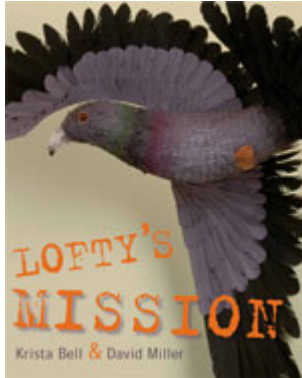


Title: *Lofty's Mission*

Author: Krista Bell

Illustrator: David Miller

Teachers Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright



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INTRODUCTION

Lofty has been bred by a young boy named Harley McNamara who is heartbroken when his father sends the bird to be used as a carrier pigeon by the Australian army involved in conflict in New Guinea during World War II. How Lofty becomes a hero while Harley similarly narrowly escapes death at home, is told in this moving story which, because it is set in a past and dangerous time, also invites young readers on an imaginative journey into history.

Idea is 'all' in story writing. And the idea in this story is two-fold. One idea is the historical background of the war effort and the unusual and unlikely part which homing pigeons played in that. The other is the idea of home, the bond between the boy and the bird, and the boy and his family. Both Harley and Lofty are threatened, challenged, and damaged. But both emerge triumphant.

The fact that the story's visual narrative is executed in exquisite paper sculptures will provide a further source of aesthetic and emotional investigation for readers. For this form of illustration is poetically suggestive of the arcane power of flight – of hope, renewal and overcoming adversity.

TOPICS

Several **topics** are covered in this work which might provoke class discussion:

Ñ **Carrier or Homing Pigeons**

Activity: Pigeons have helped human beings in many ways—as racing birds, as messengers, and as pets. Read about them on websites and in books. Make a list of all the roles which pigeons have played in human endeavours.

Activity: Homing Pigeons were used quite extensively in WWII as messengers. Read about and research this subject, which few would have read about before. An essential resource is the Australian War Memorial website at <http://www.awm.gov.au/> (Krista Bell did some of her research for this book there, as well as visiting the Australian War Memorial archives in Canberra and watching black-and-white archival film from the 1940s.) If you type in the word pigeons in the category of WWII, the site shows you photos of the birds being unloaded in New Guinea, and lots more!

Activity: Watch the DVD of *Valiant*, an animated feature film about the use of such homing pigeons by the RAF in WWII with a British cast including Ewan McGregor, Ricky Gervais (*The Office*), Tim Curry (*Home Alone 2*), Jim Broadbent (*Moulin Rouge*), Rik Mayall (*The Young Ones*), John Cleese, and Hugh Laurie (TV hit *House*). Walt Disney Pictures, 2005. Dir. Gary Chapman Producer: John H. Williams

Activity: Read other picture books which feature birds such as Narelle Oliver's *Home*; or Jeannie Baker's *Home in the Sky*. Locate other picture books on birds and create a classroom display of them.

Activity: Research the training of birds. You might also make your own cage or loft as a class project.

Ñ **History of WWII**

Activity: This story is about ordinary people during war. Even though Lofty is sent to a conflict, it's just as much about those who stayed at home and the sacrifices they had to make as well. Research the effect of war on people in Australia.

Questions: What things did people at home during war have to do without? What jobs did they do which helped with the war effort? What sorts of restrictions were placed on food, petrol etc? Did other animals or birds play any part in the war?

Activity: In your research try and discover a similar aspect of lesser-known WWII history and then write your own story about it. Visit sites such as: 'Just Curious: World Wars' *Suffolk Web* <http://www.suffolk.lib.ny.us/youth/jcssworldwars.html> to assist in your research. Another site includes this fact: *'The youngest US serviceman was 12 year old Calvin Graham, USN. He was wounded in combat and given a Dishonorable Discharge for lying about his age. (His benefits were later restored by act of Congress).'* 'Interesting World War II Facts' *Air Warriors* <http://www.airwarriors.com/forum/showthread.php?t=5897> Wouldn't this make a great story to research?

Activity: The Dickin Medal for bravery by animals is an unusual award. Read and research it and find out what other animals have received it.

Activity: Find a map of New Guinea which shows where the conflicts in WWII took place.

Activity: The glossary at the back of the book contains some useful historical information. Choose any topic raised in the book and research it in relation to WWII in Australia.

Activity: Costumes and hairstyles can give us a sense of how life was lived in a particular time. Examine the pictures and discuss what you notice about clothes etc.

Activity: Another indication of a period is architecture. Study the picture of the hospital wall which is in the Art Deco style. Read about this style of design. Observe buildings in your city which are built in this style.

