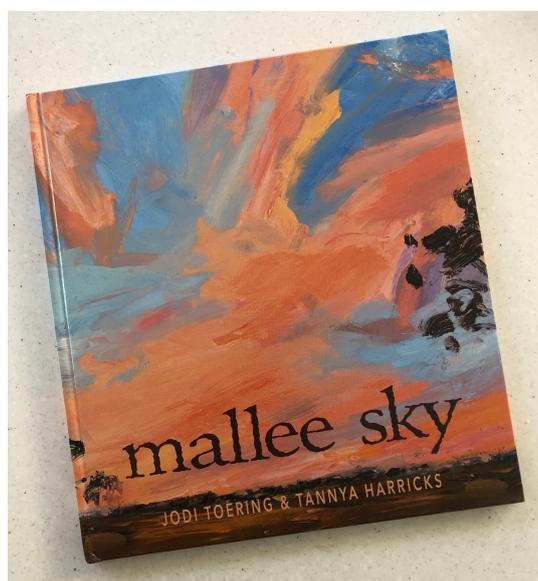




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Interacting through Reading No 2: Mallee Sky



Lesson Sequence Overview

[Mallee Sky](#) by Jodi Toering and Tannya Harricks (2019, Walker Books) is a poetic picture book describing the Mallee region of northwestern Victoria, Australia. Through both exquisite words and illustrations, it captures the vast spaces, heat, blue skies, unique landscape and communities and how both the land and its people are effected by drought.

The following learning sequence has been designed to maximise interaction and engagement with the book and to connect to the experiences and understanding of different places which may not be part of student experiences. Students are supported through carefully designed tasks before, during and after reading the text. Through the strategies and interactions, learning has been designed to link reading and writing through use of the teaching and learning cycle (Derewianka & Jones, 2016 and Rossbridge & Rushton, 2015).

It is necessary to read the book several times before implementing the sequence. The following table summarises strategies designed for interacting with the book.



Before Reading	During Reading	After Reading	Writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Slow reveal• Predicting subject matter• Investigating setting• What's the purpose?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading without interruption• Reread with think alouds• Reread whole text	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Freeze frame• Identifying participants• Painting	<p>Purpose: to describe</p> <p>Form: prose</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Modelling / text deconstruction• Joint construction• Independent construction

Before Reading

Slow reveal

Display the front cover of [Mallee Sky](#) but have the bottom 75% covered. Ask students to share what they see whilst revealing slowly. Just before revealing the title ask students to predict the title of the book and why it might be placed in the bottom quarter of the cover. Guide students to think about why the image, colours and patterns are so dominant. Reveal the remainder of the front cover including the title. Discuss what was predicted and what was surprising. Ask students if anyone has heard the word 'mallee' before. Note that it is not capitalised as in a proper noun. Discuss why this might be.

Predicting subject matter

Tell students that the book is about a natural disaster. Provide small groups with images of a bushfire, heatwave, drought, flood, storm etc. Ask groups to rank these based on the probability that they are the topic of the book. Return as a whole class and ask students to share and justify their rankings. They will draw on predictions so far and also their own background knowledge and experience.





Open up to show the front and back cover of the book and read the blurb on the back. Link to earlier predictions. In small groups ask students to record:

Who or what might take part? (noun groups)

What might happen? (verb groups)

What setting or other circumstances might exist across the book? (adverbials)

Investigating the setting

Tell students that the book is set in the Mallee region in north-western Victoria. Locate the area using [Google maps](#). Point out that the Mallee goes to the New South Wales and South Australia borders. Also note the proximity of the Murray River and Victorian towns in the Mallee including Buloke, Gannawarra, Mildurra, Swan Hill, Hopetoun and Beulah. Ask students what they notice about the terrain in this corner of Victoria. Ask how knowledge of the setting might influence their predictions about the book.



What's the purpose?

