

Title: Mo and Crow
Author: Jo Kasch, illustrated by Jonathan Bentley
Publisher: Allen & Unwin
Price: \$24.99
ISBN: 9781760631758
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Audience: 5–8
Reader: Carolyn Walsh, Allen & Unwin

Synopsis:

Mo lives alone and he likes it that way...until Crow comes into his small and tidy life and wants to stay. A gorgeous picture book with a powerful message about breaking down barriers and discovering the joys of friendship.

Style:

The text, in short simple sentences with small bursts of Mo's dialogue, is supported by lively, colourful watercolour-and-pencil illustrations that capture the movement of the wind and the trees, as well as of the characters. But it is the elemental tones of the illustrations that give everything a fable-light allure that will appeal to young students.

Jo Kasch's text repeatedly stresses the rhymes of *Crow* and *Go* (and *Mo*) to reinforce the to-and-fro between the protagonists, and the determination of both to achieve their goal.

But Crow will not go and Mo is worn down, leading to a final scene that is steeped in charm and demonstrates the advantages of opening oneself up to new friends and experiences.

Author Motivation:

'There were three inspirations for *Mo and Crow*.

'The first was my daughter. Despite my having been nervous about becoming a mother she has taught me that I have an infinite amount of love to give and that we can't know everything that is wonderful until we take chances and let the unknown in.

'The second was during one of the media/political cycles when a prime minister was pushing border control. Successive government policies built around the "fear of other" is, in my opinion, to everyone's detriment and I wanted to put that gently on the page.

‘And the third is that I just really love crows!’

Jo Kasch

Author’s Background:

Jo Kasch is an award-winning Melbourne-based television writer and script editor, with a particular love of television aimed at children and teens. She has worked as a developer, writer and editor of live-action and animated series for the Australian Children's Television Foundation, Every Cloud Productions, Fremantle Media, Channel 7, Jonathan Shiff Productions, A Stark Production, Blue Rocket Productions and Channel 7.

Illustrator’s Background:

Jonathan Bentley is the illustrator of over forty wonderful picture books (six of which he wrote), including *Ella and the Ocean* (Winner Patricia Wrightson Prize for Children’s Literature, NSW Premier’s Literary Awards 2020), *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 *Mo and Crow* show the cover to your class and read the book’s title out loud. Ask the following questions to encourage students to predict what might follow in the story:
 - (Pointing at Crow) What kind of a bird do you think this might be?
 - Did you know that a group of crows is called a ‘murder’? What else do you know about crows? [Hint: intelligent and survivors.]
 - Do you think this is a friendly crow? What is it about Crow that makes you think that about him?
 - What sort of work do you think Mo might do? What is it about him that suggests that?
 - Do you think he is happy to see Crow in this image?
 - Do you think Crow is happy to see Mo?
 - What sort of story do you expect this to be? Funny or sad? Why?

- Read the story through once, close the book and ask the class to close 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 their feelings with the class and try to get them to pinpoint the parts of the story that prompted those feelings.
- **Colour:** Put the book down for a moment and discuss with students how colour can affect our mood. Ask students how bright colours make them feel compared with dark, sombre colours. Pick the book up and open it on the first double-page spread. Ask what colours dominate here and how they influence how we feel about Mo and his home when we see them. Now turn the page and compare the colours shown here. Ask which side of the wall is wider, richer and more interesting – the one showing Mo’s side or the other?
- **Scale:** Using the same two double-page spreads, compare how big Mo’s house is in the first with how big it is in the second. What do you think the difference in size might say about how limited Mo’s world is on his side of the wall?
- **Typography:** Talk to your class about how words are sometimes presented on a page to indicate how loud or musical they might sound. Now turn the page and point out the word *Tap* here and on the following page. Point out that the word grows larger and thicker as it is repeated and even seems to dance around the page. Now turn the page again and look at it here. Point out the way *Pop*, ‘*Oh*’ and ‘*Go*’ are shown and ask students what the typography suggests about that word.
- **Rhyme and Repetition:** Hearing and using rhyme and repetition helps children develop literacy skills. Turn to the page where Mo and Crow stare at each other at the kitchen window and read the accompanying text: *The crow did not go. Mo watched the crow. And the crow watched Mo. But the crow did not go.* Ask students which words rhyme with *crow* here. Now ask them if they can think of other words that rhyme with *crow/go/Mo* but are not featured here. [Hint: *sew/so, low, mow, foe, grow, bow, doe...*] Ask students which words and phrases are repeated in the extract and if they can even see where a sentence is repeated but the subject and object is switched around.

- **Subtext:** Picture book images can relay a story that is different to that being told by the text. Demonstrate this by turning to the page where Mo is asleep in bed and ask students to examine the image closely to see if there is anything to suggest that Mo might not have always lived alone. Ask questions such as who might the lady in the painting above the bed be and why might Mo like having her portrait in his room? The object of this exercise is to provide a scaffold so that students realise that Mo may have once lived with someone he was very close to and that his insistence that he likes to live alone might be a way of dealing with her loss.
- **Comprehension:** Why do you think Mo changed his mind about Crow when he looked up in the sky and saw *Where the wall had been, there was the world.*?
- Look at the double-page spread where Mo finds Crow again and describe what you think he is feeling at that moment. What in the image of Mo and in the text led you to believe that?
- Why might the final image and text be described as a ‘happy ending’?
- Compare the endpapers at the front of the story with those at the end. [Endpapers are the pages that consist of a double-size sheet folded, with one half pasted against the inside cover, and the other serving as the first free page.] Ask students why they think they are not the same?
- **Metaphor:** Older students might be encouraged to think about this story as a broader lesson about allowing into our lives people and things that initially might make us feel uncomfortable. Encourage them to reflect on a time when they were reluctant to do something but discovered it was really wonderful. Examples could be learning to play a sport, going to school for the first time or playing with a new person at school.