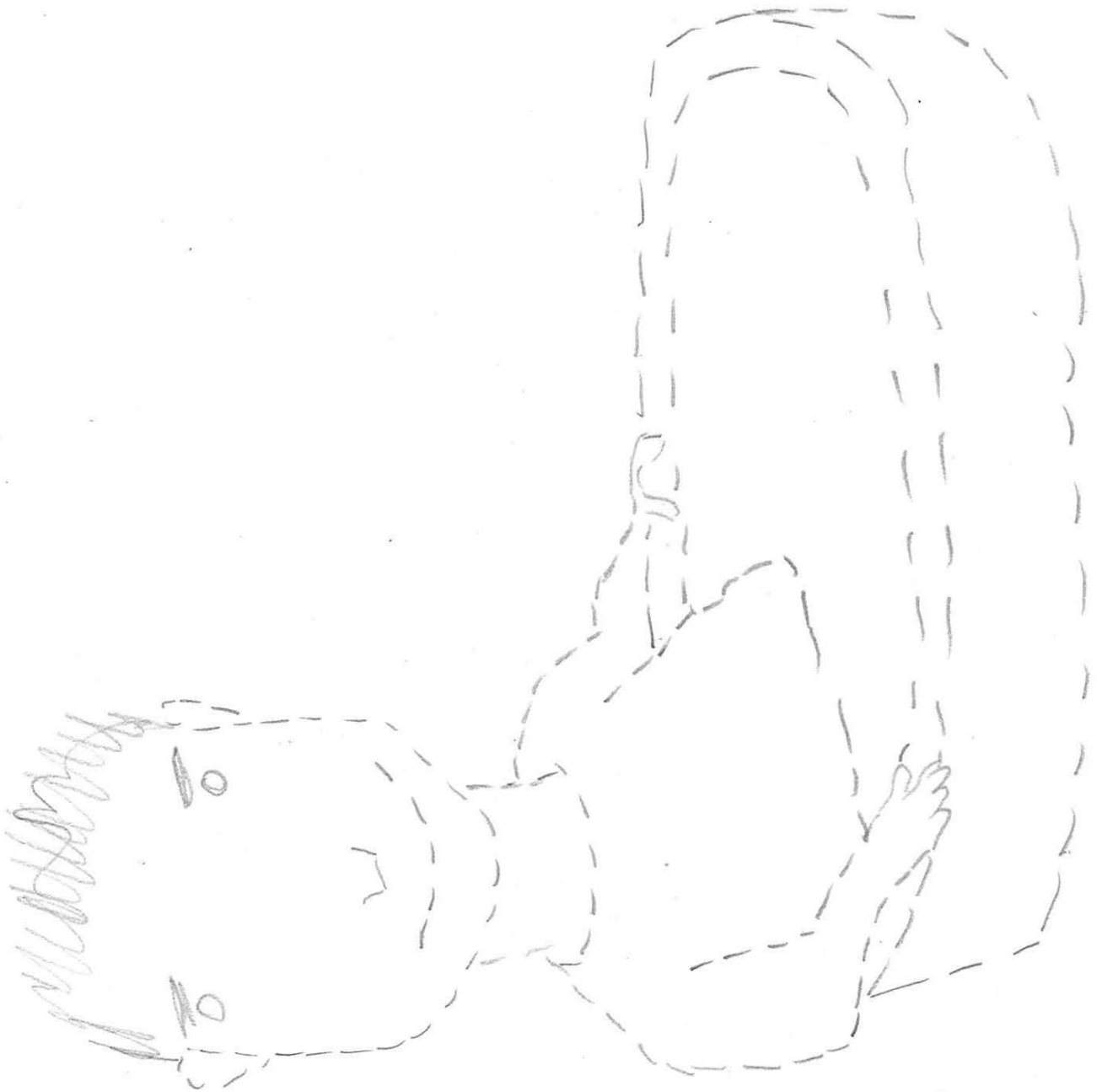
BLM 1

CREATE A COLLAGE PICTURE OF ALEX IN HIS WATERMELON BOAT

Using the rough outline below, create your own image using collage techniques.

Cut out pictures from magazines, collect pieces of foil, feathers, lolly wrappers, glitter, buttons, or any other material which appeals to you, in order to create a totally original interpretation of this picture

Don't forget the watermelon seeds!



BLM 2

PAIRS

There are a number of **two word phrases** describing things in the book. In the table below, these pairs have been 'mixed-up'. Match the things in the first and second columns, by drawing a line from one word to another which is its pair. Then in the third column, write another word which might go with either of the words beside it in the first two columns, to form a common two word phrase e.g. Fish Cake.

Baked	Rolls	
Watermelon	Pies	
Spring	Turvy	
Possum	Fingers	
Party	Boat	
Topsy	Beans	
Fish	Party	

Some things come in **pairs of words linked by a joining word**. For example, 'pots and pans' are mentioned in this book. Finish these phrases:

1. HERE AND ?

2. BITS AND ?

3. LIFE AND ?

4. PINS AND ?

5. RISE AND ?

BLM 3

QUIZ

1. What street does Alex live in?
2. What name is on the crown worn by the cat in the opening pages?
3. What is the cat on the roof called?
4. Who is barbecuing on her roof?
5. What is Scarlett wearing in the bath?
6. What vehicle is the policeman driving?
7. What has Lonely Ross lost?
8. Where are the Misty Mountains?
9. Whose car is the other Kafoops twin in?
10. Why doesn't Alex go on with his journey after he finds Rabbit?

BLM 4

'I SPY' WITH ALEX

Images of each of these things appear in the book. Try and find them – some more than once.



BLM 5

NAME THAT OBJECT

Write the word beside these pictures of things which also appear in the book.