

Teachers Notes
by Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright

DREAM OF THE THYLACINE

Margaret Wild & Ron Brooks

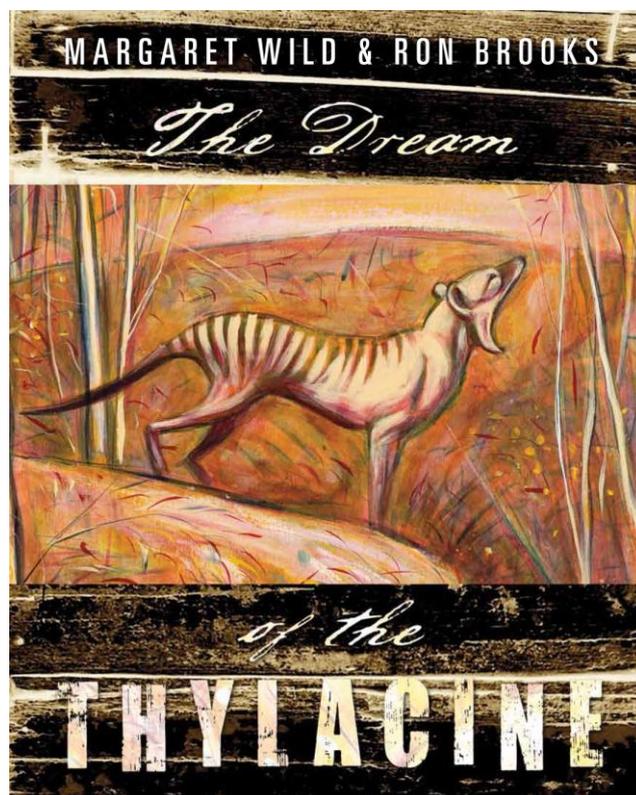
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Recommended for ages 8+ yrs

Older students and adults will also appreciate this book.

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INTRODUCTION

*Trapped am I,
in cage of twisty wire, cold concrete.*

PROWL

RAGE

HOWL

*Know you not that I am tooth and claw–
see me hunt through bracken and bush,
see me swagger across wild lands,
see me glory at the edge of cliff.*

The Dream of the Thylacine is the first book in ten years from the award-winning team of Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks, and like their last book together, *Fox*, it promises to be widely read and used in classrooms at several levels. It is both a poetic piece of writing and a superb work of art which explores significant scientific, environmental and ethical issues, and so might be used in a variety of curriculum areas.

The possibility that thylacines may still exist is the subject of some speculation. Although the last known survivor died on 7 September 1936 in Hobart Zoo, there are still some people who believe that this large carnivorous marsupial may have survived in isolated pockets of Tasmania.

Other creative artists (such as Gary Crew and Mark Wilson in their picture book *I Saw Nothing* or Julia Leigh in her adult novel *The Hunter*) have written about the reality and the myth of this charismatic creature; see the list of related texts towards the end of these notes.

THEMES

This book, which could be studied in primary or lower secondary classrooms, is relevant in a number of **curriculum areas**: Arts (Language and Literacy, Visual Literacy, Creative Arts), Science and SOSE. It could be used to explore the **themes** of:

- Human Influence on Nature
- Environmental Responsibility
- Extinction and Endangered Species
- Freedom and Captivity

Use quotes from the book to explore these themes and their often ambivalent implications. For example:

- *Trapped am I, in cage of twisty wire, cold concrete.*
- *See me glory at the edge of cliff.*
- *Rest now. Hear the stones chant, the winds console.*

Meredith Tate, in a review of *The Dream of the Thylacine*, captures succinctly the depth of the themes to be found in this book:

In their first collaborative work since Fox, Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks again push the boundaries of the picture book form with this haunting allegory of extinction. It tells the story of the last-known Tasmanian Tiger, whose eventual death in captivity in the late 1930s marked the end of an entire native species. Trapped within a cold concrete and twisty wire cage, the thylacine prowls and rages, driven by a deep longing to return to the forest. Yet it is only through death that his dream to be reunited with the

land will be realised. Wild's text is sparse and powerful. With two stories to tell – of what was and what could have been – the book hovers in an unsettling space between fantasy and reality, hope and extinction, and the living and the dying. This duality is captured most beautifully through Brooks's mixed media artwork. Confronting us with the imprisoned and suffering thylacine, pleading for freedom and understanding, Brooks then contrasts this with the animal's exhilarating transformation through the wilds of its imagination – pointing towards a universal resilience of spirit in the face of certain death.