Share information about the author and illustrator. [Jodi Toering](#) was born in the Mallee at Hopetoun and grew up on a wheat farm outside a small town called Beulah. She has always loved stories, reading and drawing and writing. She lives on a bush block with her husband, children and many animals. [Tannya Harricks](#) is an award winning artist who lives in Sydney. She paints from sketches done out in landscapes and develops paintings in her studio using oil paint. Based on what students know so far ask them to predict the motivation of the author and illustrator and the purpose of the book, as well as the impact they believe the writer and illustrator might want to have on the reader.

During Reading

Reading without interruption

Read the whole text without interruption. Preferably the book is read by the teacher or a reading can be found on [YouTube](#). If using the YouTube clip, turn the volume down and read the text to students. After reading, confirm predictions and share responses. Play the [YouTube](#) clip again with the volume up. Ask students how the background music changes their response to the text.

Reread with think alouds

Reread 'Mallee Sky' using think alouds. For example:

- I notice on the title page that the sky is missing. I wonder why, when it is so strong on the cover (p1).
- Clearly the sky is dominant on the opening double page spread but I notice it has stronger colours to the cover. I also see that the author has acknowledged the first people of the Mallee and has used their language for naming Country. As in the image, its name and the image both show how important the sky and sunset are in this setting (p2-3).
- The next spread focuses on the sky as well but describes it at night. I think the narrator is referred to as 'me'. Perhaps this is the boy laying with the dog looking up at the sky (p4-5).
- Each double page describes a different aspect of the Mallee but the sky and/or sun are always evident. The appearance of the sky changes throughout the images. I notice the participants are non-human in the written text as they include aspects of the landscape, seasons, weather and so on. Also, human participants are not shown in the images although sometimes I can see a car in the distance. I wonder why nature sometimes takes on human actions and behaviour. I wonder why this choice was made (p6-13).
- Mum and Dad are now named in the written text along with particular repeated events (eg dust storms and wind) that never cease to end (p14-17).
- I think the unrelenting effects of the drought are described (p18-19).
- Human participants begin to be named in the written text although they are not specific - friends, people. They are also not specific in the image that is a wide shot from a high angle, taking in a whole town (20-21).
- The sky suddenly changes to a grey colour as more humans are introduced into the images and the use of the pronoun 'we'. I think the boy might be the student in the middle (p22-23).
- I notice as the rain falls, from this point the colours in the images begin to change. This reflects the change for the human and non-human participants, however, the humans now seem to be in every image. Maybe this reflects that they have more control now that the drought has broken (p24-29).
- The final double spread is the image from the cover. It is bright and looks warm again. I wonder if it's a sunset or if the weather is about to change again (p30-31).

Reread the whole text

Read the whole text again without teacher interruption. Students may wish to add their own responses during this reading. The text may be read several additional times throughout the lesson sequence.

After Reading

Freeze frame

Remind students that in the earlier stages of the text the human participants tended to not feature in the written text in particular. Place students into pairs and reread the text, pushing the pause button at certain points so students create a freeze frame or still image (See Ewing et al 2016 and [UK Drama Resource](#)). The images can be made quickly without discussion – or they can be planned and rehearsed. The freeze frame should represent the human response to the conditions across the text. After making freeze frames ask students to discuss how their reactions changed across the book.



Identifying the role of non-human participants

Walk through the images in the text and identify the main non-human participants across the text (eg, the land, the sun, the sky, the gum trees, the rain). Revisit the text and locate noun groups/adjectivals naming and describing these participants by linking these to the narrative stages of the text as in the table below.

Discuss aspects such as the following:

- how the role of participants changes across the narrative
- some participants, eg. land and sky are described differently as the narrative progresses
- the gum trees act as a gauge of the effect of the drought over time
- the negative description of the sun remains constant
- the rain is described in detail as it serves as the resolution to the drought.



