

Type of Text

Picture book

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

English Literacy

The Arts

Writing

Social Science, PE

Science

THEMES

- child parent relationships
- loss, grief, coping, normalising grief
- family, perseverance
- emotional hurt
- love, hope, building emotional resilience
- the importance of fathers / male role models

Publication Details

Published: March 2017

Author: Dimity Powell

Illustrator: Nicky Johnston

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ISBN: 978 -1925335347

Format: Hardcover 32pp

Ideal for: 4 – 7 year olds and lovers of picture books

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SYNOPSIS

It's handy having a dad who can fix just about anything. A young girl believes her father is the king of fixing things. He even knows how to make her ailing mother feel better. However, after her mother passes away, she discovers that broken hearts are not as easy to repair as damaged toys. Together she and her father find a way to glue back the pieces of their lives.

This picture book is a poignant look at the way a young girl copes with the loss of her mother. Replacing and repairing damaged emotions is not always as straightforward as gluing a broken kite back together or sewing up a torn toy. By sticking together with her dad, she is able to strengthen her resilience and ability to cope with one of life's harsher lessons – loss.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Dimity Powell has trekked through many parts of the world and crossed several of its oceans collecting crazy story ideas along the way. She loves transforming these into children's stories because deep down, she'd love to be a kid again. *To Read, Write and Inspire* sum up Dimity's main passions in life, along with eating her body weight in ice-cream. She lives just around the corner from Bat Man on the Gold Coast in Australia but both are far too busy 'fixing stuff' to hang out much together.

WRITING STYLE

This story was originally written in open non-rhyming prose. It is not intended to follow a specific metre or poetic style however as it developed, the gently lyrical phrases assumed a loose rhyming pattern. This was wholly unintentional. The main objective of the author was to infuse each word with enough musicality to make it enjoyable and beautiful to read. The use of symbolic metaphoric description is deliberate to further enrich and highlight the many nuances and emotions within the story.

ILLUSTRATOR BACKGROUND

Nicky Johnston is an educator, speaker and children's book author and illustrator. She is a mum to four boys and lives in Melbourne, Victoria. She works at home in her art studio and is fulfilling her lifetime goal of being an artist. She is passionate about promoting emotional resilience in children and her love of teaching (and all things creative) sees her visiting lots of schools inspiring young writers and artists.

ILLUSTRATION STYLE

Nicky's illustration style is often described as being whimsical, emotive, nostalgic and moving – a perfect match to Dimity's lyrical words. The illustrations are done using watercolour and pencil, soft tones, with specific colours representing emotions and events throughout the book. Every pencil stroke has been meticulously performed, with every detail a conscious one.

SELLING POINTS

- Zero – 100-year readership. As grief is universal and does not discriminate between age, gender or creed, this story's potential to aid children's mental health and well-being especially in times of grief and loss is immeasurable.
- Positively fulfils a pivotal role in supporting childhood mental health care. As such, it and other books like it need to be accessible to young readers in general but especially to those experiencing stressful life situations as well as to those surrounding them in caring and supportive roles.
- Concentrating the story at the point of impact of death, and thus attempting to 'normalise' the emotions that ensue is what sets *The Fix It Man* apart from other similar titles on the market.
- Provides practical, non-didactic material to support programs facilitated by those who work and care for children dealing with grief and life crises be they school counsellors, grief support organisations, or psychologists.
- Endorsed by leading mental health industry and grief counselling professionals along with teacher librarians throughout Australia.
- Tender, whimsical illustrations reflect vulnerability and despair in a way, which ultimately heartens and encourages hope.
- Supports the use of symbolism to paint strong visual images and connections.
- Addresses difficult to discuss themes of loss, family relationships, perseverance and coping using an eight-year-old's voice.
- Reminds us how adults are not damage-proof and how this realisation can affect a young child's coping abilities.
- Examines a child's belief in the omnipotence of a parent's ability to make good all wrongs and fix all things broken and their reliance on such abilities. How they (father and child) evolve when these beliefs are challenged by loss and grief suggests that not everything can be fixed but together we can work towards brighter, better futures.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

1. Why did you write the book?

It grew from an idea spawned from an incident created by my then infant child. A bowl was broken, shattered to splinters, and like many young children who view their carers /parents as omnipresent cure-alls, she immediately presumed Daddy would fix it. It got me thinking, what if a Daddy couldn't fix something. What if one day, he needed fixing, too? How would a child cope in that situation?

