



Teachers' Notes  
Written by Dr Pam Macintyre

# *The Midnight Zoo*

by Sonya Hartnett

## **Background**

*The children are Rom or gypsy, survivors of a massacre two months earlier that wiped out their entire extended family, and ever since their lives have been 'gnawed at every edge by worry'... Hartnett's descriptions of both the murders and a war-torn landscape across which flows a miserable tide of humanity comprises some of her finest writing.*

Ruth Starke 'Winds of War' *Australian Book Review*, September 2010, p71

*In a time characterised by a severing of old links between man and animal, when industrial agriculture has rendered them no more than raw material for manufacturing processes, Hartnett reminds us that they were once magical, oracular, even sacrificial creatures: a crucial means by which we explained the world and understood ourselves.*

Geordie Williamson 'Strange Beasts', *The Monthly*, August 2010, p62.

As these reviewers' comments suggest, while *The Midnight Zoo* can be read as a gripping narrative by younger readers, its import will be better grasped by older readers who will appreciate its fable-like qualities and metaphoric ideas.

## **Plot**

It is midnight in a destroyed village somewhere in Europe. Through the moonlight, two boys, one with a baby in his backpack, come walking. The realism of the opening paragraphs is disrupted by the personification of Night. Clearly we are in for a fabulist story.

The two boys have been on the road for weeks, scrounging an existence in a landscape often devoid of humanity and sustenance. The back-story to the boys' current situation reveals itself slowly: their family has been slaughtered by soldiers two months previously. They find a pitiful zoo which miraculously has survived the war that has ravaged its village. Also miraculous is that each of the animals in the zoo speaks to the boys.

Over the course of one night, we are given the stories of the animals, the zoo, and its most recent zookeepers. This is not a chronological telling but the narrative events come to us almost like a play, with limited settings, such as glimpses of the boys' travels, the zoo, and the Rom camp. The structure of the novel is instrumental in our interpretation of events.

While the story can be read as a narrative of survival during war, much of its significance operates beneath the surface of realism. Symbolic meanings are fundamental to understanding the narrative: its time frame, the survival of the zoo, its midnight setting.

## **The Title**

- Discuss what is associated with midnight, such as the 'witching hour' – a magical time, a time of transition, and how this might operate symbolically in the book.
- Look at the descriptions of the zoo's 'other worldliness' during the night hours, and how this changes when daylight exposes its tawdriness.
- Why and how did the zoo survive? There is no evidence of the soldiers having been there.
- What happens to it after it is bombed in Chapter 3? Why does Andrej hear his mother's voice? You might like to read carefully the opening paragraphs of Chapter 4 and puzzle out what is happening to Andrej. Specific vocabulary that is being used might help to unravel the puzzle.
- Why does the action not move from the zoo from then on?

## **Tone**

- The opening tone is sombre, ominous.
- The descriptions are of absence (pp 1- 2, 5) and evoke what has been lost. What is missing is normalcy of life – the small things.
- We ask ourselves as we read, 'why is this place so ghostly?' We speculate that there is something particular about this village and understand this will be revealed to us.
- In personifying Night, the author sets up the tone and expectations of the fable that is to unfold.
- There is a sudden change on page eight as the boys become children again and tear through the town as aeroplanes.

## **Characters**

There is a close focus on a limited range of characters. Hartnett uses much animal imagery to describe the boys, their actions and their feelings. What is her purpose do you think? What does this suggest about animals?

### **Andrej**

- Is twelve years old, and brave and resourceful. He has to be for his siblings. He doesn't think of himself as a child (p4).

- For him, initially, that the animals speak is further evidence that the world has become topsy turvy.
- After hearing the story told by the wolf, he shares their food with the animals.
- He bravely overcomes his fear and puts biscuits in the boar's cage (p98).
- He is sustained by evoking his much-loved uncle, Marin, whose wisdom and advice sustains him.
- He has a spiritual side revealed in his belief in the patron saint of the gypsies, Black Sarah.

### **Tomas**

- Is nine years old, and comfortable around his family but not with strangers.
- He is responsible for carrying his baby sister, Wilma.
- He is often afraid, depends on Andrej and misses his parents.
- He is immediately delighted when the animals speak.

### **Wilma**

- Is only a few months old.
- Is able to be pacified by lemon butter.

We construct these characters in the reading, by responding to what they say, do and think. Invite students to develop a character profile of the brothers, drawing on what is said about their culture and lives before the massacre, as well as what we watch them do after they escape. Have students also consider that there is something special about the boys – symbolically – that allows them to speak with the animals. The story operates on dual levels: a realistic level, which must convince us of its setting, events and characters, and on a symbolic one, which also must convince us of the importance of its meanings. To some extent there is a parallel dualism in the characters, who are children, yet must take on tasks and make decisions that are adult. Similarly, the animals behave as their characteristic beast selves and also exhibit human emotions and understandings.