– Junior Bookseller+Publisher newsletter, 21/3/2011

CURRICULUM TOPICS

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

- After a first reading, the class should discuss the book as a whole. What is it saying? What effect did it have on readers? Is it giving us a simple 'message', or telling us a simple story, or is there something else in it? Or all three?
- The text is arranged in four sections. Why the shift from 'Trapped' to 'Ailing' to 'Shadow' and finally 'Dreaming'? (Notice, by the way, how Ron Brooks has presented this shift in his treatment of the type.)
- Is the book about a single animal only?
- Who is the 'I' and who is the 'you' in the text ('Know you not...')? Why does Margaret Wild use 'I' and 'you' rather than using third person (for instance, 'The last known thylacine died in 1936')?
- The book is written in the present tense even though the last known thylacine died long ago. Why? Try rewriting a few lines in the past tense. What is the effect?
- Wild's text in this book (as in her verse novels), is a lesson in how to say a great deal in a very few words. It is **concise**, **poetic** and **cryptic**, in evocative ways. How does this work?

Choice of words is important. Take as one example, the words 'hunt', 'swagger' and 'glory' in the 'Trapped am I' page. These words have literal meanings that are quite clear. But they have a strong 'flavour' or aura as well; they are rich in associations. 'Hunt' is associated in our minds with speed, power, killing; 'swagger' with confidence, bravado; 'glory' with uplift and dominion and again power.

Notice also that Wild is ready to invent words if the one she wants doesn't exist already; for example, 'striply bark'. Think of alternative words she might have used instead of 'striply' and didn't – why might she have rejected them?

Sound is also powerful. 'Mourn. Ache. Yearn' in the middle of the book. They have meanings in the area of grief and longing; but what does the *sound* contribute to the meaning? Don't the long open vowels, underlined by the pauses in between, remind us of wailing and howling? (How different would it be if we read 'I mourned. I ached. I yearned'? Read it aloud to find out.) So the exact way the words are used intensifies the feelings that Margaret Wild has named.

Here's another example of sound reinforcing meaning: 'creeks of flickering fish'. The sounds here (ks, ck, sh) echo and reinforce the visual and kinaesthetic picture that 'flickering' gives us of darting shapes intermittently seen. Or, think of 'Run with me where the snow falls slow' – why 'slow' rather than 'slowly'?

Over and over again, Margaret Wild chooses words and rhythms that are full of **connotations**; they suggest and hint, they work by calling up pictures and sounds and

feelings in our minds as much as they 'mean' something. Look up the words **connote** and **denote** and find examples in the book of words that do both.

- Each section begins with a repeated statement of the animal's anguish: *Trapped am I...; Ailing am I...; Shadow am I...* Discuss what effect is produced by this word order. (What would be the effect of recasting as 'I am trapped; I am ailing; I am shadow'?)
- How does Margaret Wild present Nature and land? In thinking about this, you might look again at phrases such as 'the mouth of the river, the arms of the mountains', 'my heart is a forest' and 'Hear the stones chant, the wind console'
- Create your own story about the thylacine. What perspective or point of view would you adopt in order to tell the story?

What tense would you use?

- Create your own list of evocative words to describe another endangered creature, and write a text in the voice of that animal.
- Students could **compare** *Dream of the Thylacine* to the earlier book by these two artists, *Fox*, and to other picture books for older readers on similar themes. E.g. Gary Crew and Mark Wilson's *I Saw Nothing: The Extinction of the Thylacine* in which he has a child named Rosie tell the story of the last thylacine in captivity in Hobart Zoo.

Discuss how the narrative styles differs from one book to the other, and whether the books have any similarity in style.

How does Mark Wilson's illustration compare to Ron Brooks'? [See the Bibliography of Related Texts, below.]

VISUAL LITERACY, ART & DESIGN

This book gives wonderful opportunities to draw out students' responses to images and help them become more alert to the sub-text; to observe how the pictures often add to or illuminate meaning, complementing and enriching the words.