2. What was the most rewarding part of this project?

Watching Nicky Johnston bring my words to visual life. Her ability to grasp the intent I was hoping to portray and transform it into images so quickly and precisely was astounding. Working with her and my publisher so intimately was truly joyful and very satisfying.

3. What was the most challenging part of this project?

Fine-tuning the manuscript to ensure each word delivered as much as possible and was able to involve the reader as emotionally as possible without becoming too morose or melancholy.

ILLUSTRATOR INTERVIEW

1. Why did you illustrate the book?

As soon as I read Dimity's eloquently written manuscript, I connected with the emotions instantly. I knew I would be able to extend the words further through my heartfelt illustrations. The story touched my heart deeply, and as a primary educator I know firsthand how important it is to share a book like this with children and families. Touching on emotions that can make grownups feel uncomfortable is so difficult to do but this book conquers this difficulty exceptionally well leaving the reader with love and hope.

2. What was the most rewarding part of this project?

The ease in which the illustrations evolved was extremely rewarding as it didn't feel like 'work' at all. I know when I'm working on a polished story when the illustrations simply fall from the pencil without effort. Working closely with Dimity and the team at EK Books was wonderful, all of us striving to make this book the best it could possibly be.

3. What was the most challenging part of this project?

While I was working on the final illustrations I experienced a family loss of my own and my personal grief very much filled my world. This was challenging and yet perfect at the same time. I tend to illustrate pages out of order, and the wordless page illustration was one of the hardest ones I have done, but it is also one of my favourites. I channeled the hope and repair in this story and I feel like I am the main character.

TEACHING POINTS & ACTIVITIES

This book may be used in whole class, small group or independent learning activities in schools, with caregivers or as part of grief and loss programs facilitated by children's charities or counsellors. It is easier to appreciate the emotional meaning and overall essence of this story with a whole class. Focus on specific causes of loss and feelings of helplessness or despair may be better addressed in independent one-on-one situations or small groups where coping strategies may be explored and shared.

Please note, the following suggestions and activities are suited to a variety of year levels spanning Foundation to Year 6 primary aged children. Some activities may be applicable to early secondary school students, as well. Where possible, [Australian Curriculum goal codes](#) have been included which address Foundation to Year 2 curriculum learning outcomes and apply directly to the targeted audience intended for this book, (4 – 8 years).

Knowledge and Literal Understanding

- **Before Reading** (Interpreting, analyzing, evaluating / [ACELY1660](#))
 - Show the cover to the class and ask the students what they think the book might be about.
 - Read the back cover blurb. Does this give them more of an idea of what the book could be about?
 - Ask students to define what an emotion is.
 - Ask them to name a variety of emotions and how they make them feel.
 - Do they think it's important to share / show emotions? Why?
- **During Reading**
 - Ask students if they know of or have someone like the fix-it man in their family.
 - In what ways do they depend on them: good at repairing things, making things, soothing hurts, listening?
 - Discuss how they might feel if their 'fix-it person' couldn't fix something? What would they do? Ask someone else, rely on themselves, worry?
 - What changes does the girl have to face during the story?
 - Can students guess what could be wrong with Mama?
 - What happens to Mama? What are the possible reasons for this? How does it make students feel?

- Do they think there is a possibility she could return? What aspects of the story suggest why or why not?
- Ask students how they perceive the girl's situation. Do they think she is happy with her situation at home?

Inferential and Critical Thinking

- After Reading (Responding to literature / [ACELT1783](#), [ACELT1582](#), [ACELT1578](#))
 - Ask students how they think the girl views her father at the end of the story.
 - Have students' impressions of her father and his abilities altered by the end of the story?
 - Gently enquire if any of the students have ever lost something they loved or was very special to them: a toy, person, friend, pet, home? Discuss how it made them feel.
 - What did the girl do to feel better? Do they think it worked? Discuss what students would do or have done to make themselves feel less sad?
 - Ask students what they think symbolism means. Get them to describe how symbols can show the relationship between real physical things and emotion and ideas. In groups, pairs or as a whole class, brainstorm some everyday common examples of symbols.
 - What are some of those used in the story? Girl's antenna; glue; sticky tape; Tiger toy.
 - Examine these and their metaphorical correlation between fixing physical things and emotional things and sometimes not being able to: broken hearts and broken tea pots; relationships torn apart by loss and beloved stuffed toys falling apart at the seams; joy of life in song and dance and kites bereft of wind to fly.
 - Whom do students regard as the main character of the story? Who are the sub or secondary characters?
 - Why are the sub characters important to the story?
 - How do they support the girl and help her deal with her situation?