The following two characters operate differently in the text. We see them briefly in the action of the story, but mostly they come to us through others: Marin through Andrej, Alice through the animals, though they are just as vivid as the children and the animals.

### **Marin**

- Gives his life to save Nikolai when the soldiers come to the gypsy camp.
- He is vivid character who inhabits the novel as guide and mentor to Andrej.
- Passes on much of his knowledge about animals to Andrej.

## Alice

- The daughter of the zoo keeper, who instigates and executes the blowing up of the train, including an unplanned death. This results in savage retribution for the village. After this she joins the resistance fighters and leaves the village. She promises to return to the zoo animals.
- Consider the choice of name and any associations, such as Alice in Lewis Carroll's equally fantastic story, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Do you think the author intended such a resonance?
- Her mother died at her birth, but she had 'a hundred mothers' in the village. Why might the author have given this background to her character?
- p54 We are told Alice was a rascally child, clever, but lazy.
- She was 'owned' and loved by the village.
- The zoo was built by her great-grandfather. She was friends with the animals and had raised some, but she became ashamed of the zoo and saw that it was hell for the animals (p59). Yet she loved the animals as did her father, and they loved her. While the animals speak harshly of the human race and its vicious destruction of their homelands, their displacement, and captivity, they nevertheless love the zoo keeper and his daughter. Discuss these ambivalences in the novel.
- p60. She reads about the lands each animal came from, and tells them stories about how they might have lived. But she also realises they could not survive in the wild. Consider how this knowledge informs our understandings of the fate of the animals.

## Animals

Talk about why these particular animals were chosen to have in the zoo, by the author.

What do we know about each of them? What folklore exists around them? What associations do we make with them?

Then examine the character that has been given to each of them. Does this confirm or challenge common perceptions? They speak on each other's behalf, telling individual and collective stories. Consider how our reactions to them are constructed by the stories they tell – the tone and insight.

## The Wolf

- Description pp17, 20. Andrej finds it wonderful [t]hat they had crossed over into the life of this great grave beast'. What do you think he means?
- p21 'A wolf can hear your heart beating before you're even born'.
- Andrej feels an immediate connection with the wolf – why?
- p47 The wolf talks about the war. It is wise, articulate.
- p49 The wolf is critical of humankind, even of the villagers who fought back against the invaders because they too were invaders and destroyers of the land that belonged to the wolves and bears.

### **The eagle**

- p90 The bear explains why the eagle will not speak.
- It has never flown through the sky.
- p99 describes its powerful beauty.
- Is it the most tragic of the captive animals?
- This powerful bird's situation brings to mind the proverb 'it is better to have loved and lost, than never loved at all'. Do you agree?

### **The bear**

- Description p25, p48. Is it just sad, or dour?
- p83 It asks Andrej to forgive the animals for their violent noise that frightened Wilma: '*Their minds are getting misty.*' What does this suggest about its intelligence?
- P88 Briefly tells his own story. Here is an opportunity for students to expand on the bear's back-story, from what they already know about its disposition, and in the style of the author: sensual language.

### **The chamois**

- p41 It says the lioness will eat Wilma.
- It is regal and self-important.
- p48 It feels superior to the other animals and complains a lot.

### **The monkey**

- p26, '*intimidating*'.
- p80 It baits the chamois. There is clear animosity between them.

### **The lioness**

- p27 Like the description of the village in the opening pages, she is defined by absence: no cubs, no mate – all taken from her.
- Concerned about the children, and praises Andrej for his care of his baby sister.
- p147 The boar finally speaks to tell the story of the lioness.
- She wants to smell Wilma and says (p158) '*My cubs smelt as she does. Like pollen.*'
- Is her tragedy the most poignant?

### **The seal**

- It swims incessantly in its pool repeating the same pattern over and over, only pausing for breath.
- pp 84-7 The bear tells the story of the seal.
- p87 '*Its ceaseless glide to nowhere was a piteous thing to witness.*'
- Is the seal's story the saddest?

### **The wild boar**

- This animal frightens Andrej and Tomas more than does the lion or the wolf. Why are they so frightened of it?
- p29 It stays hidden, is mysterious, and not liked by the others. The author uses a pun, a 'bore', to describe it.

- According to Marin, it is clever and vicious.
- On page 145 it finally speaks, calling Andrej an *'idiot boy'* for being afraid of the lioness. What does this defence of the lioness prompting the boar out of its silence, reveal about its character? Why are some animals relatively straightforward and other ambiguous?

### **The Llama**

- It is described on page 30. It looks friendly to Tomas with its *'heartmeltingly large, lassy eyes'*, but skitters away when he tries to pat it.