- Discuss the pictures in a general way. What do students think of them? Which ones did they find most powerful or affecting? Would the words have been as memorable without the pictures?
- Examine the 'architecture' of the book, as Ron Brooks calls it. Does it fall naturally into several different parts? How does that shape our understanding of the text? (If these questions are difficult for students to answer, break up the discussion into stages. Start with the cover, then look at the endpapers, the preliminary pages, the three spreads with text on them and the wordless colour spreads.)
- Start with the **cover**, discuss why the illustrator juxtaposed two images of the animal on back and front.
- Examine the **endpapers**, which give two different views from inside the cage. What do they suggest about the animal's situation?
- In the opening pages, what do the dilapidated brown boards suggest about the story that is to come?
- Ron Brooks says the **medium** used is 'acrylic on board and mixed media'. However, the images are clearly executed in two contrasting **styles**. Some are in stark black and white, based on photographic images, and depict the caged thylacine. The others are in colour, and evoke the freedom of the animal. **Texture** is evident in the grainy photographic images in contrast to the smoother, painterly images.

Discuss the artist's choice of medium and colours – how do they support the themes in the text?

- Why do students think Ron Brooks followed each sepia spread with three colour spreads? Ask them to think of words to describe the animal a) in captivity, and b) in the landscape.
- In the spreads in which the animal is depicted captive, what might be the artist's reasons for surrounding the cage with white page space, in contrast to the coloured images that 'bleed' to the edge of the page? Why does one of the images show a snowstorm? What other important things might we notice about the representation of animal and landscape in the coloured images?
- Discuss the use of **perspective and spatial relationship** in this text. For example, when the thylacine is in the wild, his body dominates the foreground, or is depicted in positions of power (e.g. on the cliff face), whereas in captivity, his body is diminished and his image is muted, shadowlike, incomplete.
- The **font size** used is deliberately uneven with lower case and capitalisation used. What effect does this have on the reading?
The final words look as though they might be hand-written. What does this suggest?
- Have students **create their own** set of three related pictures depicting the animal in the wild.

OTHER CREATIVE ARTS

This book could be used to explore a range of other creative arts such as acting, improvisation, music and dance.

- Ask students to improvise the scene in the book where the animal is running through the snow; develop the improvisation into a dance which suggests the emotions conveyed in that scene. They could also 'dance' as the thylacine in captivity.
- The class could choose two pieces of music which are suggestive of the animal's emotions when being held captive, and when free.
- Visit 'The Tasmanian Tiger' *Squidoo* [<http://www.squidoo.com/TasmanianTiger>] for activities including colouring pages for the thylacine.

SCIENCE

In science, *The Dream of the Thylacine* could be used to discuss a range of issues such as:

Thylacine

- Research the animal's **evolution**.
- **Discuss this background in relation to its iconic status.** (For example, the Tasmanian Coat of Arms features the thylacine as its supporters.) Is the thylacine a unique animal?
Write an essay outlining why the features and evolutionary background of the thylacine are unique.
- **Study species** and how the thylacine fits into the marsupial family.
- Study the images in the book to discover **the nature of the environment** in which the thylacine lived.
- What might the carnivorous thylacine's **diet** have consisted of?
- The possible **cloning** of the thylacine is a scientific concept which has had a fitful history. Research further, and discuss the implications, the difficulties and the potential outcomes of such research.
Conduct a class debate on the pros and cons of such cloning.

- **Make a timeline** showing the significant stages in the thylacine's evolution as we know it today. Include in your timeline the key interventions by human beings which have contributed to its life cycle, and the appearance of the thylacine in Aboriginal rock art from thousands of years ago.
- **Make your own list of thylacine facts and trivia.** Visit "The Tasmanian Tiger" *Squidoo* [<http://www.squidoo.com/TasmanianTiger>] for some interesting facts.

Student Quiz:

Q. What animal does a thylacine resemble?
(A. Dog or wolf)

Q. What other names are used for it.
(A. Tasmanian Tiger or Tasmanian Wolf)

Q. What is its scientific name?
(A. *Thylacinus Cynocephalus*)

Q. Was it confined to Tasmania?
(A. No, at one time it was found in continental Australia as far north as New Guinea. It is said to have become extinct in all areas except Tasmania over 2000 years ago.)

Q. What are said to be its closest relatives?
(A. The Tasmanian Devil and the numbat)

Q. Are thylacines related to dogs as a species?
(A. No, thylacines were marsupial mammals and had no direct genetic ancestry to dogs, foxes, wolves or jackals, but instead were, 'cousins' to kangaroos, possums and wombats, and are an example of what is called 'convergent evolution'. They acquired characteristics similar to those of dogs by living and adapting to similar environments and/or ways of life.)

