

# TEACHING NOTES

## BELLA AND THE VOYAGING HOUSE

MEG MCKINLAY

ISBN (PB): 9781760990695

YEAR LEVEL: Y3–6

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITY: Sustainability

### ABOUT THE BOOK

Bella's house likes to travel, setting sail across the ocean while everyone sleeps. Bella's parents don't mind as long as the house is home by daylight. One night, Bella has a wonderful idea for her grandfather's birthday. She wants to find a figurine he made of her grandmother, which was lost overboard in an accident. Bella and the house go in search of it, but things don't quite go according to plan ...

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meg McKinlay is a children's writer and poet whose work ranges from picture books through to young adult fiction. Her publications include the Prime Minister's Literary Award winning *A Single Stone*, and CBCA-shortlisted *No Bears and Duck for a Day*, among many others. Meg grew up in central Victoria, and spent her childhood roaming through the bush, striking it rich at least once a week on a vein of fool's gold. Raised in a TV-free household, she was a bookish kid, in love with words, excited by dictionaries and spelling bees. These days she lives near the ocean in Fremantle and spends her days writing, reading and rambling. She is always busy cooking up more books.

### THEMES

- Family
- Sailing
- Invention
- Recycling
- Adventure

### AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

Y3–6 English

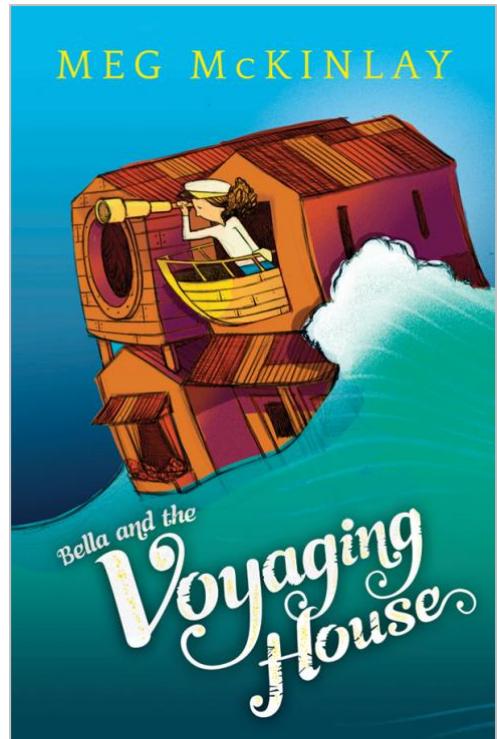
Y3–6 Design and Technologies

Y3–6 Science

Y3–6 Mathematics

### USEFUL WEBSITES

- Author's website: [megmckinlay.com](http://megmckinlay.com)
- Author's Facebook: [facebook.com/megmckinlayauthor](https://facebook.com/megmckinlayauthor)
- Author's Twitter: [twitter.com/MegMcKinlay](https://twitter.com/MegMcKinlay)



## CLASSROOM IDEAS

### Discussion questions

1. What does the word ‘voyage’ mean? Have you ever been on a voyage? Where did you go?
2. Bella loves spending time with her grandad. What do you enjoy most about spending time with your grandparent/s or a special relative?
3. Grandad is always tinkering at his workbench creating new inventions out of discarded items. What do you think he might be building out of metal pipes, an old lawnmower engine, leather belts and the remains of two kites? Make a list of possibilities.
4. Why do you think Bella suspects Grandad would rather repair his clock radio than receive a new one with all the latest features?
5. Bella’s mum declares that ‘a voyage isn’t a present. A present should be a thing, something you can hold onto and keep’ (p. 18). Do you agree? What are some of the advantages of planning an experience as a birthday gift instead of buying an object? Which would you personally prefer?
6. Bella’s parents allow the house to keep voyaging on two conditions – what are they?
7. Bella says, ‘Sometimes when you’ve done something wrong, when you feel bad about something, you want to fix it’ (p. 98). Have you ever felt this way? What did you do about it? Turn to a partner and share.
8. Upon creating his flying contraption and rescuing the house and his family, Grandad declares this birthday to be the ‘best one ever’. What is the best birthday you’ve ever had and what made it so memorable? What is the most unusual birthday present you have ever received?
9. Choose three adjectives to describe each of the following characters: Bella, Grandpa, the house, Mum, Dad. How do Bella’s parents change over the course of the story? What prompts the change in their attitude? Why does Grandad think an adventure is ‘exactly what they need’?
10. If your house went voyaging at night, where do you think it would take you? Why?

