



# Reading Notes

## *The Little Old Man Who Looked Up at the Moon* Pamela Allen

### SYNOPSIS:

A little old man looks up at the moon and is troubled by life's big questions. *'Does the sky go on for ever and ever?'* he wonders. He turns to his wife, sitting beside him, for answers. And the next morning she sets off on a journey to find the knowledge he seeks.

On her travels she comes across a rooster, a pig, a cow and a duck, and asks them the same questions that are troubling her husband. *'Cock-a-doodle-doo,'* says the rooster. *'Oink,'* says the pig. *'Moo,'* says the cow. *'Quack,'* says the duck.

The little old woman returns home to her husband, who is waiting to greet her, keen for her answers. She tells him what she's learned, but still he isn't satisfied. *'Yes, but who am I?'* he cries in anguish. Her answer – that she is his husband – brings him solace and comfort, and they sit together embracing as the moon sinks below the horizon.

### WRITING STYLE

This is an interesting blend of Pam's more serious, contemplative prose (think *Black Dog* and *The Toymaker and the Bird*), and her trademark boisterous style, replete with opportunities for the child reader to join in making loud animal noises. The use of repetition in structure and of time markers throughout the text invite familiarity and participation.

From its title to its existential subject matter, the book has an allegorical feel to it, and tackles life's big and important issues. The little old man's questions are sure to initiate thoughtful and profound conversation between adults and child: *'Where do we come from? Where do we go, and why are we here?'* Yet Pam's lightness of touch renders this as accessible as it is engaging, and the old woman's journey is a metaphor for the struggles and triumphs of life. There is a lovely sense of comfort and resolution in the ending. Enfolded in the little old woman's final words ( *'Why, you are my husband'* ) is Pam's ultimate message: the importance of love and human connection in identity, and in life.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Pamela Allen** is a phenomenon in the world of children's literature. For almost thirty years her picture books have enchanted generations of children in Australia and overseas and many of her titles have won prestigious awards and commendations. She has earned classic status through the enduring popularity of her stories with the very young.

Pamela's books are full of the music of language; they are 'fragments of theatre', designed to be read aloud and shared between an adult and a child. Eight of Pamela's titles were adapted for the stage by Patch Theatre Company, and performed in the Sydney Opera House. In 2004, *Grandpa and Thomas* won the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award: Early Childhood and *The Potato People* was named an Honour Book in the same category in 2003, and *Grandpa and Thomas and the Green Umbrella* was shortlisted for the same award in 2007, as was *Shhh! Little Mouse* in 2008. *Is Your Grandmother a Goanna?* won a 2008 Speech Pathology of Australia Book of the Year Award, as did *Our Daft Dog Danny* in 2010.

## EDITORIAL COMMENTS

This is a thought-provoking book from a rare picture-book creator – one who truly understands the magic of a child's world; its beauty and danger and enormity. In this story she has managed to tap into the child's natural curiosity about the beginnings and endings of life, and to address questions that even adults fear and turn away from. Yet the themes of mortality, belonging and love are explored with tenderness and hope, and the result is a delightful book about a quest for answers and the things in life that are beyond knowing.

# STUDY NOTES/ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHERS

## THEMES:

- Philosophy
- Rhetorical questions
- Answers
- Journeys
- Happiness

## CHARACTERS:

- Look at the illustrations of the man and woman. What do you note about them?
- How do they represent the ordinary people?
- What does this suggest about the types of people who ask questions about life?
- Would the story be different if the main characters were young? How would this change the story?
- Why do you think Pamela Allen chose to make her main characters old?
- Why did Pamela Allen choose to have the little old lady seek answers from animals?
- What animals does she ask? What do you know about these animals (they are quite common animals and found in many countries).
- Why might she have chosen these particular animals for her story?
- Why do you think she chose to make the animals so much bigger than the little old lady?

## THEMES:

### Philosophy:

- This book is an introduction to philosophy. What types of questions do philosophers ask – where did I come from, why are we here? How did we get here? Where are we going?
- Do these questions have answers?
- Why do we as humans like to ask these questions?

### Rhetorical questions:

- A question without answers is called a rhetorical question. They are designed to make people think, but often the creation or formulation of the question is actually more important than the answer.
- What philosophical questions might you ask about life?
- What sorts of people do we often go to in order to seek the answers to these questions? (soothsayers, wise men/women, fortune tellers, religious leaders etc).

- What does it say about human beings that we like to find answers to these questions?
- With rhetorical and philosophical questions quite often there is not one specific answer. Different people will provide different answers. What might cause these variations?
  - Age
  - Gender
  - Culture
  - Economic background
  - Social background
  - Religious beliefs
  - Education
  - Previous experiences
- If two people have different answers does that make one of them wrong? Why?

#### Answers:

- What answers do the animals give to the little old lady's questions?
- Can she understand these answers?
- How does she react to these answers? Is she angry or upset by them?
- When the little old lady returns to her husband she gives him the answers exactly as they were given to him (she doesn't 'translate them'). In spite of the fact that these answers had little meaning for them, they both appear to be quite happy with the response.
- What does this suggest about our real need to have answers to all the questions in our lives?

#### The journey:

- To seek answers to their questions, the little old lady sets out on a long journey.
- What does this suggest about the strength of her desire?
- Often spirituality results in or stems from a quest – the need to travel to a far off land seeking guidance or answers. How is this idea reflected in this story?
- Why did Pamela Allen choose to make the journey a long and tiring one?

#### Happiness:

- What causes the old man to become unhappy and seek answers to his questions about life?
- Why does looking at the moon and the planets often cause people to question our place in the universe?
- How does the man feel at the end of the story?
- Has he been given the answers to his questions?
- What does the little old lady tell him that makes him happy?
- What does this suggest about what we need in order to be happy?

## WRITING STYLE:

### Mood:

- What is the mood of the story?
- How does the author manage to make it relaxing and dream-like? (Consider both the words and illustrations)
- How does this reflect our notions of spirituality?

## FOR DISCUSSION:

- If you had the opportunity to find out everything about your life before it happened, would you take the opportunity?
- Would it make you happier to know everything that will happen to you?
- How might this knowledge ruin or alter your life?