

TEACHER'S NOTES FOR *FREDRIK GOES BANANAS*

By Melissa Firth

Illustrated by Cheryl Orsini

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MELISSA FIRTH was born in Auckland, New Zealand, in 1972 and apart from three years living in the Philippines, she grew up there. She was an avid reader and her parents also read aloud often. On sailing holidays, her father read classics like *Treasure Island* and *Swallows and Amazons* to keep the children's minds off the choppy water. The first story Melissa remembers writing is 'Harold Hampet the Spy'. In her teens she wrote poetry and didn't have the urge to write fiction again until her twenties.

Melissa completed a Bachelor of Communications at Auckland University of Technology, focussing on television production. She then worked in London as a web producer and information architect. Moving to Sydney, Melissa completed a Graduate Diploma in Creative Writing at the University of Technology, Sydney. As well as writing and directing a television documentary, she has had a number of short stories and articles published. At present, Melissa manages digital product development for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's commercial division. She writes in her spare time. *Fredrik Goes Bananas* is her first children's book.

CHERYL ORSINI studied Visual Communication at the University of Technology, Sydney. Her first job after university was as a graphic designer for a children's publishing company. When an illustrator was unable to finish a job, she was asked to step in, and has been illustrating ever since. She has more than a dozen picture books and novels to her name, including the popular 'Dolls' series by Natalie Jane Prior.

She says that her work is inspired 'by the words people say, the stories they don't even know they're telling; people speak in pictures that beg to be drawn.' She is inspired many artists, including illustrators Maira Kalman, Lisbeth Zwerger and Giselle Potter.

Cheryl lives in Coogee with her family. She loves, among other things, walking swimming and dancing. If she wasn't an illustrator she would want to 'sing in a trio and play the piano accordion.' See more of her work at www.cherylorsini.com and cherylorsiniillustration.blogspot.com

SYNOPSIS

Fredrik Lotsie lives on Snowsmoke Island, a special place in the north that is very cold but where there are hot pools and steam rises from the ground. When Fredrik realises he's sick of eating fish, he does the unthinkable and leaves his catch behind. After Mrs Lotsie tells him the whole village thinks he's going bananas, Fredrik gets an idea. Bewildered, everyone watches while he builds a glasshouse over a steamy patch of ground and plants some corms. But later, when Fredrik picks his first crop of bananas, they are glad he had such an unusual idea.

THEMES

Behind the humorous story of *Fredrik Goes Bananas* are some important messages. Fredrik is faced with a problem, but he doesn't let that problem get him down for long. He thinks of a creative solution and acts on it. Even though what he does is unusual and everyone around him thinks he's strange, he doesn't let criticism stop him. He persists, working out a way to make his idea come true, all the while ignoring the stares and comments of others. Fredrik keeps going and believes in himself, and he is rewarded.

WRITING *FREDRIK GOES BANANAS*

Melissa Firth finds writing for children very relaxing because it gives her so many opportunities to be playful with language and ideas. 'Children have a much more blurred idea of what is real and what is fantasy. Writing stories for kids gives me room to play with that blurry line.' She thinks it is important not to engage in heavy moralising and to encourage children's creative thinking. In *Fredrik Goes Bananas*, she aims to show someone who didn't just accept a problematic situation but made an impact by acting on his ideas to change it.

The story grew out of a short trip Melissa took to Iceland when she was living in London. Her father was a geothermal engineer and 'As a child I was led reluctantly around many an infernally hot thermal park.' On her trip to Iceland as an adult, she was struck with the fact that Icelanders make a lot of use of the geothermal heat freely available to them. They grow food like tomatoes, cucumbers and even a small number of bananas in heated greenhouses. This practice served as a basis for Fredrik's innovative idea.

The first version of *Fredrik Goes Bananas* was about two thousand words long. Scholastic Publisher Ana Vivas found Melissa's writing so visual that she thought the story would work better as a picture book. Melissa trimmed the story back to about six hundred

words. She found this a difficult task that took many drafts, but also wonderful exercise in getting to the essentials of a story.

