

ANISA'S ALPHABET

Written by Mike Dumbleton, illustrated by Hannah Sommerville

Teacher Notes

Anisa's Alphabet is an alphabet book with a difference! It tells the story of a young refugee's flight from danger. We travel with Anisa on her journey, sharing her experiences, fears and resolute optimism. The story is told simply and sensitively in rhyming text and appeals to readers of all ages.

About the Author

Mike is an award winning picture book writer with many 'Notable Books' selected by the Children's Book Council of Australia. His book, *Muddled-up Farm*, was the Speech Pathology Australia Book of the Year, 2004, and *Cat* was a CBCA Honour Book, 2008. Mike has also received a Federal Minister's Award for Outstanding Contribution to Improving Literacy, for his work as an educator and a writer over an extended period of time. Part of Mike's interest in writing stems from the fact that his grandfather was a local poet in an Oxfordshire village in England, who regularly recited his poems to the family, with or without requests! In his spare time, Mike enjoys reading, travelling, trying to keep fit, listening to jazz and watching sport.

Website: mikedumbleton.com.au

About the Illustrator

Hannah creates enchanting watercolour, pen and pencil drawings in her studio on the South Coast of NSW. The daughter of a ceramicist, Hannah earned a Bachelor of Creative Arts (Visual Arts and Graphic Design) at the University of Wollongong in 2006. Hannah began illustrating after the arrival of her young children from whom she draws inspiration. Hannah is a storyteller, who enjoys creating picture books that capture the imagination, tenderness and playfulness that surround children and family life. Her picture book *Digby & Claude*, written by Emma Allen, made the CBCA 2019 notables list.

Website: <https://www.hannahsommerville.com>

Style

The story is told gently, in relatively few words. It is a carefully crafted text with restrained descriptions of dramatic and poignant experiences. Mike uses the alphabet creatively to pinpoint significant events in Anisa's refugee journey. The writing gives a clear focus to situations where Anisa shows us the personal face of a refugee and reveals her determined optimism.

The book was a genuine collaboration between author and illustrator. The visual text cleverly expands the written narrative with details and important information which cannot be found in the words, including the roles played by other members of Anisa's family. Hannah also uses a range of techniques to give personal prominence to Anisa throughout the book. At the same time,

however, she uses shaded outlines, silhouettes and several distant views to remind us of the anonymity which befalls many refugees.

The captivating illustrations perfectly complement the text. Hannah begins with a watercolour ground, to create a surface with varied tone and areas of texture. She then builds upon this by applying multiple layers of gouache. The muted tone and evocative use of light and shadows adds depth and impact to the events. In contrast, Anisa's drawings were made using coloured pencils.

Motivation

As a teacher in Australia, and a Literacy Consultant in New York, Mike has worked with students and teachers who were refugees. He found that their personal stories were often disturbing and very different from some public narratives about refugees, which deliberately focused on refugees as a group rather than as individuals.

Mike wanted to write a story with a strong personal focus that was accessible to readers from a young age. In choosing to write not only in rhyme, but also following the letters of the alphabet, he gave himself a significant challenge. He was grateful for the interest and encouragement of several refugee students along the way and to one in particular who is mentioned in Mike's dedication.

Educational Applicability

Discussion Questions

Before reading the book:

1. Show the cover of *Anisa's Alphabet* to the children and ask them:
 - What can they see?
 - Who can they see?
 - What do they think the characters on the front cover are doing?
 - What do they think the story might be about?
 - What are the most common colours used? Why do you think they were used? [L1]
[SEP]
2. Ask the children how they think the alphabet might be used in the story. Could they suggest any ideas for how one or more letters of their choice might be used? [L1]
[SEP]

After reading the book:

Ask the children:

1. What were the 2 most frightening parts of the journey for Anisa? [L1]
[SEP]
2. What would be 3-5 good words to describe Anisa's emotions at these times?
3. What were the 2 most peaceful parts of the journey for Anisa?
4. What would be 3-5 good words to describe Anisa's emotions at these times?
5. Why did only Anisa and her mother leave the refugee camp?
6. What do you think might have happened to Anisa's father and grandmother after they left.
7. What do you think happened to Anisa and her mother in the end?

Activities

Anisa's Alphabet provides a springboard for many different classroom activities such as:

- making a list of the things you would try to carry with you if you had to leave your home in a hurry, like Anisa
- making and using puppets of the characters to retell the story or create variations of the story
- finding and sharing information books and other stories about refugees.
- using the story as the basis for a class play
- working in groups, or as a whole class, to make an alphabet frieze of *Anisa's Alphabet*, with new illustrations for each letter
- writing diary entries for several events in Anisa's journey
- writing a journal entry for a child arriving in a refugee camp
- explaining how *one* of the adults felt when the father and grandmother were left behind in the refugee camp
- writing a letter from Anisa to her father after arriving in the new country
- drawing a picture which would be suitable to replace one of Anisa's drawings in the book
- looking at the drawings by Syrian children in the book *Home*, edited by artist Ben Quilty, and answering such questions as:
 - what do you learn from the pictures the children drew?
 - which picture(s) made you feel happiest? Why?
 - which picture(s) made you feel saddest? Why?
- discussing/explaining how the illustrator uses some of the following techniques or features to create atmosphere or emotion in the illustrations:
 - small and large illustrations
 - close-ups and distant views of scenes
 - light and shadows
 - different colours.
- giving examples of information which is in the pictures, but not in the words?
- identifying one or more messages contained in the book.

Use de Bono's Six Thinking Hats for further exploration of *Anisa's Alphabet* and related issues.

White Hat (*facts / information*)

- Which countries are refugees leaving to come to Australia?
- Why are they leaving their own countries?
- How do they come?
- What happens to them?

Red Hat (*feelings / emotions*)

- How would you feel if you had to leave your home quickly because of an approaching disaster?
- How would you feel when you first landed in another country?

Yellow Hat (*optimism / positives*)

- What do you think were the best times for Anisa on her journey?
- Where do you think Anisa will be one year after the end of the story if her dreams come true?

Black Hat (*dangers / problems*)

- What were the dangers that Anisa faced during her journey?
- Can you think of dangers Anisa could have faced that were not mentioned in the story?
- What problems could Anisa face after the end of the story?

Green Hat (*creativity / new ideas*)

- Working in groups or as a whole class, can you:
 - make an alphabet frieze with new illustrations for Anisa's story?
 - create a new story for a different child refugee?

Blue Hat (*process / organising*)

- How can you share the information you discovered about refugees?
- What is the best way to display your class frieze?

Overview Of Key Learning Areas

Type of text

- Picture book ^[L]_[SEP]
- Poetry ^[L]_[SEP]
- Fiction text ^[L]_[SEP]

Key Learning Content Areas ^[L]_[SEP]

- English: language, literature and literacy
- Art
- Hass

General capabilities

- Literacy ^[L]_[SEP]
- Critical and creative thinking ^[L]_[SEP]
- Visual literacy ^[L]_[SEP] Language Modes ^[L]_[SEP]
- Listening, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating

Themes

- refugees ^[L]_[SEP]
- families
- journeys
- danger
- survival
- resilience ^[L]_[SEP]