



Teachers' Notes

Dancing the Boom-cha-cha Boogie

Written and Illustrated
by Narelle Oliver

'... a unique and very different kind of alluring picture book that repays repeated readings.' – Maurice Saxby, *Magpies*, September 2005

OMNIBUS BOOKS

Category	Picture Book
Title	Dancing the Boom-cha-cha Boogie
Author/Illustrator	Narelle Oliver
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Previous publications

Fox and Fine Feathers
(Omnibus Books, 2009)
Home (Omnibus Books, 2006)
The Very Blue Thingamajig
(Omnibus Books, 2003)
What a Goat!
(Omnibus Books, 2003)
Mermaids Most Amazing
(Omnibus Books, 2001)

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About the Story

Three murmels find themselves on a foreign shore after being lost at sea. As strangers they are not welcome in Grand Snigdom and find themselves imprisoned. There they will stay until their boat is fixed and they can be on their way.

A young snig takes pity on them and each night unlocks their cage and lets them out, taking them to a safe place. It is during these night-time meetings that the snig and the murmels become friends and celebrate by feasting, playing and dancing together.

About the Author

Narelle Oliver was born in 1960, and grew up in Toowoomba, Queensland. Her father was a keen amateur photographer and her mother was a watercolourist and art teacher. As a child Narelle was constantly exposed to the delights of artistic creativity, and not surprisingly she herself enjoyed drawing, painting and reading. A highlight of her childhood was regular family trips into the countryside to gather ideas and material for various artworks.

When she began to study for a Bachelor of Education degree, Narelle majored in design and printmaking. It was during this period that she discovered the world of contemporary children's picture books. After graduating she taught for several years at the Queensland School for the Deaf, 'living and breathing picture books and sign language'. She also tutored in the Language and Children's Literature courses offered by the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland.

Narelle's first book, *Leaf Tail*, the story of a lizard, was published in 1989. The project took her more than three years to complete. Like most of her books, it was inspired by natural environments she has explored, and her interest in natural history. It was followed in 1991 by *High Above the Sea*, a CBCA Notable Book, and *The Best Beak in Boonaroo Bay*, which was shortlisted for the CBCA's Picture Book of the Year in 1994. In 1995 *The Hunt* was published: it won the Picture Book of the Year award in 1996, and was also shortlisted in that year for the Wilderness Society Environment Award for Children's Literature. *Sand Swimmers*, published in 1999, was also extremely successful, being shortlisted in 2000 for the Queensland Premier's Award and the CBCA's Eve Pownall Award for Information Books, winning the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales Whitley Award (Best Book for Older Readers, 1999), and winning the 2000 Wilderness Society Environment Award. *Mermaids Most Amazing* was a CBCA Notable Book in 2001, and Narelle's *Baby Bilby, Where*

Do You Sleep? was judged an Honour Book in two sections of the CBCA's 2002 awards – a rare distinction. *The Very Blue Thingamajig* won the BILBY Award, an Australian children's choice award, in 2003, and more recently *Home* won a NSW Premier's Literary Award and was shortlisted in the 2007 CBCA Awards, the 2006 Queensland Premier's Literary Awards and the Wilderness Society Environmental Award for Children's Literature in 2007.

Narelle is unusual among Australian illustrators in that she writes all her own books. Interestingly, she has published a book that she has written but *not* illustrated! – a title in the Omnibus Solo series, *What a Goat!*, illustrated by fellow Queenslander David Cox.

Narelle lives in Brisbane with her husband Greg, an environmental scientist, and their children Jessie and Liam.

Author/Illustrator Inspiration

Narelle Oliver took inspiration from a number of things when creating *Dancing the Boom-cha-cha Boogie*. 'I met a friend whose daughter was in secondary school and she mentioned that in one of her school subjects the topic of refugees and immigration was being studied. To highlight some of the issues involved, the teachers had offered to be fenced off in an area of the school. In the exercise, each teacher was an illegal immigrant and it was up to them to come up with ideas that might convince students to let them out into the wider community.'

She took the essence of this idea and applied it to her work: 'In *Dancing the Boom-cha-cha Boogie* the murmels have only their cultural richness to offer the strange creatures of their new land – the foods, games and dances and their joyful approach to life. And they offer friendship as well, even though they are not welcome.

'At the same time, the issue of refugees trying to reach Australia illegally by boat was in the news. I recall seeing news footage of one of the boats – how poor and old it looked and on the verge of sinking. Instead of focusing on the rights and wrongs of this situation occurring, I started to imagine what it must be like to take off on a long unknown voyage on a boat that looks like it could sink at any moment. And not being exactly sure if and how the boat will get somewhere safe. And knowing that there is probably not a life to go back to, and hoping like crazy that there will be some kind of life where the boat lands – if it does not sink or get smashed up in a storm ...

