

RECOMMENDED FOR

Lower and upper primary and lower secondary

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TYPE OF TEXT

Picture book

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- English: language, literature and literacy
- History: Historical knowledge and understanding; Historical skills
- Art

THEMES

- Exploration and discovery
- First Europeans in Australia
- Indigenous history

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MEET CAPTAIN COOK

Rae Murdie & Chris Nixon

PLOT SUMMARY

Captain James Cook was an explorer in the British Royal Navy.

In 1768 Captain Cook and his crew on the *HMB Endeavour* set sail from England in search of new lands and scientific knowledge.

Meet Captain Cook is the story of how Cook and his crew discovered the east coast of New Holland (Australia) on that voyage, and claimed it for the King of England.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RAE MURDIE is an editor based in Sydney. After finishing a harrowing law degree, she decided to retreat into the wonderful world of children's books, where anything can happen. This is Rae's first picture book.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

CHRIS NIXON is an illustrator and designer based in Perth, Western Australia. His work is influenced by surf, skate, music and contemporary pop culture with an emphasis on the hand-drawn form. Accompanying his commercial work, Nixon has created several large scale artworks which have been installed around the state. In addition to his commercial illustration, Nixon has been published in over 10 children's books. In 2011 Nixon was named in the top 100 New Creatives by CMYK Magazine.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

1. Can you tell us a little bit about your research for *Meet Captain Cook* and the resources you used?

Researching a subject is always the most fun for me at the beginning of every project. I borrowed armloads of books from the library, consulted authoritative websites and even spoke to experts, such as the librarians at the Australian National Maritime Museum. The really interesting part of my research, though, was reading the journals of Captain Cook and Joseph Banks – I literally read their side of the story!

2. Did your opinion of Captain Cook change or deepen as you wrote the book?

I didn't really have much of an opinion about Captain Cook when I began this project. However, I grew to really admire and respect him for what he achieved in his lifetime. He came from a poor family and was mostly self-taught, rising through the naval ranks and becoming a captain through his own initiative and hard work. He was known to be fair and was highly respected by his peers. Most of all, I was impressed by how brave he was to explore the seas at a time when most of the Earth was still unmapped and when navigational instruments were still inaccurate – when you could be lost at sea and perish from lack of food and water, when ships could succumb to dangerous weather, or the crew could encounter hostile and violent inhabitants of foreign lands.

4. What was the most challenging part of the project?

It was hard to choose what to include in the story. There are so many interesting facts and anecdotes about Captain Cook, his crew and their journey aboard the Endeavour. For example, did you know that the cook on the ship, John Thompson, only had one hand? And that the Tahitians were very nifty pickpockets?

5. What was the most rewarding part of the project?

Seeing Chris Nixon's wonderful illustrations bring my words to life was incredibly exciting. Not only are they beautiful, they are playful and imaginative – who would have thought to create a whale-shaped cloud!

ILLUSTRATOR INTERVIEW

1. As well as books, you do illustration for lots of different mediums, including large outdoor murals. What are the main differences between illustrating picture books and your other illustration work?

I've realised that the scale and execution really don't matter that much and it's more about the creative process. I know I'm really lucky to be able to switch between the scales and I love the fact that I can work for a while in the studio and then get outside and paint. I think designers can become too reliant on digital tools and lose some of that spontaneity in their craft so I try to avoid this by switching up jobs regularly and never getting too stuck on one scale. The process is essentially the same - stemming from an idea then developing from sketches towards the final execution. With picture books, there's just a lot more involved as far as pre-production work - characters, setting design, style development etc. and there's much more involvement by the publisher in the decision making process. I treat picture books as a series of stills from a film, where the film would be telling the story in an animated motion form, so there needs to be a common thread and consistency in style across all the spreads to help tell the narrative and engage the reader. I guess the picture books are more like a collection of images with a common thread telling a narrative, whereas my other illustration work is often a one-off piece.

2. This is a historical book, based on a real person and story. Did you have to do a lot of research to get the historical details right, such as how people looked and what they wore? Were you surprised by how much/little material there is out there about Captain Cook and his voyage?