CROSS-CURRICULAR DISCUSSION AND IDEAS

ENGLISH LITERACY SKILLS

Vocabulary (Language for interaction/ [ACELA1462](#))

- Alliteration – give examples from the story.

- Onomatopoeia – where and how is it used to emphasis feelings

Grammar

(Expressing and developing ideas / [ACELA1786](#), [ACELA1451](#), [ACELA1462](#))

- The girl and her father are referred to as pronouns (I, she, he) rather than with proper nouns. How does this impact on the story? Would students prefer the girl to have a name? Discuss possible reasons why the author avoided using proper nouns and names.
- How would students classify the term 'the Fix-It Man'?
- What type of punctuation is used to show despair, helplessness, shock, drama?
- Do certain words, adjectives link to the facial expressions and emotions depicted in the illustrations? Which ones?
- Identify some of the metaphors the author uses and discuss their meanings. For example, 'the cracks are too wide', 'hummed with laughter', 'tiny diamonds into starbursts and snowflakes'.
- What other adjectives could replace those used?
- What do you think the phrase 'stitched together from rainbows and old hugs' refers to regarding Mama's rug?
- There is minimal dialogue shown in this story. Why do students think this is? Does it make the story easier or less easy to follow?

Comprehension

(Wellbeing / [ACPPS005](#), [ACELT1581](#))

- Get students to name the sequence of events in this story.
- Discuss how it would affect the feeling and outcome of the story if it began at a different point in time, i.e. begins when Mama is already gone.
- Do the illustrations follow the story? Do they enhance it, if so, how?
- At which point or points do the girl's emotions change? How many times?
- Were students able to predict what would happen to Mama? Name the clues – in the text and pictures? If not expected, how did it make them feel?
- Make a list of the various emotions and the adjectives that relate to them that that girl is experiencing. Compare these with her father's.
- Discuss whether students feel this is a sad story or happy one and encourage them to give reasons based on the words and images used.

Writing

(Examining literature / [ACELT1584](#))

- Identify whose point of view (POV) the story is written in.

- Attempt to write the story from a different POV: Tiger's; Mama's; Dad's.
- Get students to choose a scene and rewrite it using more dialogue or just dialogue.
- Ask students to work in groups or pairs to create an Acrostic Poem using emotion words such as: HAPPY, SAD, WORRIED, HOPEFUL, LOVE. Share with the class and compare.

Literature and Media (Responding to literature / [ACELT1582](#), [ACELT1583](#))

- Ask students to name cartoons or movies that have similar themes to *The Fix-It Man*.
- Ask them to list fairy tales that incorporate this theme.
- Define which ones stick most in their memories and discuss why? Is it because of the way they make them feel, for example.
- Consider how they end. Do all sad stories have sad endings or is there always a promise of hope to come?
- Which have the better endings? Which ones do students prefer most? Debate what makes a good ending and why that is important.

VISUAL LITERACY (Expressing and developing ideas / [ACELA1453](#))

- Search for the visual clues the illustrator includes in the story to show a change of:
 - Emotion
 - Time / situation
- How do the end pages change? Identify the differences.
- How do the illustrations depict the personalities of the characters and what they are experiencing? E.g. Drooping antenna, kite tails, mobile in the wind.
- Examine the perspective and angles used in the illustrations, e.g.; we cannot always see the characters' faces. Why do students think this approach is used – is there more meaning in what you *don't* see than what you can see?
- How do certain colours make students feel? How can they apply this to this story?
- Discuss the use of colours to project or symbolise emotion in illustrations and this story. (used with [Visual Arts and Craft](#))
- Identify the predominant colour palette, and then list emotions to match those colours. Use their location in the story and the associated text to help identify the match.

MATHEMATICS

- Chance and Probability
 - Explore the likelihood of losing special things. Getting them back.
- Shapes

- Identify the geometric shapes and symbols used throughout the illustrations e.g. kites, polka dots, doghouse panels, teapot, mobile, pajamas.
- Count them and examine their use in the illustrations.
- Discuss how certain shapes could produce certain emotions.
- Count the number of times Tiger appears in the story.