Ñ Polio

Activity: Harley, the boy in this story, contracts polio, an illness which is virtually eradicated in Australia with immunisation, but which inflicted many people in earlier decades. Read about its history and how a cure was discovered.

Question: Harley will always suffer some ill-effects from polio. What were the effects of polio on people who contracted it?

Question: What is the full name for polio? What is another name for it?

Question: Who were the two men who discovered the injected and oral vaccines used to prevent infection with polio?

THEMES

There are **themes** covered in this work which might provoke class discussion:

Ñ Home

Activity: Lofty is taken away to war, and Harley yearns for him to come home. Then Harley goes to hospital, and also misses his home. Discuss the nature of home and compare this book to other books which trace this theme.

Ñ Rebirth and Hope in Renewal

Activity: Flight is used as a symbol of renewal in this story. Harley breeds Lofty, and then Nifty (Lofty's offspring), to become another potential champion. Harley has recovered from polio, but like Lofty may never be as active again. But they are both able to use their skills nevertheless. Discuss the theme of renewal in this book.

Question: How do the illustrations convey this idea?

Activity: Lofty's mission is actually two-fold. Discuss.

Ñ **Bravery and Overcoming Adversity**

Questions: What constitutes bravery? Is Harley brave? Is Lofty brave? Discuss.

LANGUAGE & LITERACY

Ñ **How a writer opens a story with a ‘hook’** is a pivotal strategy for engaging with a reader. One of the ways to do that is to open with direct speech, as this text does: *‘No dad, please don’t take Lofty! I bred him to be a champion racer!’* Imagine how much less interesting it would have been if this story had begun with: ‘When Harley’s dad came home and told him that his trained pigeon Lofty was going to be sent way to assist with the war effort, Harley was horrified.’

Activity: Discuss interesting ways to open a story. Then write your own opening sentence for this story. For example, another strategy might be opening with a question.

Activity: Research writing and illustrating picture book stories. Use Libby Gleeson’s book *Making Picture Books* (Scholastic, 2003) as your source.

Ñ Unusual words are explained in the **Glossary** of this and other books

Activity: Are there other words in the book which you didn’t understand? eg ambush, gallantry, contrary. The text also includes words which are what are called ‘colloquialisms’ or expressions not used so much today, such as goner, ripper, bonza. Look them up and write your own glossary.

Ñ **Names for pets** often reflect their nature. eg Lofty is a good name for a bird.

Activity: Make up your own list of appropriate names for a pet cat, dog, snake, guinea-pig.

Activity: Once you’ve chosen a name for the pet, try and think of a story to write about that pet, and a title for the story.

Activity: Write a song about Lofty’s Mission.

Activity: Write an acrostic poem about him. eg

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Y

Activity: You could write a haiku poem about his journey as well. A haiku is an unrhymed 17 syllable and three line poem and usually includes a reference to the seasons. The structure is: line 1 - 5 syllables; line 2 - 7 syllables; line 3 - 5 syllables. Example:

Lofty the hero

Superior messenger

His winter has come

Ñ **Homophones** are words with the same pronunciation but different meanings, origins, or spelling e.g. one/won. **Homonyms** are words with the same spelling but different meanings and origins. e.g. Light (to light up a room) and Light (opposite of heavy). [Read Krista Bell’s book *That’s the Trick* to find out more about homophones.]

Question: How many potential homophones or homonyms can you find in *Lofty’s Mission*?

VISUAL LITERACY

Ñ **Collage** is the medium in which this book has been illustrated. David Miller calls his particular technique, though, '**paper sculpture**'. Although other artists use paper sculpture, he is unusual in photographing and translating it into book illustration. Collage often consists of many **textures** such as fabric, wool, or even natural materials as in Jeannie Baker's work. But in Miller's intricate and complex paper sculpture work he uses varieties of paper, including cardboard, foil and tissue paper and then makes it mimic the texture he is depicting. For example, the grey feathers are made out of tissue and the larger black feathers are construction paper which is carefully cut to give the impression of a feathery edge.

Activity: Collect a number of pieces of different types of paper and try to make them look like something else such as a woollen dress.

Activity: Observe the image of Lofty on the cover of this book. Then choose another type of bird and make a collage paper sculpture picture of it.

