

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

The Very Blue Thingamajig

Written and illustrated by
Narelle Oliver



The Author: Narelle Oliver

Narelle Oliver was born in 1960, and grew up in Toowoomba, Queensland. Her father was a keen amateur photographer and her mother was a watercolourist and art teacher. As a child Narelle was constantly exposed to the delights of artistic creativity, and not surprisingly she herself enjoyed drawing, painting and reading. A highlight of her childhood was regular family trips into the countryside to gather ideas and material for various artworks.

In her Bachelor of Education degree, Narelle majored in design and printmaking. It was during this period that she discovered the world of contemporary children's picture books. After graduating she taught for several years at the Queensland School for the Deaf, 'living and breathing picture books and sign language'. She also tutored in the Language and Children's Literature courses offered by the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland.

Narelle's first book, *Leaf Tail*, the story of a lizard, was published in 1989. The project took her more than three years to complete. Like most of her books, it was inspired by natural environments she has explored, and her interest in natural history. It was followed in 1991 by *High Above the Sea*, a CBCA Notable Book, and *The Best Beak in Boonaroo Bay*, which was short-listed for the CBCA's Picture Book of the Year in 1994. In 1995 *The Hunt* was published: it won the Picture Book of the Year award in 1996, and was also short-listed in that year for The Wilderness Society Environment Award for Children's Literature. *Sand Swimmers*, published in 1999, was also extremely successful, being short-listed in 2000 for the Queensland Premier's Award and the CBCA's Eve Pownall Award for Information Books, winning the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales Whitley Award (Best Book for Older Readers, 1999), and winning the 2000 Wilderness Society Environment Award. *Mermaids Most Amazing* was a CBCA Notable Book in 2001,

Very Blue Thingamajig 1

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

and more recently Narelle's *Baby Bilby, Where Do You Sleep?* was judged an Honour Book in two sections of the CBCA's 2002 awards—a rare distinction.

Narelle is unusual among Australian illustrators in that she writes all her own books. Interestingly, she is soon to publish a book which she has written but *not* illustrated!—a title in the Omnibus Solo series, *What a Goat!*, which will be illustrated by fellow Queenslanders David Cox.

Narelle lives in Brisbane with her husband Greg, an environment scientist, and their children Jessie and Liam.

About *The Very Blue Thingamajig*

Although it is illustrated in Narelle's hallmark style of hand-coloured linoprints, *The Very Blue Thingamajig* is a significant departure from the more typical Narelle Oliver picture book. Most of Narelle's previous titles have dealt with Australian animals and their environment, often concentrating on specific aspects of natural history such as adaptation and camouflage. Her latest picture book, *Baby Bilby, Where Do You Sleep?* is innovative in that it follows a question-and-answer pattern, using cut-outs to reveal a partial answer which is fully revealed when the page is turned. *The Very Blue Thingamajig* has a similar pattern, but instead uses gatefold or flap pages to reveal the answer—in this case showing the different physical features developed on each consecutive day of a week by the plain, newly hatched thingamajig as he grows. However, the biggest difference between this and Narelle's earlier picture books is that the thingamajig is not an Australian animal, or even a real animal at all, but an entirely imaginary creature. As Narelle says, 'This was a very new direction for me, but lots of fun.'

The main purpose of this picture book is to introduce young children to mathematical concepts, but it does this through the vehicle of a fictional story. The very blue thingamajig, when he hatches from his egg, is 'very blue and very plain', and as such is scorned by the other, more highly developed thingamajigs. The very blue thingamajig then starts to grow, and each day he sports a new feature—on Sunday one twisty twirly tail, on Monday a pair of yellow waxy wings, on Tuesday an odd number of red hideously hard horns, on Wednesday two lots of two ferocious fangs—and so on. In the end the very blue thingamajig is 'not so plain any more', and the other thingamajigs are even more appalled. 'How dreadfully different,' they all mutter. But then our thingamajig sees another thingamajig, all alone. She is attracted to his difference ('How delightfully different you are,' she says), and the two enjoy each other's company, flapping and flipping and flying about 'as high and low as numbers go'.

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

Very subtly, then, the story of the very blue thingamajig shows the wrongness of prejudice and the wonder of accepting and celebrating difference.

Notes for Teachers

The Very Blue Thingamajig is valuable in several ways. With its simple, predictive and repetitive text, it is ideal for developing reading skills. It also provides an excellent base for introducing several basic concepts:

1. Mathematics

Counting, multiplication, and odd and even numbers are introduced in an informal, fun and visual way. Narelle has used a variety of means of expressing numbers: in words; in figures; in illustration; and in varying verbal forms. For example, two is 2 and 'a pair'; 'four' is 4 and can also be 'two lots of two'. There is an 'odd number of red hideously hard horns' (3) but 'an even number of curly whirly hairs' (6). Within each gatefold the look of the relevant number is reinforced with a storm of tiny numbers printed all over the page.

As an extra bit of counting fun, Narelle has introduced another thread of storyline in the cumulative tale of a tiny bird-like creature who builds himself a rocket ship from numbers (beginning with 1, and finishing with 8) and blasts off in it at the end of the book.

2. Days of the week

The look of the thingamajig changes day by day, with each consecutive day of the week clearly indicated. (This could make for a good memory game: What happens on Wednesday? On Friday?)

3. Colours

This is a book whose appeal is in no small part due to its brilliant use of colour. The very blue thingamajig not only gains horns, wings, teeth and so on, but also becomes multi-hued, with physical additions in yellow, red, pink, tangerine and green. The numbers that decorate each gatefold are also in bright primary colours, and children could count the numbers of green 5s, yellow 7s, blue 4s, etc as a counting/colour identification game.

4. Shapes and patterns

As part of the idea of prediction that shapes the entire structure of this picture book, each of the gatefold pages features a different repeating pattern that reflects which new physical attribute of the thingamajig it will reveal. Children will enjoy guessing from this pattern what feature the thingamajig has grown—tail, teeth, wings—thus reinforcing their ability to recognise and understand the concepts of both regular and random shapes and patterns.

Very Blue Thingamajig 3

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

Publisher's Note

With her wide experience as a teacher of young children, a mother and an artist/illustrator, Narelle Oliver has created a picture book that is fun, colourful, entertaining and a useful teaching tool. Its various elements have been put together with a great deal of care and thought, with a teacher's eye to stimulation and education, and a creator's eye to visual appeal and enjoyment. Of course the story can be read simply for its appeal as a story—but there are so many more levels to it, and adults and children will enjoy discovering them all.

The poor very blue thingamajig is ostracized by the other thingamajigs because he is so plain and boring. But his life changes when one day, he grows a twirly tail, and then every day after, some new, strange physical feature. Award-winning Brisbane author has also written 'The Hunt', 'Baby Bilby, Where Do You Sleep?' and 'Mermaids Most Amazing'.