### Arts and crafts

1. What do the terms ‘recycling’ and ‘upcycling’ mean? What kinds of materials can be recycled? How does recycling help protect the environment and contribute to sustainable living? Create a poster or pamphlet detailing 10 tips for recycling to share with your school community.
2. Grandad believes ‘You never know ... when something might turn out to be the absolute exact thing you needed’ (p. 10). Bella gives examples such as ‘a pipe you could mould into the perfect statue for the front of your boat’ and ‘a garden stake you could shape into a frame for a photo’ (p. 10). List five creative uses for three everyday objects found in your classroom or home (e.g. a cup can be something to drink from, a container to hold pencils, a musical instrument, etc.). Visit your local recycling centre to see what you can create from discarded items (e.g. an artwork/sculpture, a toy, jewellery, a unique piece of furniture, a gift, a tool, a brand-new invention). Present your recycled creation to your class!
3. On A3 paper, create a map of Bella’s route to find Merry Annie and Little Bella.
4. Illustrate the scene where the house dives below the waves using any medium of your choice (watercolour paints, acrylic paint, oil pastels, pencils etc.).

### Creative writing

1. ‘... maybe they’re going the wrong way for home but the right way for something else’ (p. 104). Where do you think Bella’s parents are heading? Will they find their way home eventually, or will Grandad and Bella have to fly to the rescue? Write the next chapter from the point of view of either Mum or Dad.
2. ‘Which way *did* they want to go ... Straight home ... or do some exploring first?’ (p. 105). Where will Bella and Grandad fly to next? Will Grandad’s invention continue to work perfectly or will it break down? Write the next chapter from the point of view of either Bella or Grandad.
3. Imagine you are invited for a sleepover at Bella’s house and become co-captain of the voyaging house for a night! Where will you set sail? Write a short story describing your adventures.
4. Create a definition for the terms ‘personification’ and ‘simile’. Can you find an example of both in the following excerpt: ‘The house bounded over the fence and across the road and down onto the sand. It waded into the shallows and stood, hopping from side to side like a runner warming up at the start of a race’ (p. 25). How many more examples of simile and personification can you find throughout the book? Can you create some of your own?

## Maritime mathematics

1. What is a compass and why is it so important to be able to navigate on the open sea?
2. Place labels for the four compass points (north, south, east and west) in the four corners of your classroom. Separate students into pairs. Child one must choose a start and end point for child two. Child one must then direct child two using instructions such as ‘two steps east’ or ‘five steps south’, etc. (Note: children are not allowed to go over furniture and must be directed around it.) To make the game harder, use eight compass points (i.e. incorporate north-east, north-west, south-east, south-west).
3. What is a ‘sandbar’? Why does the house avoid it? Why would ‘even one degree ... send them off course ... have them sailing right past the island’ (p. 35)?

## Science at sea

1. What is a telescope? What is a periscope? How does each invention work? Can you build your own telescope like Bella’s? [Go to the ‘Make a telescope’ page on the National Geographic website for instructions.](#)
2. Create a class definition for the term ‘buoyancy’ and conduct a test of everyday classroom objects to see which are buoyant and which are not. Predict the outcome for each before placing it in an ice-cream container filled with water and giving it 10 seconds to float or sink. Design your own miniature voyaging house out of materials you have found to be buoyant. Hold a class competition to see whose house can float for the longest time period!
3. How are submarines designed to be able to travel deep underwater?

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

### **Tell us about your book.**

*Bella and the Voyaging House* is the whimsical tale of a girl whose house just won’t stay put. It’s a standalone story, but also functions as a sequel to *Bella and the Wandering House*, which came out in 2015. In the first book, we learn that the house’s wandering has a purpose: it is partly built from the timbers of Grandad’s old boat and is yearning for the ocean. In this one, the house, together with Bella’s family, is living peacefully by the seaside. The house gets to go sailing while the family sleeps at night, and everyone is happy because they’re always home by morning. But of course, it’s not a story unless a spanner is thrown into the works, which is where Bella’s quest to retrieve Grandad’s precious figurine comes in.

### **How often do you write books in a series? Is it different from writing a standalone novel?**

I don’t see myself as a series writer at all. The only other sequel I’ve done is *Definitely No Ducks!* which followed my earlier book *Duck for a Day*. And although I am currently working on a sequel to another book, in each of these cases, I wrote the first book as a standalone with the impetus to do a second coming much later. With *Bella and the Voyaging House*, I was just sitting on a Fremantle beach one day watching yachts head out from the harbour, and I started thinking about the house – what it would look like on the water, where it would go, what sorts of things could happen out there – and those thoughts gradually gathered momentum until I couldn’t resist doing something with them.

Writing a sequel is different to writing a standalone in a couple of key ways. You might think it’s easier because some of the key elements are already in place – the characters, their relationships, the ‘world’ and logic of the story in a general sense. That’s true in a way and is also something lovely about returning to this world I thought I’d left for good. But in other ways it’s very difficult because you have to make sure that there is a sense of continuity – that you work within the parameters you established in the first book – or find a way of explaining any changes. If you are a sensible writer, you’re thinking ahead to the second book as you write the first and putting the pieces in place to enable a smooth passage across the two stories. But because a sequel is always an afterthought for me, I don’t do this, and so end up having to work with all kinds of tricky constraints. For example, if I’d known I was going to write this second book, I would have been sure to sneak in a mention of the figurine of Grandma in the first and to make sure it was included in the illustrations. In the end, I decided that the boat illustrations were blurry enough that I could get away with it but there were several points where I wasn’t so fortunate, and I had to change what I wanted to write simply because it didn’t fit with what was in the first book.

