

## **The owl who got left behind**

### **Synopsis**

One moonlit night on a faraway beach an owl is mourning the recent departure of his beloved friend who sailed away with a pussycat in a pea green boat. A passing rhino reminds him that there is no point waiting for someone who is not returning, but Owl is attached to his grief and will not give it up. He even wishes the rhino would leave so that he can properly attend to his misery. But the rhino sees that the poor owl needs company, so she stays. This sends Owl into a flurry. What can he do to make Rhino leave? He decides to build himself a boat and sail away so that Rhino will be the one who is left behind, not he. When he is done he turns to show off his beautiful boat and finds that Rhino has finally left. Owl is distressed. How can he sail away, when there is no one to leave behind, or wave good-bye to? Owl throws himself on the ground and weeps, which is how Rhino finds him when she returns. Instead of sailing away Owl begins a new friendship with Rhino.

### **Themes**

This is a story about the tender, fragile and complex dynamics of friendship and relationship. Owl has so entirely succumbed to his own sadness and longing for the relationship that he has lost, that he can no longer see any other possibility. This is a common psychic pattern and we could say that the victim archetype is one that is dominating our popular mythology and politics. In being so absorbed by his own misery and the loss of connection, Owl not only fails to see the world around him, with its lapping sea and tasty mice, he almost misses the possibility of the new connection, friendship or love that Rhino, in her steadfastness, offers him. And yet perhaps it is this steadfastness and care that the flighty Owl needs, just as the Rhino may benefit from the

more adventurous nature of Owl. In this way we see the mutually enhancing equilibrium that friendship between different types can offer. We see also that Owl's self-absorption reduces the scope and pleasures the world can offer him, which becomes a self-perpetuating cycle of misery and that Rhino breaks this cycle by prompting him to act. In acting instead of moping; he changes his own psychic landscape as well as the exterior one. While he builds the boat, he unconsciously begins to value the attention and care that Rhino offers. It is not till Rhino leaves that Owl realises what he has come to value. This also is a common trope. Often our experiences are more transformative than our thoughts. In the building of the boat, we see also a common relational dynamic in which Owl so enjoys the attention that Rhino gives him, that he begins to play up his importance and skill and Rhino, in her generosity, accommodates this showing off.

### **Writing Style**

The book is written in a humorous tone, using simple language. The story takes as a point of departure, a very well known rhyme by Edward Lear, *The Owl and the Pussycat*, which ends with an owl and a pussycat sailing away in a pea green boat. The writing is ironic in its rendering of the miserable state of the left-behind owl. I.e. "poor owl- having two difficult feelings at once and not knowing which one was worse..." The writing is sensitive to the different physical qualities of the main characters and how their characters inform and are informed by the particular animals they are. The Owl for instance, flaps and fidgets and sobs, whereas the Rhino stays, sighs, listens.

### **Author motivation**

I am very aware of the changing dynamics in friendship in which we become at different times both owl and rhino,

depending on the circumstances of our lives. This can be like a sea saw. When I have been very owlish -hysterical and anxious and unconsciously trapped in my own fears or sadness's, I am aware that my close friends become the rhino to my owl, in that they console, support and remind me that this too shall pass. Other times it is I who am rhino to their owl and I'm always pleased to be able to invoke a bit of Rhino when needed. It is stabilising in itself. In this way friendship teaches and gives so much more than it would appear. In having to become rhino, i.e. in having to support, we grow stronger. In having to listen we become more compassionate. When owl, one pushes at the comfort zones and helps expand them outwards. In Owl and Rhino I saw an opportunity to play with those sorts of dynamics. While the story and the drama belongs to Owl, it is Rhino who is the quiet hero and to this extent it's her kindness that is elevated. In these times the capacity to bear witness, to give attention, to listen and to be kind cant be underestimated and I hope in creating a character who some aspects embodies the maternal, we can revivify our understanding and reverence for this aspect of human nature.

### **Author background**

Martine Murray has been involved in the arts as a writer, illustrator, theatre maker, and filmmaker. She studied film at Prahran College and then painting at The Victorian College of the Arts. She was an original member of The Women's Circus and after further study in New York, formed a dance theatre company, *Bird on a Wire* and directed their full length work at the Black Box Theatre, *Contained*. After an injury she started writing and illustrating books for children and young adults. Her first novel *The Slightly True story of Cedar B Hartley* was included in the White Ravens international list of outstanding children's books, and was shortlisted for the Victorian, NSW, Qld Premiers Awards and

the CBC Award. Her books have been published internationally and translated into seventeen different languages. She has won the Queensland Premiers Award for *How to Make a Bird* and again for *The Slightly Bruised Glory of Cedar B Hartley*. She was shortlisted for the Prime Ministers Award for *Mannie and the long brave day*, the CBCA for *Molly and Pim and the millions of stars* and she was awarded two honour books from the 2018 CBCA shortlist, *Marsh and Me* and *Henrietta and the Perfect night*. She has made appearances at literature festivals across the country and overseas, has taught writing at RMIT and currently for the Faber Academy in Melbourne and has recently released an adult novel, *The Last Summer of Ada Bloom*, with Text Publishing.

