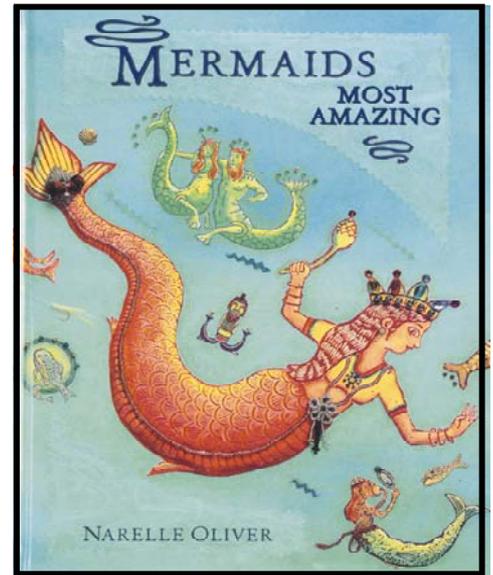


# TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

## Mermaids Most Amazing

Written and illustrated by Narelle Oliver



### The author: Narelle Oliver

Narelle Oliver was born in 1960, and grew up in Toowoomba, Queensland. Her family spent every spare moment in artistic pursuits—especially photography, drawing and painting—so as a child Narelle was constantly exposed to the delights of creativity in the arts. 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 print-making. 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. Like most of her books, it was inspired by natural environments she has explored, and her continued interest in natural history. It was followed in 1991 by *High Above the Sea*, a CBC Notable Book, and *The Best Beak in Boonaroo Bay*, which was shortlisted for the CBC'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 short-listed in that year for The Wilderness Society Environment Award for Children's Literature. *Sand Swimmers*, published in 1999, was also extremely successful, being short-listed in 2000 for the Queensland Premier's Award and the CBC'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.

Narelle is now working on her sixth book. She lives in Brisbane and lives with her husband, Greg, their children Jessie and Liam, and the family dog, Tashi.

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## Author's note

As a child, I always hoped and dreamed that I would see a mermaid. Every summer we stayed at a place called Mermaid Beach, so I was convinced that if a mermaid was indeed out there in the Pacific Ocean, I was in a good spot to catch sight of her.

These hopes and dreams were revived again a couple of years ago. Quite by accident, as I was waiting for someone in a library, I came across a dull-looking old book called *Sea Enchantress*. Puzzled by the title, I started to read it, and soon found I couldn't put it down. It contained reports of 'real' mermaid sightings that have been made in many countries throughout history and recorded in important science and history books of their time. Some of the mermaids were even caught, examined and held in captivity. Most intriguing were the detailed descriptions of these mermaids and mermen. They rarely resembled the familiar beautiful half-woman, half-fish figure, but instead had strange features like a monkey face or an eel-shaped body. The book also mentioned interesting mermaid stories from all over the world, not just Europe, where most of the famous mermaid folktales originated.

At this point, I couldn't resist the challenge of illustrating some of these mermaids and mermen and retelling some of the more unusual culturally diverse stories in a picture book form for children. And that was how *Mermaids Most Amazing* began.

Once again, I find myself hoping to glimpse a mermaid or merman whenever I go to the beach—but now I'm not exactly sure what it might look like!

## The illustrations: author's comment

I used a variety of illustration techniques together to help create the feeling of an eclectic mix of stories from a number of countries and from very different periods in history.

Each illustration is an assembled collage of a variety of pieces which includes:

- Linocuts printed in coloured inks and hand-coloured with watercolour paints
- Coloured pencil or wax crayon rubbings of linocut blocks on rice paper
- Real objects such as beads, feathers, fish hooks, shells, sand, etc.
- Segments of coloured photocopies of 19<sup>th</sup>-century copyright-free illustrations on rice paper.

## About *Mermaids Most Amazing*

This book is a departure for Narelle Oliver, because its subject is not specifically Australian, and it deals with speculative rather than natural history. It is the culmination of many years' research, and a passionate interest in the genesis and development of one of the world's best known and most pervasive myths.

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About *Mermaids Most Amazing* cont...

This book is a departure for Narelle Oliver, because its subject is not specifically Australian, and it deals with speculative rather than natural history. It is the culmination of many years' research, and a passionate interest in the genesis and development of one of the world's best known and most pervasive myths.

Are mermaids real? Or are they simply the product of an over-active imagination which, fed by centuries of 'sightings' and rumours, has assumed virtual reality? *Mermaids Most Amazing* doesn't answer this question, but it certainly poses many, and will leave readers poised on the brink of scepticism and acceptance. Rather like the mysterious Loch Ness Monster, the mermaid is something people *want* to believe in.

Narelle has avoided sensationalism, and has gone to the earliest records to show that sea people have existed in the traditions of countries all over the world. Ancient artworks, some of them reproduced in *Mermaids Most Amazing*, show that belief in fishtailed people (or gods) has persisted for thousands of years, from the ancient Babylonian fishtailed god Oannes (5000 BC) onwards.