I did do a lot of my own research and was also helped out by the editor. My work is quite stylised and that's the way I wanted to represent the characters and the setting whilst still making it recognisable as that particularly period and place. I was surprised at the lack of information out there. I had to dig a fair bit to get consistent reference material which I thought was strange considering the impact and profile of Cook and the *Endeavour*. He was a brilliant and courageous explorer with a controversial legacy and I really wanted the reader to make up their own mind about the character and to the decisions made on the voyage. My stance was to take a neutral viewpoint and let the reader decide what they thought of him.

3. What mediums did you use to create the art? Can you explain a little bit about your process?

I used a combination of ink work, acrylic and digital. I will work up the composition using traditional methods as much as possible - painting and sketching outlines and then I will scan them in and colour digitally compositing paint textures to give it a hand crafted feel. This gives me the most control over the look and still enables me to make quick edits if I need to - perfect for working on picture books!

4. What was the most challenging part of the project?

I would say getting the characters and the tone right. Once I established the neutral stance I wanted to take, I went about getting the characters designed as a set starting with Cook as the leader. Once I had this sharp sparrow-like look to him I could follow this as a style guide for the rest of the crew. I went the complete opposite way with the indigenous people, looking to create strength in their fluidity and muscular figures. They are shown to be much leaner yet I wanted them to look like they were strong and could hold their own. The English obviously had stronger weapons and were quite forceful, but I wanted it to seem as if it was all foreign and reasonably even so the audience could make their own decisions about the story. I definitely didn't want to shy away from the conflict between the English and the Indigenous Australians, though, and in fact I wanted to do the opposite and highlight these meetings to show the clashes in culture and experience.

5. What was the most rewarding part of the project?

It's been a big break between picture books for me so it was great to work in the medium again. I think the

most rewarding part was getting the characters right and then seeing them come to life in the illustrations. It was quite a quick process so I could ensure consistency with the style. It was a challenge and I definitely learnt a lot about Cook and the history of the *Endeavour* so it was a really rewarding project for my own growth.

6. Did your opinion of Captain Cook change through the course of the project? How?

I would say it changed from my opinion before I took on the project. My opinion before was that he was quite heroic and brave but I guess I was uneducated about the controversial aspects of his voyage. There was definitely a gap between what I learnt at school and what I researched for this project which is why I wanted to help get the information out there and let the reader decide for themselves. It takes a very courageous individual to sail across the world in search of the unknown and that alone should be admired. I think it's inspiring for readers to see it this way and acknowledge all aspects of the story.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. What does the front cover of *Meet Captain Cook* tell you about the book?

- Who is the subject of the book?
- Who is the author?
- Who is the illustrator?

2. Does the back cover give you more clues about the book?

- Does the blurb explain why Captain Cook is holding a telescope on the front cover?
- In what time period do you think the book is set?
- What does the blurb tell you about why Captain Cook is an important figure in Australian history?

3. What do you already know about Captain Cook and the great explorers of the Eighteenth Century? Make a list and add to it as you read the book.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY KEY LEARNING AREAS

English

- Story grammar: Create a simple story map of the key elements in the narrative: Setting; characters; beginning, middle and end (See Worksheet 1).
- The story is set in the late-1700s. List some of the words in the text, and the objects in the illustrations that give you a clue that the book

is set in the past (e.g. clothes, modes of transport, Captain Cook's mission to learn more about science and the world). Are any of these words or objects still used today? What are the modern equivalents of these words and objects?

- There is a timeline at the back of the book with facts about Captain Cook's life. How is the language in this section different from the rest of the book?