### **The Kangaroo**

- It is described on p31, but we don't find out much about it, or how it came to be so far from home, apart from its shyness. What is the motive behind its inclusion do you think?

Share reactions to the animals and their stories about how they came to be in the zoo. Discuss which scenarios readers find most moving, tragic, confronting and reasons for those reactions. Is it the writing, or is it something outside the text that prompts such responses?

The animals come alive for us, as does the midnight setting of the zoo. As the writing is so visual, a possible rich response to the text is the materialising of the images created in the students' minds. They can be invited to draw, paint or computer generate images of the zoo and one or more of the animals. The character of the animal should be represented as well as its physical appearance.

Geordie Williamson in the review quoted at the beginning of the notes says of Hartnett's work: *'Animals are bridges that link our muddled, hypocritical, timid human natures with something closer to the ground of being... those breathing metaphors for courage, intuitive rather than intellectual understanding, freedom from constraint...'*

- Discuss these ideas in terms of *The Midnight Zoo*.
- This could be a written response: take one animal and write about its place in the novel, literally and symbolically.
- In a close reading of the novel that this task requires, students should be alert to how careful language choices are at work.
- This book is excellent for encouraging metacognitive thinking, and students could undertake this task in pairs – sharing ideas and interpretations.
- The form could be narrative, poetic, dialogic.
- Students could post these on a class wiki.

## Language

Hartnett's writing is vivid and evocative and students should be invited to identify particularly powerful and sensual passages as they read. Some examples only are supplied below:

- **Similes:** Students could be asked to look for favourite similes, such as on p1: *'the tower now stood against the sky like a blunt unfinished question'*.
  - p35 *'...they were as black and stiff as a trio of undertakers.'*
  - p6 *'Moonlight lay on Andrej like a fairy's suit of armour.'*
  - Such examples of original use of language and the power of a simile over adjectives and adverbs can be used as models for writing.
- **Personification:**
  - p2 Night is introduced as a *'black-clad horseman'*, an image that brings to mind Alfred Noyes's *The Highwayman*. What do you make of the night horseman and its role in the story? Trace it to the end.
  - p45 *'Flames burned higher than they had done, laying claim greedily to the new fodder of collapsed timber.'*
- **Repetition:**
  - p3 *'Their eyes in their young faces were dark, like raven eyes, and their black hair was straggly, as unkempt as raven nests.'*
- **Metaphor:**
  - p63 *'...the moon a thin cat's claw.'*

## Visual language:

- This is a highly visual narrative. For instance, the opening is like the opening of a film, or the casting of the eyes across a painting.
- It invites a visual response: paint, draw, use computer program to represent moments, scenes, tones of the story. Mood is very powerfully created too, and a possible response is to select music that would support parts of the book, such as the boys running through the village; the soldiers and the Rom in the clearing; the zoo and each animal's story; setting them free, and the ending. Although this is a non-verbal response, it requires thought and analysis about how best to represent elements of the story and how these have been felt and interpreted by students.
- Students could be invited to make a trailer for this book, using Photostory, i-Movie, Moviemaker etc.
- p7 Consider the function of detail: not just that Andrej has found food, but what he found. The reader can see and taste it.
- p45 The after math of the bombing – sights, sounds, smells, textures.
- Sounds are not excluded and students might like to actually create those they like, such as pp13 *'...her noise was spreading out through the night like a thin sheet of steel, edgy and reverberating.'*
- p50 *'...the moon still lit the zoo with a creamy light, turning the circle of cages into a place like a chapel, somewhere solemn and fragile and holy.'*

- Another characteristic of Hartnett's writing is the use of animal imagery to describe the humans, such as on p112: *'Tomas, hugging Wilma, shrank like a fox cub to the ground'*.

## Response

The book is a powerful, visceral experience, as well as a narrative one. So after the book has been read and the ending allowed to settle, invite readers to think about where they are positioned in the reading.

- Do they identify with the boys (one more than the other)?
- Do they identify with the animals? One in particular?
- Are they outside observers watching the story roll out in front of them? Or are they in the events with the protagonists?
- Do they feel implicated in the story – for instance, the charges that are laid against humankind?
- Are they unsettled by the fabulist nature of the story, or drawn in by it?
- Have they engaged with it primarily as realism, a fable, a fantasy?