Equally interesting are the many eyewitness accounts of mermaid sightings. Some have elements of myth, like the reported beaching of a giant mermaid on the coast of Scotland (then called Alba) in AD 887. Others are less hard to ignore as fantasy. What about the creature caught by a group of fishermen off the Scottish island of Yell in 1833? Her appearance was recorded in detail, down to the bristles on her head that could lie down like a cockatoo's crest. Three years earlier a 'little sea maiden' was seen in the Hebrides. When she died as a result of an accident, she was given a Christian funeral and burial, so human did she seem. These reports, and others, are left open ended, leaving us to make up our own minds.

The beautiful half-fish, half-woman of western culture is only one of many kinds of mermaids in many different world cultures. Most of them are much less beautiful, and some of them are quite sinister. There is the evil blood-drinking Scottish mermaid, for example; or the Ghanaian rock-dwelling Tahbi-yin who makes people drown. Physical characteristics vary greatly, with mermaids in different cultures sporting bird feet or green teeth or webbed fingers, and an extraordinary variety of tails. The New Zealand maraki-hau have long tongues for sucking up fish; the Irish merrow can change itself into a little hornless cow. Australian Dreaming tales tell of the mermaid spirit Yawkyawk, whose voice is the roar of a waterfall, and whose hair is the long waterweed found in creeks and billabongs.

Not all mermaids have fishtails. Some are simply human or humanised creatures who have the capacity to live underwater. But the western preoccupation with the half-fish, half-human creature has

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prompted a rash of fakes and curios over the years—many of them adding to people's uncertainty about whether or not mermaids are *real*. The gullible have been pandered to with meticulously crafted fakes consisting of orang-utan bodies joined to fish tails; and deformed people have been shown, suitably made up, in fairgrounds and sideshows and freak shows.

Narelle has balanced the 'facts' about mermaids with a selection of folk tales from Australia, New Zealand, India, North America and Ireland.

## Notes for Teachers

*Mermaids Most Amazing* combines **fiction** (folk tales) and **nonfiction** (the origins, documentation and scientific reporting of mermaids), and provides an interesting stepping off point for discussing the differences between these two genres. How should *Mermaids Most Amazing* be classified? Why?

The following might also be explored:

### *Society and Culture*

In the days before international travel was commonplace, most people only heard of strange events and exotic places through stories told by sailors. It is more than likely that the sailors exaggerated, to make their stories even more interesting! And if sailors saw things they didn't understand, it is also natural that they should link them with things they *did* understand. They saw what they wanted to see, and their audience at home had no way of disproving their fantastic stories, even if they had wanted to. Travellers' tales were much too exciting to be reduced to boring realities.

Think of some famous stories about travellers, or fantastic stories that had their origin in travellers' experiences. (*Ulysses*, the tales of the Argonauts, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels*, etc.) These are all very old stories: are there any modern equivalents? Or is the world now a much smaller and less mysterious place? What have been the effects of international travel, scientific discovery, and the internet on the way we see the world and its wonders? (This could make a good discussion!)

Do the many kinds of mermaids in *Mermaids Most Amazing* reflect the culture from which they have come?

### *Language/Myths and Legends*

All through history, people have invented stories either for entertainment or in an attempt to provide explanations for natural mysteries. Think of some other legends about extraordinary or mythical creatures (dragons, giants, dwarfs, unicorns, trolls and so on). Might any of these creatures have had their beginnings in reality? Try to find rational explanations for some of these creatures.

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What might the giant mermaid of Alba, described on page 15, really have been?

Myths contain amazing and sometimes magical elements, and are often set in ancient times or exotic places. Often they contain a 'moral', or a message about how people should behave.

Are myths relevant today? What are the messages contained in 'The Merman of Coos Bay', 'The Sea-Maid and the Apsara', 'The Tohunga', and 'Soul Cages'?

## Science

On page 11 we read that people once believed that 'for every land animal there was a similar animal in the sea'. Make a list of all the sea creatures that have been named after land animals or plants (sea horse, sea cucumber, sea cow, sea dragon, seagrass, sea snake, sea lettuce, sea lion, etc).

Talk about the way human beings try to relate the unfamiliar to the familiar, in order to understand and accept it.

Is there any scientific evidence that mermaids exist? Can the eyewitness reports made in ancient times be taken as authoritative? Why might we be sceptical about these reports?

On page 9 we read that 'Many scientists say that life on Earth began in the water. Over millions of years, various water-dwelling animals grew legs, developed stronger lungs and skeletons, and moved onto the land'. Can this comment justify the possible existence of mermaids?

How might scientists today go about proving the existence or non-existence of mermaids? (There have been many attempts to prove the existence of the Loch Ness Monster and the Yeti, for example: how were these experiments carried out?) Where would be a good place to set up such an experiment? (Note the large number of reports and sightings that have come from northern Scotland and its surrounding islands. Why is this so? Talk about the islands, the folklore, the traditional way of life, the fact that there are so many communities where fishing is the main industry—and has been for hundreds of years.)

## Art

1. Discuss the art styles of different cultures represented in the book: Australian Aboriginal, ancient Babylonian, Indian, New Zealand Maori. Talk about different decorative techniques.
2. What is the effect created by Narelle Oliver's linocut artwork? How is a linocut created? Does this technique suit the subject matter?
3. Talk about the use of the pencil and crayon rubbings. In what other context are rubbings used (eg church brasses)?
4. Look at the many collage elements in the illustrations. Discuss the choice of artefacts. How do they enhance the artwork?
5. In any medium, create your own illustration of a mermaid.