THE ARTS

VISUAL ARTS / CRAFT (Visual Arts / [ACAVAM108](#))

- [Make a kite](#) – either crotchet = take home task or with more conventional materials; paper, wooden skewers / batons, ribbon tails ([Crotchet Kite pattern](#))
- Create sock or hand puppets. Sock or hand puppets could involve paper Mache heads for characters. ([Sock puppet tutorial video](#))
- Using techniques of either paper Mache or clay work, create a teapot. Clay work could involve glazing and kiln drying if available.
- Using [colouring in templates](#), use colours to show emotion in the various scenes.
- Invite students to name their favourite colour and why. (use with [Visual Literacy](#))
- Ask students which page (spread) of the story they feel is the saddest one and how it makes them feel? (The Blue page) What part of the story does this page occur?
- Which do they deem is the happiest page?

MUSIC (Communicating and interacting, wellbeing [ACPPS020](#))

- Listen to and watch the Book Trailer for this story. What type of music is used? How does it make students feel?
- What types of instruments suggest sad feelings? Does the pace of the music dictate the feeling of this mini movie?
- Do students think background music is important for relaying the feel of the story and suggesting what it could be about? Do they think instrumental background music is enough or if a song with lyrics was used instead, what would they choose?
- Can music trigger certain memories? Ask students if they have a particular song that elicits strong memories, good or bad. (use with [Science](#))

DRAMA(Language for interaction [ACELA1787](#))

- Using sock puppets get students to re-enact the story. A small stage could be rigged up to facilitate this.
 - Enlist someone to be the narrator instead of the girl's voice.
- Get students to experiment with how to manipulate the puppets to show the different emotions and voices used in the story. Cover:
 - Body Language
 - Stage position
 - Influence of music to the performance – when to use it to inject drama or relief for the audience.
- Re-enact the story with students but not using words or a narrator, just music to accentuate the:
 - 'light and shade' moments of the story
 - Show scene changes
 - Mood changes (use with [Music](#))

SOCIAL SCIENCE(Social Health [ACPPS005](#), [ACELA1787](#), [ACPPS020](#))

- Discuss the mean of empathy.
- Get students to imagine they have a friend who has lost something precious to them: a pet, parent, sibling, treasure, then get them to design and write a card to show that friend they are thinking of them. What words or images would they use to convey empathy for their friend's situation?
- Discuss the difference between Optimism and Pessimism.
- Ask how students feel when something makes them sad. Get them to list some of the ways or things that would help cheer them up. Explore ways to cope with bad feelings: writing / drawing them down, stepping back and counting to ten, meditation, talking about them, engaging in your favourite activity, burning energy, crying, telling jokes... and so on.
- Enquire whether students know where or whom to turn to for help when worries or feelings become too much for them. List their suggestions and research other avenues together.

SCIENCE**(STEM)**

- What tools are used to fix things? Hammer, nails, tape, pins, glue etc.
- Discuss the properties of various glue types: super glue vs paper craft glue.
 - What are the differences?
 - What works best for certain jobs?

- How is glue made, where does it come from?
- Can glue be used on people like the objects in this story?
 - Yes! Special super-glue is used in place of stitches on humans for example.
 - Physically yes – Emotionally? Discuss.
- Consider the five senses and how music, smells and words can stimulate and trigger memories.
 - Hypothesize why they think this is and then research the answer.
 - Locate words and phrases the author uses in the story to add sensory detail and evoke the reader's senses. Discuss how this could enrich the story telling experience.
- Experiment with different materials to make a kite then in groups or pairs, test which designs perform / fly the best. (used with [Physical Education](#) and [Arts and Craft](#))
 - Which weather conditions suit the different designs best?
 - What role does the kite tail serve?
 - How long should the string be?
 - What are some famous historic experiments involving kite flying?

PHYSICAL EDUCATION (Health and Wellbeing / [ACPPS005](#), [ACPPS020](#))

- [Kite flying](#) is a fun physical activity that makes you laugh, move and feel good – useful in times of stress and despair. What other physical activities could positively improve mental wellbeing?
- Practice flying handmade kites in pairs or groups. Is it easier to launch a kite in teams or with a partner?
 - Experiment with launch techniques and how to maintain height.
 - Have fun!

TEACHERS' NOTES for THE FIX-IT

Prepared by Dimity Powell & Nicky Johnston November 2014