Q. What caused the decline of the animal?
(A. It is not known whether human beings or a combination of their influence and that of other wildlife caused it. Dingos represented a threat as did the introduction of sheep by European settlers, who then sought to protect their flocks. The Tasmanian government placed a 'bounty' on the capture of the animal, and because it was such a rare species it was also much in demand by zoos and other such institutions, all over the world.)

Q. Is it extinct or endangered?
(A. Although declared officially extinct in 1986, there are some who believe it may still survive in isolated places.)

Q. Have there been sightings of the animal since 1936?
(A. Many people have reported sightings and several searches have been undertaken but no conclusive proof has been discovered.)

Biodiversity

- **Discuss biodiversity** using the thylacine as the starting point for your research. Find out what other flora and fauna exist in the Tasmanian landscape. How does this ecology differ from other areas of Australia? Choose one other area with its own characteristics as a comparison.
- **Use other texts** such as Narelle Oliver's *Sand Swimmers* or *Fox and Fine Feathers* or Jeannie Baker's *The Hidden Forest* as examples of ecological biodiversity.

STUDIES OF SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT

Human Influence on Nature

- The actions of humans have enormous effects on animals and plants, soils and climate. What are some of the actions that alter environments and habitats in a big way?
- The words 'Know you not that I am tooth and claw' assert the animal's wildness. Should we value this, or try to tame it? Can animal instincts be changed by domestication? Discuss.

Environmental Responsibility

- Discuss the need for human beings to be environmentally aware, and active. Research particular movements (Greenpeace Australia or Australian Conservation Foundation) and action groups which have endeavoured to protect certain species or natural landscapes (Save Ningaloo Reef or Save Curtis Island), or to encourage people to be more responsible (Clean Up Australia Day).
- Use books such as Jeannie Baker's *The Story of Rosy Dock, Where the Forest Meets the Sea, Window* or *Belonging* as stimulus in this discussion.

Extinction and Endangered Species

- **Research how and why the thylacine became endangered.** The Bounty system was a system introduced by the Tasmanian government to encourage people to kill the animals. But other animals such as dingos also played a part.
- **Research other endangered species.** Make a list of several and then create your own fact files on each of them.

Find out what causes extinction of animals Visit 'Causes of Extinction'
<http://www.uwec.edu/jolhm/EH4/Extinction/CausesLink.html> for a brief list.

- **What Australian animals (fauna) are endangered?** E.g. Numbat, Central Rock Rat, Banded Hare Wallaby.
Visit 'Australia's Threatened Species'
<http://www.science.org.au/nova/010/010key.htm>
and 'EPBC Act List of Threatened Fauna'
<http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicthreatenedlist.pl?wanted=fauna>
- **What flora is at risk in Australia?** Visit 'EPBC Act List of Threatened Flora'
<http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicthreatenedlist.pl?wanted=flora>

Freedom and Captivity

- This book **contrasts the freedom of nature with captivity.**

Discuss the ethics of keeping animals in cages; of capturing wild creatures and forcing them to deny their natures in this way; of capturing animals such as pandas and breeding them in zoos. Such exercises are said to be aimed at learning more about, and thus preserving, various species.

View Brooks' depictions of the **instruments of captivity** in his graphic black and white and sepia images of chicken wire and timber batons. View the YouTube **video** of the thylacine in 1933, desperately trying to escape his prison, which is too small for his nature. This is a powerful image of how an imprisoned animal feels. Examine footage of pandas and elephants and other such larger creatures forced to remain in cages. Are any such forms of protection inhumane?

- **Imagine if human beings found themselves captive** like this. Read Gillian Rubinstein's powerful *Galaxarena*, or Kirsty Murray's *Vulture's Gate* or Victor Kelleher's *Taronga* for examples of how human beings might feel in such circumstances.
- The book might be used to **discuss feelings about being restricted or repressed** in more subtle ways as well.

CONCLUSION

The Dream of the Thylacine is a work of art which will repay several readings. It is an exquisite work of poetic and visual art; a treatise on human environmental responsibility; a celebration of the Australian landscape; and a multi-levelled investigation into the nature of an animal which was a unique product of this environment.

Sadly, the thylacine is no longer with us. In this book, Wild and Brooks lament its passing, celebrate its uniqueness, and entreat the reader to recognise the tragedy of this story. Their unspoken message is that such animals deserve to be treated with more care. They offer a literary tribute to the thylacine, that he/she 'may rest in peace'.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RELATED TEXTS

PICTURE BOOKS

Baker, Jeannie *The Story of Rosy Dock* Random House, 1995.