Melissa's teenage years writing poetry taught her to use playful language devices such as assonance, alliteration and repetition, such as 'Big fish, small fish, silver fish and smooth fish.' Her favourite fish image is the 'rotten shark fin' that once was Fredrik's favourite dish. It is a real Icelandic dish, although Melissa hasn't tried it.

Melissa loves the 'otherworldliness' of many of Cheryl Orsini's illustrations so was delighted to hear that she was going to work on *Fredrik Goes Bananas*. Melissa was also pleased that the characters would be based on albatrosses, as she hadn't seen them as quite human in the first place. She finds the humour in the character illustrations 'completely charming'.

ILLUSTRATING *FREDRIK GOES BANANAS*

When Cheryl Orsini read *Fredrik Goes Bananas* for the first time, she was attracted to the challenge of depicting a white world of ice, snow and steam. She says that, 'Snowsmoke Island was an exciting and scary challenge because I had to find a way to get a sense of the cold and the warm steam at the same time.'

Cheryl's acrylic and gouache paintings use lots of icy blues that reinforce the idea of cold. Not only the sea and sky are blue, but also the structures, clothing and the fish. Chips of warm orange and red act as highlights against the blue and white. All this changes when Fredrik's hard work come to fruition. When he takes his first bite of banana that 'tasted like sunshine' everything is green and the yellow bananas are like splashes of sunshine.

A strong sense of place is brought to the illustrations by the inclusion of wooden buildings with tall pointed roofs. Cheryl based these on photos of Arctic villages in Greenland and Canada, where the brightly painted buildings stand out when the icy weather arrives.

When Cheryl first read the book, she assumed that Fredrik and the other villagers would be human. Her initial rough drawings of the characters were based on the Inuit people of the Arctic region. The publisher, Ana Vivas, suggested that the characters could be based on Arctic animals. Cheryl liked the idea and had the unexpected challenge of finding an animal that fitted the bill. Her criteria were that the animal shouldn't be one that had been drawn millions of time before, that it should eat only fish and that it lived in very cold places. She says that, 'To stumble across the albatross was a gift. What beautiful birds! There are so

many different varieties in the northern and southern hemispheres. They are full of expression, have fantastic beaks and great rounded bodies, and best of all they dance!’

Not everything from Cheryl’s drawings of Fredrik as a human were scrapped. The Arctic fox came out of her very first roughs of Fredrik. ‘I kept playing with ideas for Fredrik’s clothes. I drew the fox wrapped around Fredrik’s shoulders and neck like a fox fur scarf. Once the fox scarf came alive, staring back at me, I could see this little fellow could be a good friend for Fredrik – so he stayed.’

Cheryl made lots of rough drawings of the villagers as albatrosses. She feels that they worked as visual characters because ‘the albatross has so many body expressions that are strangely similar to human movement and that they are ‘an innately funny bird.’ She hopes that she was able to get Fredrik across ‘as the sweet visionary that he is!’

DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Look at the covers. What does the place where the story is set look like? Who could the bird in the foreground be? What might he be doing?
2. Read the story out aloud without going too fast, so the children can hear all of the words and see the pictures.
3. What is the problem that Fredrik has? How does this problem make him feel? What does he do to feel better? Where does his wonderful idea come from?
4. Talk about what the other villagers think of Fredrik when he acts strangely. Does he doubt himself when he hears the others talking about him? Why does he keep going? What might have happened if he had given up?
5. This story is based on life in Iceland. Students can find out about Iceland – about the food, climate, about the volcanic activity and how the people harness heat from the earth.
6. There is a lot of food in this book. How do we know Fredrik is sick of fish? What do the bananas represent to him? Think of your least favourite food. Write a list of words that describe it. Use those words to make a poem about having to eat it. Now think of your favourite food and do the same thing. What does your favourite food make you think of?
7. The illustrator of this book had to convey the idea of heat and of cold. How did she do this? Students can do a painting of something hot or cold.
8. The illustrator has given a type of bird human characteristics. Students can draw or paint a picture, or create a model from odds and ends, of their favourite animal.