

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

Meet the Monsters

Written by Max Fatchen

Illustrated by Cheryll Johns

Meet the author: Max Fatchen

It's not an exaggeration to say that Max Fatchen is a literary icon in his home state of South Australia. Everyone knows his name, and his weekly column in the *Adelaide Advertiser* is one of the paper's most popular features. He is not only known; he is loved, both for his witty, evocative writing and for his personal character. Now eighty-three years old, Max is everyone's favourite uncle or grandfather: funny, lovable and wise.

Max was born on 3 August 1920. An only child, he lived on his parents' Adelaide Plains farm where 'books were my companions and the farm animals my friends'. He worked on the farm until he was sixteen, and still has a great love of the Australian countryside - its distinctive light, space and mood appear in many of his novels and poems. He wrote his first story at the age of eight, and had his first short story published at seventeen. After completing his high school education Max became a copy boy at the *The News*, gradually advancing to the positions of columnist, feature writer, and finally literary editor.

Max's novels for children, many of them inspired by his travel experiences as a journalist, are typically fast-moving, exciting adventure stories. His earliest novels, *The River Kings* and *Conquest of the River*, are set in the early days of South Australian settlement, and *The Spirit Wind* was inspired by his meeting with an Aboriginal song man. *Chase Through the Night* was made into a film, and *The River Kings* became a very popular television series.

Max has always been noted for his poetry, which ranges from the uproariously funny to the wistful and elegiac. He is South Australia's nearest thing to a poet laureate, his witty occasional verses illuminating and enshrining events both grand and humble. Since 1983 he has produced several collections of poems, including *A Paddock of Poems* and *A Pocketful of Rhymes*, both written especially for children and published by Omnibus Books. *A Paddock of Poems* was an Honour Book in the CBCA's Book of the Year (Younger Readers) awards in 1988. He has also published two picture books with Omnibus: *A Country Christmas*, illustrated by Tim Ide, and *Australia at the Beach*, illustrated by Tom Jellett.

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

Max's verses have been published in British, American and Australian anthologies, and he has fans worldwide. Although so much of his poetry is humorous, he believes that such writing is a very serious business. '... one has to make each line say something and often the last line must sum it all up'. Words, phrases and ideas are the triggers for his writing, and he always keeps a notebook on hand to jot down his thoughts.

Children have always loved Max's poetry, perhaps because he is so adept at seeing life from a child's viewpoint ('I have tried never to grow up'), and has himself something of a child's imaginativeness and candour. He writes: 'As a columnist, feature writer and humorous versifier I constantly studied people, their appearance, their mannerisms, their foibles. I love watching and listening to children. They speak beautiful sentences, they frame words in a distinctive and unaffected way, they are often wise beyond their years.'

He describes his interests as 'talking with children, fishing on lonely jetties, the sea, and children's parties with plenty of jelly, ice-cream and no supervision by other adults'.

In 1980 Max was made a Member of the Order of Australia for his services to journalism and literature, and he has won many other awards and commendations, including South Australian of the Year. He has been for several years Patron of the South Australian branch of the CBCA. Max and his wife Jean have three children and six grandchildren.

Meet the author: Cheryll Johns

The young Adelaide artist Cheryll Johns was born in Stirling, in the Adelaide Hills, in 1971. She was 'an RAAF brat', and describes her school life as 'a blur of continual moving' as her father was posted to different locations around the country.

'Obviously, art was my favourite subject. I've always wanted to illustrate children's books. I've drawn ever since I was the littlest of girls. My twin sister and I spent hours with our pencils, Textas and paper, avoiding anything to do with sport.' One of their most popular games was based on the pencil-nosed puppet character Mr Squiggle, in the ABC television program. Cheryll now says that she credits Mr Squiggle with being 'a major influence in my life'.

Cheryll graduated from the University of South Australia in 1994 with the degree of Bachelor of Design - Illustration. She concentrated at first on advertising work, but more recently has been involved in illustration, designing, laying out and illustrating the children's magazines K-Zone and Disney Adventures. She also works in a more painterly style and enjoys exploring a broad range of colours, bold shapes and interesting textures. Her artwork is praised for its vigour, humour and inventiveness.

