

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

Too Many Monkeys

Written by Margaret Wild
Illustrated by Sally Rippin



Mum and Dad and Eenie and Meenie and Baby Mo lived in a tree in a forest. It was just the right size for their family.

But one day there was a knock-knock on the trunk of the tree.

"Morning," said Granny and Grandpa. "We've come to stay!"

"What a lovely surprise!" said Mum.

Visiting relatives are always welcome, but sometimes there just isn't room for them! When seven monkeys have to squash up into one small tree that's just the right size for five, the solution is to find another home. And that's what they do. But as soon as they discover a new tree that's just the right size, cousins Milly and Billy and Tilly come to stay - and the family must set off to find an even *bigger* tree!

In the end, when the extended family (Mum and Dad and Eenie and Meenie and Baby Mo and Granny and Grandpa and Milly and Billy and Tilly and Auntie Nan and Uncle Dan and Great-Aunt Pen and Great-Uncle Len) all try to squeeze into a tree that's way too small for them, they are bunched up like bananas! And when this very big family sets out to find a tree big enough for all of them, they just can't find one.

The solution, when it presents itself, is a triumph of logic and practicality. They find a clump of four trees, growing so close together that their branches touch. And within those four trees there is one that's just the right size for two. And one that's just the right size for three. And one that's just right for four. And, of course, one that's just the right size for a family of five (and Eenie and Meenie now each get their very own branch!).

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Too Many Monkeys takes us to an exotic, idealised Africa where elephants and giraffes and zebras wander through a landscape of vivid yellow grass and bright blue skies. It is at once an innovative counting book, and a delightful story about accommodating and adjusting to an extended family. Funny, bright and involving, it's perfect entertainment for younger children.

The author: Margaret Wild

Margaret Wild was born in Eshowe, a country town in South Africa, and grew up mainly in Johannesburg with her brothers and twin sister. When she left school she started work as a newspaper reporter, and after moving to Australia in 1973 she continued to work as a journalist and freelance writer. In 1984 she made a career change to become an editor of educational and children's books. She worked in children's publishing for sixteen years, most recently as commissioning editor for ABC Children's Books, before making the decision to write full time.

Margaret's first picture book, *There's a Sea in my Bedroom*, was published in 1984. Twenty years and more than forty books later, she is one of Australia's most successful writers for children. She has won many awards, including Children's Book Council of Australia Picture Book of the Year awards for *The Very Best of Friends* (1990), *Jenny Angel* (2000) and *Fox* (2001), and in 2001 she also won the NSW Premier's Award (Patricia Wrightson Prize) for *Fox*. Her books frequently appear on lists of books chosen by children as their favourites, and many have also been published overseas.

Margaret has always been seen as a writer who is not afraid to expose even quite young readers to 'difficult' subjects. In some of her best known books (*Let the Celebrations Begin!*, *Toby*, *Remember Me*, *Jenny Angel* and *Fox*) she writes movingly about human suffering, death, betrayal and redemption. However, many of her books - for example, *Our Granny*, *The Midnight Gang*, *Bim Bam Boom!*, *Mr Moo* and *Baby Boomsticks*—reveal an endearing sense of fun, while *The Pocket Dogs* and Margaret's only Solo title, *Pat the Cat and Sailor Sam*, show her ability to empathise with small and not so small domestic problems as seen through the eyes of a child (or a wise cat, or a small dog).

Now that Margaret is writing full-time, she is able to work on novels for older readers as well as picture book texts, and she has recently published two highly regarded verse novels for young adults: *Jinx* and *One Night*. Since her granddaughter was born, she has also become very interested in writing stories for children under five. *Too Many Monkeys*, with its lively cumulative text, is a perfect example of her work for very young readers.

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The illustrator: Sally Rippin

Sally Rippin was born in Darwin but grew up mainly in South-East Asia. As an adult she spent three years in China studying traditional Chinese painting before moving to France with her family for three years. She now lives in Melbourne, where she writes and illustrates full time, as well as running workshops for both children and adults.

Sally's first picture books, *Speak Chinese, Fang Fang!* and its companion *Fang Fang's Chinese New Year*, were published in 1996, and since then she has written and illustrated five more books and illustrated three books written by other people. She has also written two novels for young adults: *Chenxi and the Foreigner* and *Leopard Skin*. Sally's work has a particular appeal for children born in one culture and living in another, and her books are widely used in schools to help children explore aspects of multiculturalism.

Sally says that her illustrations always strive to show what her characters are feeling through the detail of their facial expressions. Her aim is to make even quite complex emotions visible even before the child has read the text.