***What do you hope kids get out of your Bella books?***

Firstly, I hope they enjoy the story! I hope they feel as if they're right alongside Bella – on the balcony of the house, diving below the waves, and soaring high above them. I want them to feel as if they can be the heroes of their own stories, that they can have ideas and take action and manage the bumps along the way. And I'd like to get their imaginations firing, to give them a sense of wonder and possibility about the world around them.

***What positive personality traits do you think Bella embodies? Are you a Bella or a Grandad?***

I see Bella as resourceful and determined, and also hopeful, I think. She's little bit big: she claims her own space. As to whether I'm a Bella or a Grandad – what a thought-provoking question! Maybe I'm a little bit of both, depending on the context. I definitely think I wrote Bella out of my childhood self, though. I was always – and still am – someone who likes to curl up in windows and read, who liked wondering and imagining, and had a pretty strong sense of belief in her own ideas about things. I suspect Grandad as a character comes more from my father, who was, in his own way, a potterer, an imaginer and a maker of things. He was also someone who took the time to see things from a child's point of view, who honoured their way of being in the world. Funnily enough, even though I didn't remember this until long after I'd written the first *Bella*, he also made a periscope for my siblings and I when we were kids!

***This is a story about a quest about bringing something back that's been lost. Why cover this territory in a story for primary-school children? Is this a stepping stone to discussing difficult topics such as grief?***

I actually don't think about it in those terms and didn't set out to write about loss or cover any specific thematic territory of that kind. The idea for Bella to be searching for something lost emerged independently of any consideration for issues or themes. I began with wanting the house to get stuck out on the ocean and that at some point I wanted it to dive deep like a submarine; these were the only things I knew when I started planning the story. So the question becomes how does that happen and why does that matter – why will the reader care? When I write a story, I want all the pieces to work together and for the story to connect intimately to the characters. The reason the house is there must be meaningful to not just the house, but also Bella and, if I can manage it, to Grandad. Trying to think of something that mattered to all three of them led me to the idea of something lost. I think that's something that can resonate with all child readers – who among us hasn't lost something precious? Although I hadn't considered the scope for broader conversations about loss and grief, I can definitely see that parents or teachers could make those connections where helpful for a certain kind of child reader.

***In this book you have a house that gets up, wanders around and goes swimming. How do you make something nonsensical believable?***

*Nonsensical?!* I have no idea what you mean! Surely everyone's house ... all right, okay. I concede that perhaps Bella's house is a little unusual, though I think I prefer the word 'fantastical'. As to the question of believability, I see my job as making that work within the world of the story, but what they carry beyond the page is a separate question altogether. I want readers to enter fully into the story, regardless of its relationship to reality, and that means having an internal logic to the narrative and keeping that consistent. If I say the house has legs, that means it can only do what a legged house might reasonably be expected to do; it can't fly or leap great distances. I'm bending realism, but I'm doing it in ways that adhere to a certain set of rules nonetheless. I think that helps readers to go along with things: a world with parameters is a believable world, even if those parameters are very different to what we're used to. I also think that character is crucial. If readers have a character who seems real, for whom they feel a sense of kinship and empathy, I think they're likely to invest in their journey and follow them into whatever nonsensical/fantastical realm the story sends them to.

***Children often have other important adult figures in their life. Did you have other adults, besides your parents, who played a really important role in your life? Is that an important part of growing up?***

Yes, for sure. I had several teachers who were important – one in particular in primary school who I'll never forget, and who, quite wonderfully, I caught up with last year. Mr Dillon seemed to have this incredible knack for meeting every child on their own terms, for seeing them for who they were and giving them respect on that basis. In doing so, he commanded our respect without appearing to try. He was such a fantastic role model

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that we all wanted to be the best versions of ourselves in order not to disappoint him. Later, when I was a teenager, my father had a friend who was a potter, and though I only met him a few times he became very important to me in a different way. He was such a thoughtful, interesting person, and in hindsight it's clear that he became something of an inspiration to me in terms of how to live a creative life. I do think it's important to have these figures in our lives as children, though we may not recognise their influence until we're much older.

***Is there anything else you would like to share with teachers or students about the book or series?***

Just that the world of Bella and her unusual house grew from a small everyday moment that could easily have passed me by. The only reason these stories exist – in fact the only reason I'm a writer at all – is that I have a habit of letting my strange and random thoughts wander wherever they like, of daydreaming and playing with them and spinning them off into as many surprising directions as possible rather than shutting them down. I highly recommend indulging your own particular strangeness whenever and however you can!

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