

Title: Ella and the Ocean
Author: Lian Tanner, Jonathan Bentley
Publisher: Allen & Unwin
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Audience: 4-6
Reader: Carolyn Walsh, Allen & Unwin

Synopsis:

Ella's farming family are experiencing extreme drought in the Australian outback. Rain hasn't fallen for years and years and the land is as dry as old bones. Her parents and older brother are exhausted from keeping the farm going and pay little attention when Ella tells them of a dream she had about the ocean. However, Ella's grandmother knows that dreams are important and convinces the family to make the arduous journey to the coast. But once everyone is swimming in the ocean their worries are washed away and each relaxes and enjoys the moment. Returning home, life doesn't seem quite so hard: the land, while still dry, is a remarkably beautiful colour; the sky, while still cloudless, is magnificent in its vastness, and the birds are singing. Meanwhile Ella and her grandmother wait patiently for the rains to come, as they inevitably will.

Style:

Ella and the Ocean is a simple and moving story – about renewal and rejuvenation, about drought and life on the land, about travel and new horizons, and about family – particularly the relationship between Ella and her grandmother. Lian Tanner's writing is beautiful and spare and poetic – but at the same time is warm, easy and relatable for kids.

Jonathan Bentley's illustrations convey a sense of movement, light and colour that brings real warmth and joy to the text, as well as bringing to life Australia's unique, challenging and ultimately beautiful landscapes.

Author Motivation:

'I'm not sure where the idea came from for *Ella and the Ocean*. It was something to do with how hard it can be to imagine things you've never seen, especially something as huge and

astounding as the ocean. And what a child might make of the descriptions her family give her.

‘But in the writing of it, it got mixed up with my mother's childhood on a South Australian farm, my parents' courtship in the Northern Territory during the Second World War, and the toughness of life on the land. And the drought.

‘The thing about picture books is, they’re a lot harder to write than they seem. They’re probably closer to a poem than anything else, because you have to make *every word* count. With a novel, you can be a bit less fussy. You can go off on little detours. You can waste a word or two.

‘The other thing about picture books is, you have to leave room for the pictures. You don’t tell the whole story with words, because they’re only half of the book. The pictures are the other half, and they’re not just there to illustrate the words. They’re there to help tell the story.

‘Back then, when I set out to write *Ella and the Ocean*, I didn’t know any of this. What I came up with was pretty awful. I could tell it was awful, but I didn’t know how to fix it. In the end, I just stuck it away in the corner of my computer reserved for miserable failures and forgot about it.

‘But every now and again I went back to that corner and during one of those distractions I stumbled across *Ella and the Ocean* again. And I thought I could see how to fix it. I worked on it over a few months, cutting out lots of words. And at last it reached its current form.’

Lian Tanner

‘Colour was my first thought. The contrast between the dry red or orange dirt of the farm and the blue of the sea. This was my way into the story visually. I planned my illustrations around the tone and colour of the whole spreads.

‘I do look up images for reference as well. The father’s farm clothes, the farmhouse, the sea, the dry land. This all helps. Unfortunately, I wasn’t living by the sea when I illustrated *Ella and the Ocean* but I like to take lots of my own photos when I can; even if I don’t use them

all in one book, they all help like a memory bank. I find traveling is a wonderful way to be inspired and I take a lot of photos that will work their way into a story at some point.

‘In *Ella and the Ocean*, I liked the idea of Ella standing looking out, almost as if she’s on the mast of a ship – you see this on the roof of the house and when standing on the fallen tree. That lead me to use the little toy boat as visual clue to Ella’s hopes and dreams.

‘The hardest part for me was to draw and paint the sea. I had several attempts to get this right and many paintings ended up in the bin. It’s hard to draw something that is always moving.’

Jonathan Bentley

Authors’ Background:

Lian Tanner has been dynamited while scuba diving and arrested while busking. She once spent a week in the jungles of Papua New Guinea, searching for a Japanese soldier left over from the Second World War. She likes secrets, old bones, and animals that are not what they seem. Nowadays she lives by the beach in southern Tasmania with a large fluffy tomcat called Harry-le-beau. She is the author of the internationally bestselling *The Keepers* series, *The Rogues* and *The Hidden*. This is her first picture book.

Jonathan Bentley is the illustrator of many wonderful picture books, including *The Second Sky* by Patrick Guest (CBCA Shortlist 2018), *Tales from a Tall Forest* by Shaun Micallef, *First Day* by Andrew Daddo, *Blue Sky Yellow Kite* by Janet A Holmes, and *Where is Bear?*

Suggestions for classroom discussion and application:

- Before opening *Ella and the Ocean* look at the title and cover design. Ask the following questions to encourage students to predict what might follow in the story:
 - What will the little girl’s name be?
 - Where do you think Ella lives?
 - Do the colours help you to guess where she might live?
 - Do the background elements (trees/water tank/ tractor) help you guess where she might live?
 - Does it look like it has rained recently?

- Ella standing on her roof looks like she is standing on the mast of a ship so what might Ella be imagining she is looking at or for? Hint – think about the title.

Explore what the class knows about the impact of drought on farmers in Australia.

- Read the story through once, close the book and ask the class to close their eyes and think about how the story made them feel. [You may need to prompt responses by saying words such as sad, happy, hopeful, surprised or frightened.] Encourage students to share with the class their feelings and what parts of the story prompted those feelings.
- For school-aged students: Open the book at the first double-page spread and discuss with the class the idea that an illustration can communicate information just as well as words. Re-read the text here and ask students to look closely at the image and see if they can come up with more information about Ella's home than the text gives. [Reds and oranges create a sense of extreme hot weather, a tractor in the background tells us Ella lives on a farm, the trees are bare and there are no other plants to be seen so the farm is probably struggling.]
- If you found the class responded well to the previous activity then turn the page and ask them to find things in the image that tell us more about the ocean in Ella's dream. [Her dream includes fish, seagulls flying above and blue waves gently breaking.]
or
Encourage students to find things in the image that tell us about Ella. [She likes to draw, is interested in boats and ocean birds, and is curious about the wider world because she has a globe on her desk.]
- Turn the page, read the text and ask students to look closely at the image of Ella's dad. How do they think he is feeling here? What in the text and image tells us that?
- Turn the page, read the text and ask students to look closely at the image of Ella's mum. Ask the class if they can come up with ideas about what she is really thinking about while talking to Ella.

- Turn to the page with Ella and her grandmother sitting together on the couch and ask students how Gran's response to Ella's question differs from the rest of the family.
- Go forward three spreads to the image of the family arriving at the ocean's shore and discuss Ella's mum, dad and brother's responses. How do they differ from Gran's and Ella's? The text tells us one group is surprised and in awe of what they see, while Ella and Gran just want to jump in and swim. What in the illustration shows us that?
- Turn the page to the text and image describing the family's return home by plane and car and compare it to the almost identical image several spreads before. If the images are almost identical ask students to explain why the second version is more cheerful and positive than the first, and what might have happened to cause it?
- Why might the final image and text be described as a 'happy ending'?