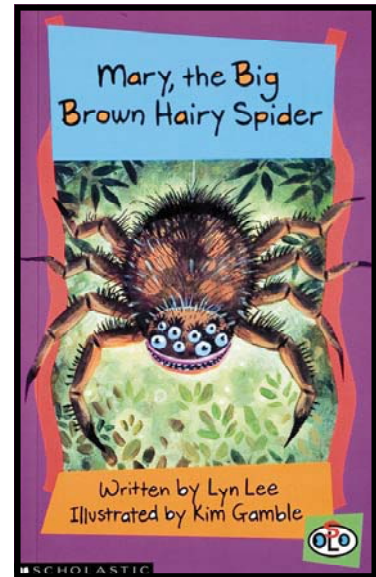


TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

Mary, the Big Brown Hairy Spider

Written by Lyn Lee
Illustrated by Kim Gamble



The author: Lyn Lee

Lyn Lee made her name instantly with her very first book: the outstanding picture book *Pog*, which was published in 2000. It was a hit not only with children but also with the judges of the Children's Book Council of Australia, who voted it an Honour Book in the 2001 Book of the Year (Early Childhood) awards.

Lyn Lee has no particular background in writing, although she did have a short story ('Dream House') published in *The School Magazine* in 1999. She started her tertiary training at Art School, 'where I went to a lot of parties' and joined a rock band as a guitarist. But, she says, 'somehow or other I ended up married with three children and a dog and living in suburbia. Believe me, that's probably been the wildest experience of all.'

Her interest in books for children began when she became a mother herself. 'I read to [my children]. I was enchanted by the enormous amount of wonderful books available. I thought I'd like to have a go at writing one.'

Lyn still lives in suburban Sydney, but now her writing has become a much greater focus in her life. She has had two more picture book texts accepted by Omnibus, and she has plans for many more.

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The illustrator: Kim Gamble

Kim Gamble has been for many years a popular and outstanding illustrator of children's books. He was inspired to become involved in this particular creative field for the same reason as Lyn Lee: because he had children of his own. Kim illustrated Lyn's picture book *Pog*, and has been contracted to illustrate another of her picture books in the near future.

Born in semi-rural Sydney, the youngest of four children, Kim was encouraged to draw from a very early age. He has vivid memories of his childhood, and remembers 'summer storms, long grass in vacant blocks, fruit trees, chooks, an old dairy, bush trails and a river' - landscapes that later often inspired the artwork in his picture books. He studied to be an infant teacher but instead became an artist.

Kim has had no formal art training and is largely self-taught. He spent ten years working for a small Sydney publisher, followed by two years in advertising, and then started doing freelance work for *The School Magazine*. The magazine editor, Anna Fienberg, is herself a writer, and loved Kim's work so much that when she wrote her book *The Magnificent Nose and Other Marvels*, she requested that he illustrate it. *The Magnificent Nose* went on to win the CBCA's Book of the Year (Younger Readers) Award in 1992, and Kim has been inundated with illustration work ever since. He holds workshops on his craft, and has written two 'how to' books: *You Can Draw Anything*, and *You Can Do Great Lettering*.

Kim's titles include the ever-growing and extremely successful list of *Tashi* titles by Anna and Barbara Fienberg; the *Minton* books, also by Anna Fienberg; the picture books *Arabella* by Wendy Orr, *Let's Escape!* by Mike Dumbleton and *First Day* by Margaret Wild; and many others. He is a winner of the Crichton Award for Illustration (1992) and has been nominated several times by the CBCA: not only for *Pog* in 2001, but also for *Tashi* (1996), *Victor's Quest* (1997), *Joseph* (2002), *Sarindi and the Lucky Bird* (2002) and *Horrendo's Curse* (2003).

Kim lived for many years in Dungog, a little country town in the Hunter Valley, but has since moved to Sydney.

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Mary, the Big Brown Hairy Spider

The second collaboration between Lyn Lee and Kim Gamble has many of the inspirational qualities that made their first, *Pog*, such a success. As in *Pog*, the main character, *Mary*, is to all appearances fearsome and ugly, but really is friendly and helpful, and in need of affection. Both text and illustrations use gentle humour and wit to neutralise any potentially frightening elements.

Mary is a lonely spider who lives in the back yard of an empty house. She tries unsuccessfully to make friends with the other residents of her overgrown yard - bees and moths - but they either buzz off or fly away. She decides instead to become 'the best weaver ever', and makes 'wonderful webs' for people to admire. But no-one comes to admire her work, so Mary sits in her web and sulks.