Non-human participants	Orientation (p2-5)	Foreshadowing complication (p6-11)	Complication (12-21)	Resolution (22-31)
the land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the land the Mallee "Nowie" the mallee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the Mallee this country the red dirt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the red dust parched paddocks parts of the farm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> carpets of green beneath the laden sky seas of barley and wheat the Mallee sky
the sun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the sun 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the unforgiving sun 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the sun relentless unrelenting sun 	
the sky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the inky sky strange wonderful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the summer sky big and blue the blue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the selfish blue the bright blue Mallee sky 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> blue grey
the gums		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the hollows of vast gums the eucalyptus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ancient gums grey ghostlike a memory of themselves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> dry gums
the rain				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a sound strange drumming the rains hot wet rain the smell of long awaited rain the best smell in the world

Painting

In addition to the images used for the rank order before reading, display a range of images of natural disasters and landscapes. Show students other art works by the illustrator [Tannya Harricks](#) and discuss her technique of drawing first and then using layers of oil paint and strong brushstrokes. Also discuss the effect of colour and the dominance of features such as the sky or landscape. Ask students to draw and then paint their own landscape/natural disaster focusing on the representation and role of non-human participants. Once complete students share their painting and explain the participants and their role.

Writing

Modelling / text deconstruction

Select a descriptive section of text from [Mallee Sky](#), for example, 'Heat shimmers ...'
Display the text and have the following already identified:

- the participants (noun groups)
- the happenings/processes (verb groups)
- the details or circumstances, eg. where, when, how (adverbials)

Identify the participants named with noun groups. Identify the process they undertake and discuss if the participants are 'actors' or 'sensors'. Some examples like 'the scrub sighs' can be discussed as an example of personification where a non-human participant takes on human actions. Discuss the effect on the reader and how the choices develop a description of the drought. See [The use of Model Texts in the Context of Natural Disasters \(PETAA 2020\)](#) and [Rossbridge 2020](#) for an example of how to talk out the text.

Heat shimmers and the bitumen melts.
The red dirt cracks; the scrub sighs, still and thirsty.

Joint construction

Select an image of a natural disaster/landscape. This may be a photo or art work. Remind students of how Jodi Toering made careful choices in naming non-human participants and the processes they undertook. Sometimes this included personification as features of nature took on human actions. On the image jointly label the non-human participants and then add the process they were involved in as either actors or sensors. From this planning, draft a description that conveys the feelings of the disaster for the reader. Reread and consider other choices by reviewing. Students can do this in pairs and then share their contributions to review the whole class joint construction.

drench invade gulps
angry clouds strains
sob brittle grass
attack absorbs grabs
holds horizon
divides fights dusty backroad
breathes waits sleeps

The purpose of joint construction is to handover to the students so there should be 50/50 participation between the teacher and students. This will require the teacher to facilitate the writing but in particular the conversation about the text based on the modelling and metalanguage used in the modelling/deconstruction lesson. This can be achieved through thinking aloud, posing open questions and pausing to invite students into the conversation. Other strategies such as think, pair, share and writing ideas on mini whiteboards as well as sharing the pen are useful for ensuring joint participation in the process.

Independent construction

Students use post it notes to label their natural disaster/landscape painting with noun groups naming non-human participants and then possible action or sensing processes to develop a description for the reader. Students then use ideas in their planning to write their own description. After writing, students provide feedback in pairs and then review their own texts. For students needing additional support, continue with small group joint construction or pair/group writing.

References

Derewianka, B & Jones, P (2016) *Teaching language in context* [2nd Ed.], Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Ewing, R, Simon, J, Hertzberg, M & Campbell, V (2016) *Beyond the Script: Take 3*. PETAA, Sydney.

Farmer, D (2021) Drama Resource <https://dramaresource.com>

PETAA (2020) *The use of Model Texts in the Context of Natural Disasters*. Leading with Literacy Conference 2020 Highlights. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPgSjFeQQ_I

Rossbridge, J & Rushton, K (2015) *Put it in writing*. PETAA, Sydney.

Rossbridge, J (2020) [Using grammar to link reading and writing](#).