## Ideas for discussion and response

- p7 *'Being courageous was the least safe thing in the world'*. Talk about this in relation to the story and its wider social, political and personal resonances.
- p46 The wolf says the reason for the bombing is *'I will have my way'*. Who or what is the I?
- p55 *'Accepting death meant cherishing what remained of life.'*
- p87 *'Somewhere out there, there's a gap in the water, a place which is hollow because the seal isn't there.'* Talk about *'...the notion that the world was riddled with holes where certain people and animals were meant to be, but weren't'*. Have Andrej and Tomas found their holes to fill, at the zoo?
- p96 *'...the strong are duty-bound to protect the weak, it is a law of nature and thus of rightness...'* Andrej believes *'...that the invaders couldn't win the war... [Alice] had only to wait for nature to right itself, as it always must and will'*.
- p109 *'You make your chance, Tom, you don't get given it –'*
- p136 *'People jeer at those who are different from themselves – those who look different, or think differently, or live in different ways. They do it because difference is a frightening thing – sometimes, an enviable thing.'*
- p147 *'...life is a battle fought alone.'*
- p156 The description of the changed world Andrej has met – no longer *'strict but fair'* but brutal, dishonourable, vicious.
- p156 But despite this, Andrej still trusts in the goodness of the world. Why is that?
- p157 Andrej recognises that he and the lioness share a *'determination to endure'*. Describe what you think that means.



- p173 *'Every war is everyone's war... Every life is everyone's battle.'* Is this how we live our lives? Is it how we *should* live our lives? What are the implications?
- p174 What do you think Andrej means when he says he already has the keys and all he needs is to find them?

### **Responsibility**

- Can the Rom be outside responsibility for the war because they are not *gadje*? Discuss in the light of the statement above *'Every war is everyone's war'*. This is another example of ambivalences in the story. Why do you think the author has included these disparate points of view?
- Andrej says the Rom are free, but aren't they also victims like the animals, but in a different sort of cage?

### **Freedom**

is a major idea in this book and readers are prompted to examine it from various perspectives and are challenged to define it for themselves. Below are some references to freedom, but students should be invited to find others.

There are clearly ambivalences and tensions in the way that freedom is experienced or felt in the book.

- p32 Andrej compares the animals he has seen in the wild with those in the zoo: *'...quick and liquid and vital; alive in their skins'*.
- p55 Alice is allowed to run wild as a child; she shouldn't lose *'freedom as well [as her mother],'* says her father.
- p58 Alice and her father bury the jaguar that had been captive all its life – Alice hoped that death had freed the animal. Is death a kind of freedom? The ultimate freedom? Does the book imply this?
- p91 *'We Rom are not like the gadje, these people you see building houses and hoeing fields and fencing off what they claim is their's. We Rom are closer to the animals than to people like that. Unburdened, unowned, and free.'* Is that what freedom means – not being tied to a place, to possessions?
- pp91-2 *'It was something to be proud of, the state of being free. It was something animals had that humans envied and respected.'*
- p140 Andrej says: *'I don't feel free. If you're free, you should be safe. And I don't feel safe. I always feel... hunted.'*
- Students can be invited to define freedom in terms of this book and in terms of their personal beliefs. Post these on a class wiki for discussion.

### **Betrayal**

- p74 Alice's father, under pressure, gives the lion and three cubs to the invading leader to placate him. Does he pay with his life for this act of betrayal of animals under his care?
- The village also suffers from the acts of revenge and the wrath and of the invaders. Is this due punishment?

## Animal lore

- p34 '*An animal hears and sees and senses much more than you and I.*'
- p42 '*Animals know things you can't imagine. And they know how to keep a secret.*'

## The Ending

This book is meticulously structured, and as night fades and daybreak nears we know there must be some resolution to the boys' and animals' predicament. Possible outcomes with evidence from the book could be predicted before reading the final chapter.

- p159 Dawn is close and so we know whatever resolution is to come.
- Andrej and Tomas make preparations for the coming day and get ready to leave the zoo. They need to find food. And Andrej plans to set the animals free. p164 '*You'll be free.*'
- p168 But there are no keys to unlock the cages.
- Andrej then decides they will stay with the animals at the zoo. Has he given up to the inevitable? Are there other reasons that compel him to stay?
- On page 172 Andrej considers that '*It was unexpectedly lovely and restful, that moment of nothing but quiet.*' Is this a hint that death is the only outcome, that Andrej knows this?
- '*Maybe this is the space Tomas and I are meant to fill.*' p173
- p184 '*They had journeyed to the final edge of life, beyond which there were no walls.*' They are welcomed by a woman Tomas thinks is his Mama, the animals think is Alice; Andrej sees Black Sarah. Why do they each see different beings?
- Consider that this ending suggests that time is also metaphoric. Is it only one night in their lives?

## Related reading

*The Silver Donkey* by Sonya Hartnett

*The Ghost's Child* by Sonya Hartnett

*The Zoo Keeper's War* by Steven Conte

*The Silver Sword* by Ian Serraillier

*Kojuro and the Bear* by Junko Morimoto

'Monkey's Paternoster' in *Red Spikes* by Margo Lanagan

'Sweet Pippit' in *Black Juice* by Margo Lanagan