'In *Dancing the Boom-cha-cha Boogie*, the murmels faced a similar situation as they drifted in their leaky arkel, knowing that their homeland, Murmella, and all the other

murmels had disappeared in the whirligig. They could only hope that there was some kind of life ahead of them.'

Narelle was also inspired by a Sudanese family who had moved into her street. 'Their three young children immediately filled their front verandah and the footpaths with noise and laughter and bike riding ... Then on weekends they dressed up in their traditional dress of glowing fabrics and headed off as a proud family up the street. I knew from the news that they had probably fled from a terrible situation in their own country and left other family behind.

'In *Dancing the Boom-cha-cha Boogie*, the snigs, or at least the Boss Snig, presumed that the snigs were superior and that the newcomers would be desperate to get hold of their sea slugs and to stay on in Grand Snigdom. However, the murmels had a cultural richness of their own – their special foods, games and dances – which they shared and the effects of this sharing on the snigs became very important in the story.'

About the Illustrations

'In a previous picture book which I wrote and illustrated, called *The Very Blue Thingamajig*, I had invented a make-believe animal which looked a bit lizard-like and was able to grow a number of features.

'In *Dancing the Boom-cha-cha Boogie*, I thought it would be fun to go a step further and create two very different species of creature. I wanted the physical features (such as colour, shape and movement) of each species to somehow suggest the general personality of that species. I made deliberate decisions to use certain shapes, colours and patterns for the murmels, and quite different ones for the snigs. I wanted the two species to look very different – at least at the start.

'When I was creating the Boss Snig, I asked my 12-year-old son about the kinds of markings or features I could put on him to make him look particularly powerful and a bit scary. He suggested spikes and battle scars. Well, the scars ended up developing into something like lightning bolts, but they seemed to suit the Boss Snig.'

Study Notes for Teachers

1. This book can be read as a metaphor for the plight of refugees, as well as the racial discrimination immigrants face in their new homes. *Dancing the Boom-cha-cha Boogie* can

be used to support discussions and study of refugee issues, and also to celebrate and recognise the importance of multiculturalism.

- Discuss why the Boss Snig tells the murmels that 'strangers are not permitted in Grand Snigdom'. Fear of foreigners is called xenophobia. Why do you think people have this fear?
- Discuss the reasons for the murmels' imprisonment. Can you think of a situation in real life where the equivalent occurs? Can you offer a better solution?
- Discuss what the snigs learn from the murmels.
- Discuss whether or not you think life improves after the murmels' arrival.
- Discuss what it means to 'own' land, and then consider what you understand by the term 'sanctuary'.
- Children can visit the following websites for more information and activities on multiculturalism:
 - 1) <http://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/> (A provider of educational resources such as activities, lesson ideas, quizzes and information sheets) and
 - 2) <http://wilderdom.com/games/MulticulturalExperientialActivities.html> (Multicultural, cross cultural and intercultural games and activities).

2. Children can be asked to respond creatively to the text:

- What would you do if you were a snig? Put yourself in the murmels' shoes. How would you have acted?
- Think of an alternative ending. What else could have happened if the characters had acted differently?
- Look carefully at Narelle's artwork and identify all the things you like and think are successful. From your observations, create your own creature. Come up with a name and some interesting facts about your creature.

3. In *Dancing the Boom-cha-cha Boogie*, the visual art elements of line, shape and colour are used to communicate important information and feelings about the characters and their surroundings. The changes in Grand Snigdom and the snigs through their contact with the murmels are mostly communicated through visual details rather than through the text. Children can be asked to:

- Compare the round, soft shapes of the murmels with the pointed, spiky and triangular shapes of the snigs.
- Consider whether these shapes indicate what kind of creatures they will be.

- Compare the colours of the murmels with the snigs when the murmels first arrive.
- Consider how colours make us feel about each group of creatures.
- Compare the colours and shapes of landscape features, such as buildings, plants and rocks, between Murmella and Grand Snigdom (when the murmels first arrive). List the differences and describe how these features make you feel about each place.
- Compare the illustration of Grand Snigdom when the murmels first arrive, and are peering out through their prison bars, to the final illustration of Grand Snigdom. List all of the differences (including changes in colour, shapes and details) that communicate the changes in life on Grand Snigdom.
- What visual elements have been used to create feelings of happiness and joy in the final scene?

4. If you liked *Dancing the Boom-cha-cha Boogie*, write and tell Narelle Oliver why. Or if someone in your class comes up with a question about the book that no one can answer, write and ask her about it! Don't forget to include a stamped, self-addressed envelope for your reply. You can send your letter to the following address:

Narelle Oliver c/- Omnibus Books, 335 Unley Rd, Malvern SA 5061

5. For information about Narelle's other books, visit her website:

www.narelleoliver.com/