

TEACHERS' NOTES FOR *NO ROOM FOR A MOUSE*

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KYLE MEWBURN grew up in Brisbane and at school writing was his favourite subject. After school, he completed a Bachelor of Business at the Queensland Institute of Technology, specialising in Advertising and Journalism. He then worked briefly as a sports journalist and at Telecom before setting off to travel the world. While travelling he took many different jobs, from teaching English to counting traffic, and continued to write.

In 1990 Kyle settled with his wife, a potter, in New Zealand where he has set up and run an environment centre, built his home and garden and planted lots of trees. Since 1997 he has focused on writing. *No Room for a Mouse* is his fourth picture book, the others being *The Hoppleplop*, *The Bear in the Room Next Door* and *Kiss! Kiss! Yuck! Yuck!* (awarded the 2005 Joy Cowley Award by the Storylines Children's Literature Foundation of New Zealand).

FREYA BLACKWOOD grew up in Orange, NSW. When she was young she loved to illustrate stories and turn them into books. Her grandfather was a painter, her mother is a painter and her father is an architect so she always had lots of encouragement.

After she left school, Freya did a design degree and became interested in film. She made two short films then worked in Sydney on production and special effects. She worked on 'The Lord of the Rings' in New Zealand, first painting and applying prosthetics and then on production. After a while, Freya began to cut her working hours so she could draw at home. It was then that she decided to become an illustrator.

Her first picture book, *Two Summers*, written by John Heffernan, was shortlisted for the Children's Book Council of Australia Picture Book of the Year in 2004 and received the Crichton Award for Children's Book Illustration in 2004. In 2006 the CBC shortlisted her picture book *Emily's Rapunzel Hair*, written by Cecily Matthews.

SYNOPSIS

Christopher, his mum and his pet mouse, Sneaky, live in a big house. When Christopher finds Mrs Fizzletum sitting on a park bench unable to go to her home because it's become a jungle, he invites her to stay at his house. This is the first of many invitations that fill the house with all manner of people—not that Mum notices, because she's always so busy working for the pigeon post. Finally the house is so full that Christopher can't find anywhere to play with Sneaky and they disappear. Straightaway Mum notices they're missing and the search is on.

WRITING *NO ROOM FOR A MOUSE*

Kyle Mewburn remembers the moment he became inspired to write *No Room for a Mouse*. He was talking on the phone to a friend who mentioned that their four-year-old, Christopher, kept inviting strangers back to the house, giving them the address details which he had just learned. Kyle said he thought Christopher's new hobby would make a wonderful story. His friend agreed, saying, 'It would be good to have a book that teaches kids they shouldn't invite strangers home.' That's not quite how *No Room for a Mouse* turned out.

The original idea of the story—Christopher inviting more and more people home to stay until there is no room for Sneaky—never changed, but getting it just right took a lot of work. Kyle finds the rewriting process can be torturous but 'the upside is the longer I work on a story, the greater likelihood that I might get a few more flashes of inspiration along the

way.’ New dimensions may emerge that take the story to a whole new level. For instance, in early versions of the story Mum was just busy but it occurred to Kyle that she had to be doing something, and he came up with the pigeon post idea. This gave the story a different atmosphere and provided a resolution—Christopher and Sneaky are found in the pigeon loft.

Kyle loves words, ‘the fancier, the better,’ and it is important to him that kids read words being used in a way that is different from the everyday. With *No Room for a Mouse*, although the story actually became more complex, it also gradually had fewer and fewer words. The story’s language is given rhythm and spark by repetition, such as, ‘There was always room for one more. But one day one more became one too many’; alliteration, such as in the phrase ‘Mr and Mrs Mistletoe, Melody and Milky’; and rhyme, as in ‘Maestro Bambonium and his Grand Pandemonium’.