'I didn't grow up in Australia, so for at least the first few months, before I learned the language of the country we were living in, I had to read faces to understand what was being said to me ... Apart from my face-reading ability, growing up overseas taught me about the difficulty of being an outsider and the challenges it can present, particularly to children who are often pulled between their parents' wishes to remain faithful to their culture and the child's own need to fit in.'

As well as the original pair of Fang Fang picture books, Sally has written and illustrated two Solos about Chinese-Australian children (*What a Mess, Fang Fang!* and *Twin Trouble*). The twin characters in *Twin Trouble* reappeared in two other little books, *A Baby Brother for Little Bean* and *The Longest Noodle Ever*, both published in 2000. Sally has also done the illustrations for John Marsden's *Millie*, and Valanga Khoza's *Gezani and the Tricky Baboon*.

A note on illustrations

Too Many Monkeys is the first book Sally has illustrated where all the characters are animals. 'I had to illustrate fourteen different monkeys, each with its own character and personality. I knew a simple way out would have been to use a different colour for each monkey to tell them apart, but I wanted them all to come from the same family. So I chose to paint them all a slightly different shade of blue, each with their distinctive personality reflected in their face.'

'Blue, I have since learned, is a publisher's nightmare, apparently being one of the hardest colours to re-

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produce, so I made a promise to my editor that if in the worst case-scenario all the blues turned out looking the same, you would be able to tell each monkey apart simply by their faces.'

If you look closely at the illustrations, you can see that the original family of five is a pure darkish blue, with the children slightly lighter than the parents. The grandparents are a grey-blue (indicating their age); the three cousins are a more vivid light blue, and the aunts and uncles are darker again, ranging from a deep purple to a deep turquoise. See, too, how Sally has indicated age and personality: the three cousins have spiky, punk-style 'hair', while the older monkeys have bags under their eyes or crowsfeet.

Ideas for teachers

Together, text and illustration in *Too Many Monkeys* provide lots of inspiration for activities, particularly in the areas of counting and language.

Counting

Each family group of monkeys represents a different number. We have a family of five (Mum, Dad, Eenie, Meenie and Baby Mo), a family of four (Uncle Dan and Auntie Nan, Great-Uncle Len and Great-Aunt Pen), a family of three (cousins Milly and Billy and Tilly) and a family of two (Granny and Grandpa). The story begins and ends with the family of five, and forms a neat counting pattern:

5 monkeys
+ 2 monkeys
+ 3 monkeys
+ 4 monkeys
— a total of 14 monkeys.

When it becomes clear that no tree is big enough for all 14 monkeys, the extended family moves to a group of 4 trees, and the family members each move to their separate trees, counting in reverse this time:

- 2 monkeys move out first, then
- 3 monkeys
- 4 monkeys
- 5 monkeys

There are of course lots of permutations, and children might have fun creating different family groups from the existing ones, and comparing numbers. For example, which family groups, added together, will add up to 7 monkeys? ($3 + 4 = 7$; and $5 + 2 = 7$), and so on.

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Fourteen children could represent each of the monkey characters and move into and out of tree 'houses' to enact the story, counting as they go.

Language

The text uses lots of repetition and rhyming words (Eenie and Meenie; Milly and Billy and Tilly). Ask children to list all the names that have the same sounds.

Baby Mo's crying anchors the text at each point where the monkeys decide to move to a new tree. What other expressions or actions are repeated throughout the book?

What is the source of the names Eenie, Meenie and Mo? Talk about the old rhyme, and think about other 'choosing' rhymes that children use (for example, 'One potato, two potato'). Get out the June Factor books and talk about playground rhymes and games!

Art

Look at Sally Rippin's illustrations, and talk about the style she has used (bold, bright gouache on strong texta outlines). Ask children to replicate this style, using very bright colours inside bold black outlines. Perhaps they could draw their favourite monkey family, or draw a tree in Sally's style.

Lots of African animals (or parts of them) appear in the illustrations. List all the animals that can be found, and then draw them. Ask children to identify the 'hidden' animals, page by page. How do we know which animal is being represented when all that's shown is a tail or a back view?

Go through the book and find Eenie and Meenie. In each illustration where they appear they are doing something different!

Studies of Society and Environment

Talk about extended families, both in Australia and in other countries. As *Too Many Monkeys* is set in an imagined Africa, this might lead to a discussion of how people live in some undeveloped African countries, where extended families are integral to their culture.

Ask children to list their own grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins - and count how many people there are in their own extended families.

Who has members of their extended families living with them in their home? Who has had extensions made to their home to accommodate a growing family? Who has moved to a bigger house? Who has to share a room and feels 'bunched up like bananas'?

Talk about different kinds of monkeys, and how they behave. Monkeys are very social animals, living in large groups and interacting with each other. Perhaps organise a trip to the zoo to look at monkeys, or get out a wildlife video to watch.