Baker, Jeannie *Window* Random House, 1991.

Baker, Jeannie *Belonging* Walker Books, 2004.

Baker, Jeannie *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* Walker Books, 1998.

Crew, Gary *I Saw Nothing: the Extinction of the Thylacine* Ill by Mark Wilson (and series) Lothian, 2003.

Toft, Kim and Alan Sheather *One Less Fish* UQP, 1997.

Greder, Armin and Libby Gleeson *The Great Bear* Scholastic Press, 1999.

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Tan, Shaun and John Marsden *The Rabbits* Lothian, 2003.

Isham, Marion and Steve *Tiger Tale* Bandicoot Books, 2002.

ABOUT PICTURE BOOKS

Doonan, Jane. *Looking At Pictures in Picture Books*. Stroud: Thimble Press, 1993.

Anstey, Michèle, and Geoff Bull *Reading the Visual: Written and Illustrated Children's Literature*. Sydney: Harcourt, 2000.

Steinberger, Kevin. 'A matter of style: artistic style in picture book illustration' in *The Literature Base* Vol 23, Issue 1, February 2012. Includes suggested teaching activities. This book is cited as an example on p.15.

NON-FICTION

Domico, Terry *The Last Thylacine* Turtleback Books, 2005.

Paddle, Robert *The Last Tasmanian Tiger; The History and Extinction of the Thylacine* Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Pyers, Greg *Life Cycles of Australian Animals* series Heinemann Library.

Cheng, Christopher *The Eyespy Book of Endangered Animals* Ill. by Michael Davis Scholastic, 1991.

Wood, David *Thylacine: The Tragic Tale of the Tasmanian Tiger* Allen & Unwin, 2003.

INTERNET RESOURCES

THYLACINE

'The Thylacine' Australian Museum <http://australianmuseum.net.au/The-Thylacine>

'The Thylacine' *Wikipedia* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thylacine>

'The Thylacine Museum' <http://www.naturalworlds.org/thylacine/>

'Thylacine, Or Tasmanian Tiger, *Thylacinus Cynocephalus*' Parks and Wildlife Service, Tasmania <http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/index.aspx?base=4765>

'The Tasmanian Tiger' *Squidoo* <http://www.squidoo.com/TasmanianTiger>

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Australian Conservation Foundation <http://www.acfonline.org.au/default.asp>

'Australia's Threatened Species' <http://www.science.org.au/nova/010/010key.htm>

'Causes of Extinction' <http://www.uwec.edu/jolhm/EH4/Extinction/CausesLink.html>

Clean Up Australia <http://www.cleanup.org.au/au/>

Earth's Endangered Species http://www.earthsendangered.com/index_s.asp

EPBC Act List of Threatened Fauna <http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicthreatenedlist.pl?wanted=fauna>

EPBC Act List of Threatened Flora <http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicthreatenedlist.pl?wanted=flora>

Greenpeace Australia Pacific <http://www.greenpeace.org/australia/>

Save Curtis Island <http://www.savecurtisland.com/>

Save Ningaloo <http://save-ningaloo.org/frames/page1.html>

ABOUT THE WRITERS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Wild is one of Australia's most highly regarded writers for young people. Margaret was born in South Africa and came to Australia in 1972. She has been a journalist on newspapers and magazines, and she worked as a book editor in children's publishing for sixteen years, responsible for managing and commissioning a large range of titles. She lives in Sydney and now writes full time. Margaret has written more than 70 books for children. Her books are published around the world and have won numerous awards. Her books for Allen & Unwin include the two teenage novels, *Jinx* and *One Night*, and the picture books *Old Pig, Fox* and most recently the picture book *Ruby Roars*.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Ron Brooks

Ron Brooks spent his childhood in Mallacoota, Victoria. Now he writes, designs and illustrates picture books for kids. He has made many books over the thirty or so years he has been working, has won many awards, including the Children's Book Council of Australia Picture Book of the Year Award (three times) and is published in many languages around the world. Two of his earlier books, *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek* and *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat*, both written by Jenny Wagner, are widely recognized as the books which introduced Australian picture books onto the world scene. Two of his more recent books, and perhaps his own personal favourites, are *Old Pig* and *Fox*, both written by Margaret Wild. He has also been a teacher, and he paints, sculpts, and does a bit of printmaking.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THESE NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates *justified text* writing and publishing consultancy services, has published widely on children's and YA literature, and has lectured in writing for children and young adults at Griffith University (GC).