Cheryll's first picture book, *Silly Galah!*, was published by Omnibus Books in 2001. A collection of verses about Australian animals by children's writer and poet Janeen Brian, it attracted immediate attention. One critic said that such a fresh new approach to Australian wildlife had 'not been seen for a long time, perhaps not since Kerry Argent and *One Woolly Wombat* in 1982'. Janeen's whimsi-

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

for a long time, perhaps not since Kerry Argent and *One Woolly Wombat* in 1982'. Janeen's whimsical verses proved to be an ideal subject for Cheryll's vibrant, colourful artwork, and in 2002 Cheryll was short-listed for the Crichton Award for New Illustrators.

Max's poems are similarly suited to Cheryll's particular talent and range. She says, '*Meet the Monsters* was a joy to produce. Max Fatchen's words, quirky and so full of energy, were so much fun to illustrate. A chance to take my imagination out for a run. Bold colour coupled with lush textures is the strength of these images. I've always loved monsters and things with teeth, so it was definitely the one I've been waiting for.'

Meet the Monsters

Max's monsters are for the most part a fairly genial bunch, ranging from a lonely bunyip weeping by the weir to a brash salesmonster advertising his scary services on the internet. There are portraits of various monsters famous in legend and mystery: a chilly Yeti alone on his Himalayan peak, and a kilt-clad Loch Ness monster; and there are assorted creatures that have sprung entirely from the poet's imagination. Many of these, such as the monsters having a party or the students at a school for little monsters, are surprisingly like children ... And then, of course, there are the classic bogeys that hide under beds and in cupboards, waiting for parents to turn out the light.

Notes for teachers

Monsters in world culture

- Talk about the many sorts of monsters that appear in our cultural heritage: the dragons, ogres, trolls, werewolves and giants that feature in fairy stories and traditional tales, from the ancient Greeks to the brothers Grimm and beyond - right up to Roald Dahl. Make a list. Can these monsters be grouped into different types?
- The Yeti and the Loch Ness monster are two monsters that we see as being potentially 'real'. Talk about some of the other monsters whose existence is still a mystery.
- Talk about monsters from a range of different cultures. In what ways are they similar? (eg dragons from around the world).
- Why have people invented monsters down the ages? Why are we fascinated by monsters? Have students discuss their own feelings about monsters: being interested, frightened, amused. Read the poems 'And s-s-so to bed' and 'I often meet a monster' in *Meet the Monsters*. Why are we more afraid at night than in the day? What sorts of things might be mistaken for monsters in the dark? Ask children to talk and/or write about their own 'night frights'.

Language and literature

- After reading some of the shorter poems in this anthology (eg 'What a load!'), ask children to write their own short 'monster' poem in the same style.
- Discuss the various styles of poetry in the book, looking especially at rhyme and rhythm.

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

- Max Fatchen, describing his own poetry, says that '... one has to make each line say something and often the last line must sum it all up'. Look at the last lines in each of these poems and discuss how effective they are in summing up the poem.

Art

- Look at Cheryll Johns's artwork. Talk about her style. Think about how she has created the monsters in her paintings. Are they mostly animal, or mostly human, or a combination of both? What aspects of her characters does she especially exaggerate? (eg eyes, mouth, tongue, teeth, ears). Talk about one such element - eg eyes - to see the many ways she has varied this feature. Talk about her use of colour to reflect unusual characteristics (eg purple tongue, greens skin).
- Get children to draw their own monsters, perhaps illustrating their own poem.
- Take one or more of Max Fatchen's poems and ask children to invent and paint the monster *they* see in this poem - it may be very different from the way Cheryll Johns has interpreted this character.
Have each child draw him/herself as a monster. Make up a Rogues' Gallery for the classroom wall.

Drama

- Read the poem 'School's in', and let the children behave like the little monsters in the poem (but not for too long!).
- Have children take on the role of some of the monsters in the poems, write a play about them, and act it out.