History

- At the time when Captain Cook and the *Endeavour* set out on their maiden voyage, they didn't know what lands existed in the southern continent. It was the job of people like Cook to find new lands and to map them on behalf of the King of England. It was a race against explorers from other countries, who also wanted to claim new lands on behalf of their nations. The West coast of Australia had already been discovered by the Dutch. Imagine how different our history would be if we had been discovered and settled by Holland rather England.
- As an apprentice in the Royal navy, James Cook studied maths, astronomy and science. Why do you think he needed these skills in order to become an explorer in the navy? Think about what he would have had to guide him on his journey—no map, no phone or computer.
- Imagine going to a new place and having no maps or signposts or Google or GPS to guide you. Think of a journey you make often (to school, to your friend's house, to visit your grandparents) and map out the course someone would have to follow to get there.
- The first part of Captain Cook's mission was to travel to Tahiti to observe the transit of the planet Venus across the sun. He was to do this on behalf of the King of England and to report back to the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge. This was at a time when scientists were still trying to figure out how the world worked. Have a discussion about early scientific myths (the world is flat, for example) and why it was so important to build and test our knowledge of the world. Discuss the impact of those scientific discoveries on the knowledge we have of our world today.
- Captain Cook was born in Yorkshire in England. He was the second of eight children.

His father James was a farm labourer and his mother's name was Grace. Although Captain Cook had six children, none of them produced grandchildren so he has no direct descendants. Starting with your grandparents, create a family tree of the people in your family.

- We are lucky to know a lot about Captain Cook from the journals and accounts he kept of the *Endeavour's* maiden voyage. We also have the journals and the drawings of the botanist Joseph Banks. These documents are now preserved in museums. Why is it so important to learn about history through first-person accounts? Choose an important event or memory in your life and write about it in a series of diary entries or letters.
- From 1644 to 1824 the continent of Australia was referred to as New Holland. Dutch explorer Abel Tasman gave it this name when he discovered the West Coast in 1644. The name was changed after British settlement in 1788. Also in the book, Tahiti is referred to by its earlier name of King Georges Island. Research other countries whose names have changed. Make a table comparing the historical names and the current names.
- The book touches on the reception Captain Cook and his crew received from the indigenous population when they reached the east coast of New Holland. The Englishman did not know anything about the customs and lifestyle of the indigenous people. Today we know a lot more about how indigenous Australians lived before European settlement. Research key aspects of their lives, such as how they hunted for food and lived in tribal groups.

Art and Visual Literacy

- *Meet Captain Cook* uses both images and text to tell the story of the *Endeavour's* journey to the east coast of Australia. How does the story change if you read the text only? Or look at the pictures only? How do the text and illustrations work together to tell the story?
- Have a look at the colours the illustrator has used throughout the book. Note the contrast between the colours when they are at sea, in Tahiti and then in Australia. What do the colours tell you about the changing landscapes? Look also at the way the illustrator uses colour to depict changes in weather.

WORKSHEET 1: SIMPLE STORY MAP

Book title:

Author:

Illustrator:

Characters:

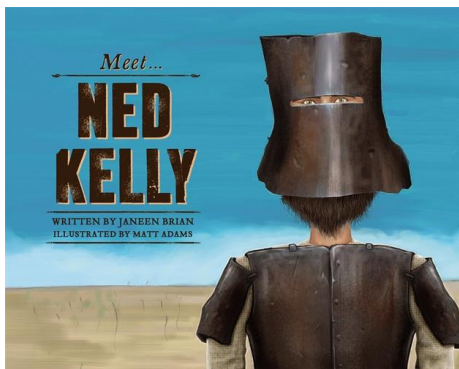
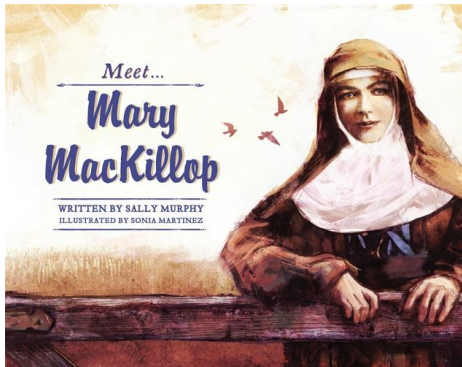
Setting:

Beginning

Middle

End

OTHER BOOKS IN THIS SERIES



COMING SOON

- *Meet the Anzacs*
- *Meet Edward Mabo*