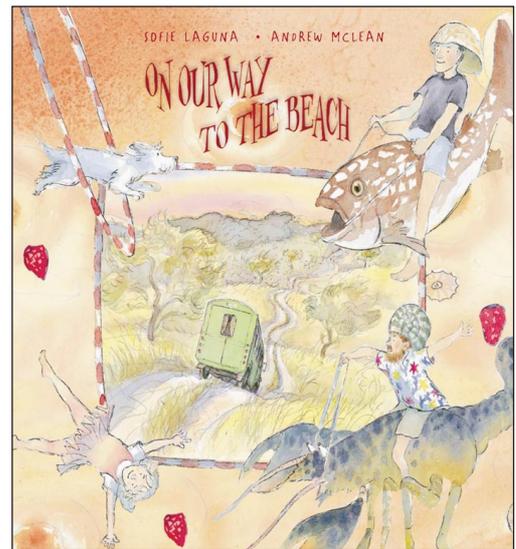


On Our Way to the Beach

Written by Sofie Laguna
Illustrated by Andrew McLean



◀ The Back Story ▶ with Sofie Laguna

What were your reasons for writing *On Our Way to the Beach*? What were your sources of inspiration?

My family went on a holiday through Europe when I was little. Uncle Daniel came too. I have tiny precious snapshot memories of this trip. I remember fields of red poppies, Dad playing chess, strawberry farms . . . maybe memories of different holidays got mixed up together to form one wonderful holiday picture in my mind. I love road trips. I love stopping whenever I want to. It's the freedom I like, the lack of rules and restraints. When I was little we didn't even have to wear seatbelts! And I'm theatrical – so when I'm with theatrical friends, we put on shows and play dress-ups.

Why did you write in this way for this book?

On Our Way to the Beach is the past, the present and the fantasy of a future all mixed up into one. I dream a lot, so the book is full of dreams. I love the paintings of the artist Chagall, and I saw the dreams to be like his paintings – with things floating and flying and colour and magic.

You could say the story began to write itself in me when I was three, you really could. Then out it came in a couple of months as words on a page. Then it was five years before it was published (with various changes along the way towards publication).

What were your sources of information?

My memory, experiences and dreams. My friends helped by listening to the story and helping me to make it stronger. My teachers at RMIT also played a role.

How did you personally plan when writing this book – themes, plot summary, structure, characters, setting and style?

I started with the idea of the holiday, then developed the dream sequences – which provided a linear narrative. My brother Stefan was in it from the start, as was my Uncle Daniel and Mum and Dad.

I didn't want to conform to any kind of stereotypical idea of family or family holiday. I wanted the family in the story to be spontaneous and open-minded. I wanted the characters to understand that all the joy is there in the moment, in the sharing, in the play. That nature does the rest. What is more moving, more beautiful, more awe-inspiring than a wild, open stretch of beach?

I picked out my favourite road trip scenes and put them in there. I left some behind – the story couldn't be too wordy. I built up to the final image. Most of my books are more character-driven, but this one is about setting and place as well as family life.

◀ with Andrew McLean

Why did you choose to illustrate this book?

My wife Janet and I have had many camping holidays with our three children, so the story struck a cord. (Coincidentally, many years ago Janet and I did a camping story called *Jenny and the Night of the Storm*, with a mother, a father and three children.) I also liked the challenge that illustrating this book presented, as I was initially a bit daunted by the dream scenes and was unsure how to approach them.

Were the characters in the book (as you illustrated them) 'based on' anyone in particular or were they all completely made up?

Initially I made up the characters from my imagination. I did the character roughs. Uncle Daniel is pretty much as he was in these first roughs. This was when I came up with the idea of giving him a variety of flamboyant shirts. The father is vaguely a self portrait – a younger me. Later Sophie sent me some photos of her family on their camping holiday. I pinned the pictures to the wall where I work. They helped a lot to keep the children looking the right age in relation to each other. If you count the van as a character – in the beginning I used a Volkswagen combi-van, but I changed it to a Citroën van after seeing the photos. I went out and bought a little model before I did the final artwork so that I could draw it from any angle.

What medium did you use to illustrate the book? Do you always illustrate this way?

I used pen and ink outline and water colour. Most of my recent books have been charcoal pencil and water colour which gives a slightly softer look. The main reason I used the ink outline for this book is that some of the figures are very small in some of the scenes. It's just too hard to do the smaller figures with charcoal.

Did you encounter any difficulties or challenges when illustrating the book?

It is always tricky keeping the characters consistent throughout the book. Like a film maker it's always hard to get a balance between distance and close up, and deciding where the viewers' (readers') viewpoint will be. My early roughs had a lot more interior van scenes.

You say you liked the challenge of tacking the dream scenes. Did you enjoy illustrating them?

I enjoyed illustrating the dream scenes because they offered a freedom to use my imagination without the usual constraints of depicting the real world. They changed a lot from the first roughs, which included the van in each scene. At the editors' suggestion I removed the van in the final illustrations. For instance the 'underwater dream scene' was initially a picture of all the family in sleeping bags, floating around like clouds in a night sky. The editors suggested the 'underwater scene' because they wanted something more active and more connected to 'the beach'. This illustration is livelier and more relevant to the story - even though I liked the dreamy quality of the first drawing.