When a man and a woman, a boy, and a noisy dog move into the empty house, Mary is delighted: she'll weave special webs just for them! The man and the woman react with fear and horror when they walk into her huge webs, but to Mary their animated gestures seem to be signs of appreciation and joy. Mary feels that she has established a good relationship with her family, and is content.

Mary's realisation, one dark, rainy night, that a burglar has come to rob her family inspires her to some truly heroic web-weaving. As the burglar attempts to leave the house, he runs face-first into Mary's 'best web ever': an enormous sticky web that covers the back door—with Mary in it, waiting. When the burglar's torch lights on her 'like a spotlight', she pulls an ugly face and waves her hairy arms. The burglar just stands there, sobbing, until the police come.

Mary's family is extremely grateful to her. She's the best burglar alarm ever! The woman catches her in a jar and puts her gently outside ("My very own house," thought Mary. "All snug and dry."—page 47). Afterwards the family bring lots of people out into the back yard to admire Mary's beautiful webs, and the big brown hairy spider listens happily as they tell their visitors what a wonderful spider she is.

Notes for teachers

Spiders

Why are people often so afraid of spiders? In his essay at the back of the book (page 51), the illustrator, Kim Gamble, writes: 'I grew up in a place where there were lots of funnel-web spiders. I have a horror of things which have eight eyes, eight legs, enough poison to wipe out an entire army, and fangs so sharp that they can bite through a toenail. And I hate the way they like to hide in shoes.' Lyn Lee, on the other hand, says, 'I like spiders. I think they are amazing' - but she also admits that they can be 'a little bit scary', and warns that some spiders can be really dangerous (page 50).

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- Ask children to talk about their own experiences with spiders. Who is afraid of spiders? Why? Who isn't afraid? Why?
- Ask children what *they* do when they find a spider in the house.
- Talk about the many different sorts of spiders that exist - from funnel-webs to tiny garden spiders. Make lists of spiders that are dangerous, and those that aren't, and draw pictures of them. Talk about 'spider safety'. Are all big spiders dangerous?
- Find out as much as possible about how spiders live, what they eat, and so on. What special role do spiders play in the natural world? What would the world be like if there were no spiders?
- What species of spider might Mary be? Read the story to find out the sort of detail that might identify her. Is she dangerous to people, or only to insects like the silly moth? Make a poster about Mary spider.
- Find out how spiders spin webs.
- After working on spiders and talking about them, ask those children who said they were afraid of spiders if they are still as afraid as they were! Does knowing all about something you are scared of make it less scary?
- Ask children if they would like to have Mary living in *their* back yard. (It's very likely that they do!)

Illustrations

Kim Gamble drew Mary using Quink, an ink used to fill fountain pens. It gives a very soft, layered, slightly blurry look to the artwork. By using this technique he has made Mary look furry and appealing.

In real life, of course, spiders aren't able to use facial expressions to show how they feel, but Kim has given Mary human emotions. Look carefully at her eyes and her mouth (she has very un-spiderlike tiny teeth!) and you'll see how her general body language shows what she is feeling. (Compare the illustrations on page 4, page 8, page 9 and page 37.) On page 12, 'eyebrows' make her look cross! By making her look funny and vulnerable, Kim's illustrations have the immediate effect of humanising her and helping us to relate to her.

- Talk about how our bodies can reveal how we feel. Look at Kim's illustrations, and then ask children to draw Mary being (a) happy, (b) cross, (c) sad.
- Ask children to draw Mary in her web. Make her webs as beautiful and fantastic as possible!
- Ask children to draw their own back yards, and show where spiders might be hiding.

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Extending Reading

Look in the library to find some other books about spiders, and read them to the class. Perhaps the most famous of all spider stories is *Charlotte's Web*, by E.B. White. There are also some picture books, like Jeannie Baker's *One Hungry Spider*, and Jenny Brooks's *Aranea*. Also read Yvonne Winier's *Spiders Spin Webs*.

There are two other Solo fiction titles that feature insect characters (remembering that *Mary*, as a spider, is an arachnid, not an insect). Read *Cocky Colin* (Richard Tulloch and Stephen Axelsen) and *Fuzz, the Famous Fly* (Emily Rodda and Tom Jellett). Like *Mary, the Big Brown Hairy Spider*, both of these use humour in text and illustrations to make appealing characters of creatures we generally regard with distaste. For another viewpoint, read the Solo *Wild Things* (Cynthia Maxwell and Stephen Axelsen), which shows these creatures as they really are - and one dad's reactions to them!