

TEACHER NOTES

Title: Meerkat Choir
Author: Nicki Greenberg
Publisher: Allen & Unwin
Price: \$24.99
ISBN: 9781760290795
Publication Date: October 2017
Audience: 4-8
Reader: Carolyn Walsh, Allen & Unwin

Synopsis:

The meerkat choirmaster will only allow meerkats in his choir. Various animals approach the choir, wishing to join, but he sends them away. Eventually, after the choirmaster has excluded all non-meerkats, the choir begins its rehearsal. To the choirmaster's horror, their singing is abominable. He disbands the choir in disgust. The choir members do not know what to do without a leader. They hear a musical noise, follow it, and discover all the rejected animals making a joyful cacophony. They shamefacedly ask if they can join in. After a moment of suspense, the other animals welcome them in. The choirmaster does not deign to return, and we see him at the end – aloof, superior, and alone with his genius.

Style:

As with many of Nicki Greenberg's picture books, *Meerkat Choir* explores issues that have a very real impact on young children and presents them in a simple and entertaining way.

Here she has taken the universal appeal of meerkats (who doesn't love these creatures for their tight-knit family groups, sociability, and downright cute faces?) and created a laugh-out-loud story that has, at its core, the very serious issue of bullying behaviour and exclusion.

Author Motivation:

'The meerkat characters first appeared in one of my Ruby Reindeer picture books: *The Naughtiest Reindeer at the Zoo*. For that book I had written more than 30 different zoo animals into the rhyming text, which meant that I had to create more than 30 different kinds of animal characters for the illustrations... and most of those creatures only appeared once! I loved the meerkats best of all – they were funny, expressive, and I thought they had loads of potential for their own stories.

‘Meerkats are group animals, and I liked the idea of doing a story about group behaviour rather than focusing on a single main character. The meerkats in the choir are rather innocent, gormless creatures. They don’t think to question the mean behaviour of their choirmaster when he excludes various other animals from the choir – which turns out to be an unwise move for everyone. Underneath the funny antics, the story prompts readers to think about the role of bystanders and their ability to challenge bullying behaviour.’

Nicki Greenberg

Author’s Background:

Nicki Greenberg is a writer and illustrator based in Melbourne, Australia. Her first picture books, The Digits series, were published when she was fifteen years old. She later spent ten years disguised as a lawyer, while maintaining a not-so-secret Other Life as a comics artist and children's book author. Nicki is the creator of the award-winning 'staged-on-the-page' adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and of the graphic adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Inspired by her own young children, Nicki has written and illustrated a range of delightful picture books for younger readers including The Naughtiest Reindeer series, *Monkey Red Monkey Blue*, *BOM! went the Bear*, *Teddy Took the Train* and *My Dog Dash*.

Suggestions for classroom discussion and application:

- Before opening *Meerkat Choir*, look at the title and cover design. Discuss what students think the story might be about and the clues in the picture that make them think that. Ask questions such as:
 - Do you think this is going to be a funny or sad story? Why do you think that?
 - What do you know about meerkats?
 - How many meerkats can you count on the cover?
 - What role in the choir might the meerkat on the far right have?

- Read the story through once and ask students the following questions to help them explore the story’s main themes:
 - Do you think the choirmaster was being nice to the other animals when he said the animals couldn’t join the choir?
 - How do you think the animals felt about being excluded?

- What should the meerkat choir members have done when the choirmaster said the other animals should go away?
 - Did excluding the animals make the choir better?
 - How do you think the meerkats felt when they were accepted by the multi-animal choir?
 - Who do you think is happier at the end of the story, the choirmaster or the multi-animal choir?
 - Hands up anyone who has seen someone being excluded in the playground. What do you think you should do if you see someone being excluded?
- Visual literacy: Ask students if anyone can see a sound. When they say no, encourage them to think about how Nicki Greenberg has captured the sounds the animals make when they sing in the story. What colours and lines does she use to show the bird singing? How do these differ from the lines and colours she uses for the snake, bats and giraffe? What sort of sound do you think the bird makes compared to the meerkats? Is it light and pretty compared to loud and squeaky? How has she shown the sort of sound made when ALL of the animals are singing?
 - Break your class into groups of 10 – two students to make up the meerkat choir, one choirmaster, one tortoise, one porcupine, one bird, one snake, one bat, one giraffe and one crocodile – and encourage each group to perform the story on stage. Students should think about the specific characteristics of the animal they are playing and the sort of song they might sing.
 - Turn to the last page of the story featuring the choirmaster sitting alone and ask students to describe his mood. What in the picture tells them how he is feeling? Now look closely at his sign. How has the sign changed from earlier in the story and what do students think this sign now tells us about the choirmaster?
 - Ask students to come up with ideas about what might happen next in the story if it continued past the last page. Might the animal choir approach the choirmaster again? How might the choirmaster react this time?

- Ask students to find three interesting facts about meerkats and put them on a cardboard poster. A good starting point for research is <https://www.natgeokids.com/au/discover/animals/general-animals/meerkat-facts/>