About the author:

Sofie Laguna

I'm the second of four children in my family. I live in Melbourne near a big park, in a house with a garden for Tigger, my dog. I like running, swimming, reading, playing with Tigger, being with friends, walking, music, dancing, movies, horseriding, camping, going for long drives, visiting students in schools and doing workshops with them and performing for them. I studied at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and devote my life to writing.

About the illustrator:

Andrew McLean

I grew up in Bairnsdale, Victoria. I trained as a painter and teacher, and taught in secondary schools before becoming a lecturer in painting and drawing at Caulfield Institute of Technology. I've been a full-time artist for more than twenty years. My wife Janet and I have created fourteen picture books together. I also illustrate books by other writers, many of which have won Children's Book Council of Australia awards.

Teaching Ideas ✓

Before Reading ✓

- Predict what the story will be about using the front cover and title.
- Discuss the students' experiences of the beach and trips to the beach. Talk about differences between families that live close to the coast and those that live a long way away. Discuss places you stop when travelling on long trips – parks, restaurants, motels, toilets . . . Have students share ideas for surviving long car trips.
- Collect and display other books about the beach and trips to the beach. Display both fiction and nonfiction. Discuss the difference with the students.
- Share experiences of dreams and how parts of the real world get muddled up in your subconscious.

Activity

Travel Pack

In small groups design a pack/kit you could take in the car for long trips. Decide and plan what you would have in it – games to play, colouring-in books, books to read, things to look for . . .

Make or collect the things you have planned in your kit.

During reading ✓

- Depending on the age and reading competency of the group, begin reading the story to the students or talk to the students about reading with expression and enthusiasm, and then allow class members to read the book aloud to their peers.
- Talk with students about each character as you are introduced to them. Ask students to tell what they like about each character. Do they relate to any of the characters?
- Discuss with students the setting and the different places the family stops on their trip. Relate any experiences of similar settings with one another.
- The author says she dreams a lot, so the book is full of dreams. She says she loves the paintings of the artist Chagall, and sees the dreams to be like his paintings – with things floating and flying and colour and magic. Stop each time you read the words 'I dream the beach looks like this . . .' and predict what the narrator's imagination may hold.
- As students look at the pictures and read the text ask them to think about how they would describe the beach to someone who had never seen a beach before.

Activities

Smart similes

In the story the van makes the noise of 'a friendly bear'. Talk about similes and how they are comparisons. Use lots of examples until everyone understands what they are. Compare what your car sounds like in a similar way.

Repeat this activity with other parts of the book. For example: the climbing tree is like . . . ; the strawberries taste like . . . ; the fire crackles like . . . Add some more if you can.

Dreamland

Try to remember and describe a dream you have had. Illustrate it any way you like. See if you can interpret your dream discovering what it means and why you dreamt it.

Talent time

In small groups or by yourself prepare a short concert item, like the family did in the story. You could choose to recite a poem, make a speech, tell a joke, sing a song, do a dance or perform a play. Dress up and perform it for the class.

The olden days

The author mentions that when she was young you didn't even have to wear seatbelts. Think of some other things that have changed over the last 20–30 years. List them. See if you can predict some things that may change in the next 20–30 years.

After reading ✓

- When the book has been read come together as a class and discuss it. Use the following questions as discussion points and prompts.
 - What did you like about this book? What age groups do you think it is suitable for and why?
 - Would you like to read any other stories written by Sofie Laguna or illustrated by Andrew McLean? How could you find other titles written by Sofie Laguna or other books illustrated by Andrew McLean?
 - What questions would you like to ask Sofie Laguna or Andrew McLean?

Activities

Story study

Fill in information under the following headings for *On Our Way to the Beach*: characters, setting/s, plot and themes. Give details and descriptions for each heading.

Theatrical performance

Divide into groups and present *On Our Way to the Beach* as a piece of theatre. Each group could take a section of the book to perform, and then join together to present as a whole.

Emotion outlet

The narrator cries when her dad shows her the fish he has caught. How do you feel when animals are killed? We feel many different emotions each day. Think of something to complete the following questions. What makes you happy? What makes you sad? What makes you angry? What makes you excited? What makes you confused? What makes you surprised? Turn your answers and feelings into a poem.

Artist study – Chagall

The author was inspired by the artist Chagall. Find out as much as you can about him. Research when he was born, where he lived, how he painted, what inspired him. Find some pictures of his work.

Secret wish

The narrator's secret wish was for it always to be holidays. What is your secret wish? Write it down somewhere and keep it safe until your wish comes true!

Literature study

Discuss the following questions with the aim of encouraging the students to read and to increase their understanding and enjoyment of *On Our Way to the Beach*.

- Can you picture places where this story may be set? Share your ideas and experiences.
- Discuss the impact of the illustrations. How do they work in with the words? Why are the illustrations so important in this book?
- Do you think the narrator is the same person as the author of this book?
- How does the author balance setting and place with character in this book?
- What emotions/feelings do you experience as you look at and read this book?
- Can you relate to the narrator's dreams throughout the book?
- What do you think the author hoped to achieve in writing this book?