Anna Read is an artist whose work spans painting, ceramics, music, theatre and garden design. Always deeply committed to and informed by her connection to the natural world, Anna is a founder of *StudioSu* in Castlemaine, Victoria.

## Study notes

The owl in this story is left behind as his friend sails away. There are many ways we might feel left behind. Sometimes it is because we can't keep up. For instance sometimes we can't join in with our older siblings, because we are younger than them and can't play in the same way, or to the same standard. Sometimes we feel left out because everyone is singing a song we don't know. Or sometimes we feel left out of a conversation because we aren't confident enough to join in. We can even feel left out just because we feel or appear different in some way. In what ways have you felt left behind or left out? What does it feel like? Have you seen other

people be left out of the game? How can you help include others who have been left out or left behind?

The Owl is so miserable that he doesn't even notice a tasty mouse or the lapping sea. When we are sad sometimes all we can see is our own sadness and yet the world is there to draw you out and console you with its beauty, its mysteries and ever-changing view. Whatever we put our attention on grows. When you are sad, what do you put your attention on? Are there things that cheer you up? Write a list of all the things that cheer you up when you are sad. Try to make this list into a poem. Make a card for someone with a picture on the front and the poem inside it and then give it to them. How did it make you feel to give this and how was it received?

Rhino plonks herself on her heavy bottom. Owl flaps and fidgets. How has the author used the animal's physical qualities to evoke character? Do you know other books where animals are used in this way? Think about an animal you know, your pet or someone else's or a wild animal. What words describe them? Try to be particular. Use verbs- how does this animal move, sleep, rest, run, and hunt? How would a mouse move for instance, and how would an elephant move. What does this tell us about that animal? Now think about someone you know? Can you also find words to describe them, the way they move, or laugh for instance? Try to find words that tell us something about this person. If you were an animal, what animal would most likely align with you? Can you draw yourself as this animal?

Owls are meant to be wise. In ancient Greece, the goddess Athena who symbolised wisdom was often depicted with an owl next to her. Why do you think Owls were associated

with wisdom? The ancient Greeks thought that owls had an inner light that meant they could see in the night. What is wisdom? Is it something that helps us see what is otherwise unseen by those who aren't wise? Seeing something in the darkness? Having insight? Owls have big eyes which make them look solemn, but which also suggest sight. What is the relationship between seeing and wisdom or insight? Why are older people often the ones we see as being wise? Is it because they have "seen" more of life? Have you had experiences that have "shown" you something about life or disclosed something to you that was otherwise hidden?

A rhino is a keystone species, which means it is considered a vital part of an ecosystem. A beaver for instance is a keystone species because of the way it engineers river ecosystems by taking down old or dead trees to build a dam in the river which create wetlands, which allow other species to grow and flourish. Rhino's are vegetarian, and because they eat so much vegetation, they produce a lot of dung, which fertilises soil and invites in the dung beetles. Birds eat the insects that come to the dung piles. By wallowing in mud puddles Rhino's help to create natural waterholes for other animals. Sadly rhino's are threatened with extinction because they are hunted for their tusks, which are wrongly touted as having medicinal benefits. What is an eco system? Can you think of other animals or insects or plants that both sustain others and depend on others? Can you do a drawing of an ecosystem that shows the connection between animals, plants and even people?

*The Owl who got left behind* is a story of how two animals become friends. Why is friendship important? What do you love about your friend? Can you do a drawing of your friend and write on it all the things you value about them. Perhaps you could give your friend this drawing. Do you like being a friend? Can you imagine befriending someone who is

lonely? Have you ever done this? Using your own experience write a story about making friends.

Rhino is kind to Owl. She stays by him because he is sad. Can we learn to be kind? Could you start a kindness project in your class? You would need to find and look for opportunities to be kind. For instance, if someone is left out, how can you include them? Is there someone who doesn't have a friend? Can you be friendly to them? Can you make it a project so that each week you can try to do three acts of kindness? This could be giving a compliment. Helping someone. Being friendly to someone. Showing an interest in them and their concerns. At the end of the week, each person could talk about their three kind acts and how it made them feel to do this?