Activity: Examine picture books by other paper sculptors eg Robert Sabuda. Visit websites by other artists who use paper sculpture. [See **Bibliography**]

Activity: Read other picture books which use **collage** as their medium by Jeannie Baker, Patricia Mullins, Eric Carle, Shaun Tan, Lane Smith; read Kate de Goldi and Jacqui Colley's 'Lolly Leopold' books: *Clubs* and *Billy* (Allen & Unwin); *The Empty City* by David Megarrity and Jonathan Oxlade is another recent Hachette title which employs collage. Also examine classical art by Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse.

Activity: Read *You Can Make a Collage: a Very Simple How- to Book* by Eric Carle (Klutz Press, 1998).

Activity: Create an origami bird as an activity.

Ñ The **3D effect** of collage is created by layering and careful cutting and placing of the pieces.

Activity: Create your own 3D effects by carefully cutting and placing paper foil and cardboard in an image of your choosing.

Ñ **Colours** used in this book are sombre and sepia-coloured to denote the fact that the story is set in the past, and also to suggest the colour of the pigeon.

Activity: Make your own picture using such colours.

Ñ Collage makes the reader very aware of **shapes**. Examine the shapes in this book, and how they can be organic or geometric.

Activity: Visit 'List of Geometric Shapes' *Wikipedia* <http://www.answers.com/topic/list-of-geometric-shapes> Try and identify as many shapes as are listed on this website.

Ñ The **endpapers** of the book depict the feathers on a background of bright orange.

Question: Is there any symbolic significance in the use of this bright colour and the images of feathers here?

Ñ The **final image** in the book depicts the boy and his father watching Nifty flying overhead with the boy pointing skyward.

Question: What does this image imply?

CONCLUSION

This is a book which brings together history, narrative and illustration to provide students with an entertaining introduction to a lesser-known aspect of WWII. Invite your students to join Lofty and Harley on this moving journey with the many activities suggested in these notes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR and ILLUSTRATOR

KRISTA BELL is an award-winning author and full time writer for young people. She also travels around Australia delivering workshops at schools and libraries, and has reviewed books on ABC radio and in print, run literary weekends and written for literary journals. She is the author of the novels *Read My Mind; Get a Life; No Regrets, No Strings, Who Cares?* (winner of the 17th Australian Family Therapists' Award for Children's Literature), *Who Dares?* and *No Tears*. She has also written the non-fiction book about homophones, *That's the Trick*, and titles in Lothian's Start-Ups series *Sniffy the Sniffer Dog* and *If the Shoe Fits*. Krista lives in Kooyong, Victoria, with her husband and three sons. She has a fabulously informative website at <http://www.kristabell.com/>

DAVID MILLER is a Melbourne-based illustrator who specialises in paper sculpture. He has said that the bedroom he shared with his brother 'doubled as their father's sculpture and calligraphy studio. They were always surrounded by art materials and were encouraged to use them.' That is why he makes his sculptures out of paper. 'Much cleaner, much lighter and the colours are endless. I enrich the coloured paper with paint, pencils or oil pastels, cut the paper with scissors and scalpel, bend, fold and glue to make the sculptures. The finished works are photographed in my studio and the photos are used to make the books.' The earliest sculptures he can remember making were small ducks that he made when he was about four years old. He studied advertising art and worked as an art director before starting his own graphic design and illustration studio in a mud brick building in the Yarra valley. His first book was *You Can Make Paper Sculptures*, which was quickly followed by the acclaimed *Boo to a Goose* by Mem Fox. More picture books have followed, including *What's for Lunch?*, *Carousel*, *Just Like You and me*, *Over the Hill and Around the Bend with Granny and Bert and Me* and *Ringle Tingle Tiger* by Mark Austin. *Snap went Chester*, by Tania Cox was shortlisted for the CBCA in 2004. David's *Refugees* was an Honour Book for the CBCA in 2005. His most recent books are *Where There's Smoke* and *Hedley Wheelspin*, both written by Robin Lovell. David lives in Gruyere, Victoria. David has always loved the bush and that's why he is a member of the local volunteer fire brigade. He and his wife Sylvia have three grown-up children and three grandchildren. When his children were small, David wrote and illustrated books just for them. Now his books are for everyone and he has fun drawing with his grandchildren.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates *justified text* writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. She teaches writing for children and young adults at Griffith University (Gold Coast) where she gained her PhD for a thesis on the development of the Australian children's publishing industry. One of her latest publications is *Paper Empires a History of the Book in Australia 1946-2005* (co-edited with Craig Munro) (UQP, 2006). Her most recent articles have been a profile of publisher Rosalind Price for *Magpies* (November 2007), and a celebration of Shaun Tan's work for *The Australian Author* (December 2007).