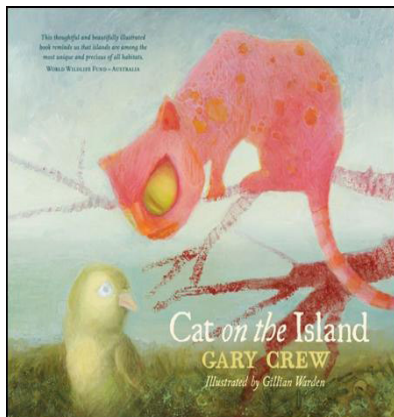


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Cat on the Island

Written by Gary Crew

Illustrated by Gillian Warden

TEACHING NOTES

**Prepared by
Christy Fulcher & Suzie Hicks**

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Teacher's Notes by Christy Fulcher and Suzie Hicks

*'The island rose out of the ocean like a blue-green jewel.
Covered in cedar forest, it was. And birds – I never saw
so many birds.'*

About *Cat on the Island*

Stephens Island is a small land mass situated between the north and south islands of New Zealand. This fern covered wilderness was scarred by humans in the late 1800's when vegetation was cleared and habitats destroyed to make way for a lighthouse and the lighthouse keeper's family. The Stephens Island wren was a flightless, insect eating nocturnal native of the island which became extinct in 1894 due to the lighthouse keepers pet cat ('Tibbles') which was pregnant when it arrived on the island. This is the only recorded instance of one species being solely responsible for the extinction of another species.

Cat on the Island is the telling of this historical environmental disaster by a fictional old man to his grandson. Told on a rainy day, the grandfather shares the story of when his father got a job as a lighthouse keeper and took his family to live on the island. 'Tibbles', the family cat, went to the island as well however she was pregnant and her babies grew to be feral inhabitants of the island. Being flightless, the Stephens Island wrens were an easy target for the

cats and became extinct within two years of the introduction of cats to the island.

This is a chilling story told with the deep regret of hindsight which reminds us of the irreparable damage man can inflict on nature by even the smallest of changes to the natural balance.

About the Author

GARY CREW

Gary Crew is a multiple award winning author of a prolific array of picture books and books for young adults. Notable works include young adult novels *Strange Objects* (1991) and *Angel's Gate* (1993), and picture books *The Watertower* (1994) and *Memorial* (2000).

Gary describes himself as an 'environmentally green adult' who is aware of the environmental issues that affect our planet. It is this awareness that inspired him to speak to children by writing about environmental issues 'in a way that children could access'.

Through *Cat on the Island*, Gary illustrates the catastrophic ramifications even slight physical changes can have on an ecosystem, as well as the disastrous effects of irresponsible pet ownership. Gary's uses his passion for the survival of the natural environment to guide his subject choice.

This is his first collaboration with illustrator Gillian Warden. He is currently working on an innovative science fiction picture book with new illustrator Jeremy Reston entitled *To the Distant Stars*.

Dr Gary Crew is also currently employed as the Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast.

About the Illustrator

GILLIAN WARDEN

Cat on the Island is Gillian Warden's first published picture book. She began her artistic career as a Graphic Designer and exhibits regularly through solo exhibitions of her paintings. She describes *Cat on the Island* as a 'tough, sad story' and has used her background in graphic design to communicate strong, beautiful painted illustrations through uncomplicated imagery with dominant shapes. Her purposeful choice of loud colours reflects her belief that this is a story that 'needs to be heard'.

For more information about Gillian Warden and to view her work visit www.gillianwarden.com.au

Readership

Middle years students

Themes

- Human impact on the environment
- Habitats, communities and food chains
- Responsible pet ownership

Suggested Learning Experiences

Science

Habitat, Communities and Food Chains

Discuss the impact of an introduced species on a natural habitat. Students study food chains and determine the effects of adding or removing a link in the chain.

Scientific Process

Students study the impact of the domestic/ feral cat on the native ecosystem in their local area.

Thinking Processes

Philosophical community of inquiry

Students discuss topics from a philosophical point of view, such as, 'Human impact on the environment is as natural as the impact of any other animal that is at the top of a food chain'.

English (Reading/Writing)

Pet Ownership

After reading *Cat on the Island*, discuss responsible pet ownership. Could responsible pet ownership have prevented the extinction of the wren? How? What is the difference between pet animals and feral animals? Discuss the domestication of the cat in terms of desexing and restraining as responsible ways of reducing a pet's impact on the natural environment.

Letter Writing

Students assume the role of a concerned local and write to an environmental group to report the impact of the cats on the wren population.

Comprehending the Text

Who do you blame for the extinction of the wren? Who do you think the author feels is responsible? How can you tell?

Visual Literacy

Look at the faces of the people in the illustrations. What emotions are they experiencing? How can you tell?

Look at the colours used in the illustrations. What is the illustrator communicating through the use of colour? Find examples of calm and aggressive illustrations. How are these effects created?

What effect does the size and position of objects and characters on the page, and their framing, create?

How do the images change as the story develops?

Make students' thinking visible by using the 'see/ think/ wonder' approach to selected pages in the book:

- What do you see?
- What do you think about that?
- What does it make you wonder?

Speaking and Listening

Debate

Students present a case for and against the following aspects of the story:

- The cats are to blame for the death of the birds
- Human development is always destructive to the natural environment
- The extinction of a species due to human interference is acceptable if we learn from it
- Domesticated and feral cats are one and the same

Visual Arts

Gillian Warden describes her technique for illustrating *Cat on the Island* in the following way:

'I begin by sourcing relevant imagery which I scan into Photoshop. Using Photoshop, I cut and paste bits and pieces of the pictures together (like a collage) and work out basic shapes, colours and composition. When I am satisfied, I copy an outline of that picture onto canvas or board and start loosely filling in with paint. I develop the images by daily applying layers of paint as the image suggests. The process is like an ongoing conversation between me, picture and paint and together we transform sourced material into an original idea.'

Elements of these techniques may be explored by students as a personal pictorial response to the text. Integrating ICT learning is integral to this approach.

Performing Arts

Tableau

In groups, students choose four key moments from the story and tell the story through tableau, aiming to communicate meaning and emotion through still poses.

Using Pictures from the Text

Students choose one illustration from the text and consider the following questions:

- What do you see?
- What do you think?
- What do you wonder?

In groups of three, students are given ten minutes to develop a performance to present to the class that incorporates their responses to the picture. Students should be given the freedom to use whatever dramatic elements they see fit.

Additional Resources

<http://www.terrannature.org/wren.htm>

Provides information about the Stephens Island wren and other flightless birds native to New Zealand

<http://maps.google.com/>

Shows the location and size of Stephens Island, situated between the North and South Islands of New Zealand

http://lighthouses.net.au/nz_lights/stephens_island.htm

Specific images of the lighthouse on Stephens Island

<http://www.rspca.org.au/>

Links to responsible pet ownership

<http://www.wwf.org.au/>

The World Wildlife Fund website for the conservation of endangered species

<http://www.wilderness.org.au/>

The Wilderness Society website provides information on natural ecosystems and ways to preserve them