Kyle likes to describe characters and situations in an offbeat way, hence the reasons the various characters are homeless are not ordinary tales of woe, such as not being able to pay the rent, but that the house has been taken over by pot plants, or a swarm of bees has moved in. Similarly, each of the homeless characters sees something positive in their situation—Mrs Fizzletum loves the high ceilings and the conductor likes the way ‘each note can float up to the clouds.’ The characters’ actions are quirky, too. Mrs Fizzletum irons rose petals and Mum never wonders where fresh-baked scones have come from or how the light switch got fixed.

For Kyle, the heart of the story is that sometimes life seems too busy to enjoy the things that really matter, such as a pet mouse and a small boy. However, even if the ‘Things to Do’ list seems endless and parents seem not to notice what is going on around them, in reality their children come top of the list.

ILLUSTRATING *NO ROOM FOR A MOUSE*

The things that appealed to Freya Blackwood about the story of *No Room for a Mouse* were that it gave her a chance for some silliness, that there were so many interesting people and animals for her to illustrate and that there was plenty of visual imagery for her to choose from.

No Room for a Mouse has been Freya’s most time-consuming book so far. She had to carefully plan and draw hundreds of people, giving them visual characterisations and details that had to be carried from page to page. There’s Mum with her assortment of watches, dresses and pockets full of bits and pieces; Mrs Fizzletum with her soft dresses, wild hair and iron; and the list goes on. There are also many visual jokes in the illustrations, such as the orchestra playing in a no standing zone and Mrs Fizzletum ironing flowers and a fence. Various things hold the story together visually, such as Christopher doing something different with one of the other characters on each page, Sneaky always appearing with Christopher, and the pigeons on each page, which finally pop into the foreground at the story’s resolution.

Freya created her pictures with acrylic paint, a change for her as she normally uses watercolour. She decided to use acrylics to make the colours brighter. She found using them quite slow, although she liked the opaque quality they gave and being able to use a dry brush.

The first page of the book is rather like the back of an intriguing dolls’ house and invites the reader to explore all the rooms and search for Christopher and Sneaky. Freya placed the illustrations in boxes because she felt there would need to be a strong visual structure, as the text was quite long. She made the boxes become larger as the story went on, gradually taking over the page and echoing the way the house is taken over. To avoid repetition, the boxes are both horizontal and vertical, are placed on different parts of the page

and use different points of view. The final illustration is like a dolls' house from the front, neatly encapsulating the story.

Kyle and Freya communicated about the book through their editor, only speaking for the first time when Kyle received a copy of the book. There were times when the text and illustrations were doing the same thing and the text could therefore be trimmed slightly, like the double page cross section of the house, which showed that the house was full and so didn't need the text to say it as well.

When Kyle first saw the book he was 'blown away' by the detail of the illustrations and the fact that the characters were shown relating to each other and learning from each other, as in the case of the ballet-loving Viking and juggling mountain climber. He feels this added a whole new theme of sharing and learning to the story.

DISCUSSION TOPICS AND ACTIVITIES

1. When reading the story with the class, look at what the different characters, including Christopher, are doing, noticing anything that carries on from page to page. Watch out for the jokes—written and visual.
2. Why doesn't Christopher's mum seem to notice all the people moving into her home? What happens when Christopher and Sneaky disappear?
3. What are the reasons Christopher's newfound friends give for having nowhere to go? Can students think up any more silly reasons?
4. The big house becomes very crowded. Make a list of the different people on the double page spread in the middle of the book. What are the advantages of them coming together?
5. Once Mum decides to have some fun, what might her 'Things to Do' list look like? Students can make up some things for her to try with Christopher and draw pictures.
6. The author and illustrator of a book often don't sit down and talk about the pictures. The words are given to the illustrator and she or he develops the story in new ways. Discuss what Freya Blackwood has added to the story. What characters would the students have added if they had been the illustrator?
7. Have students each make a book out of five folded pieces of paper. The front and back will be the covers. Each student writes a story, writing on one page and leaving the facing one for illustrations, then swaps their book with another student to illustrate it. (The only rule is that they must respect the other person's story.)