

**Title:** *Mending Lucille*

**Author:** J.R. Poulter

**Illustrator:** Sarah Davis

*Teachers Notes* by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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## INTRODUCTION

Mummy has gone away, and now there's no one to mend Lucille. Daddy can't help. And a horrible girl suggests that Lucille is just a dirty old doll! Then Daddy meets Chrissie who is not only lovely, but is able to stitch Lucille back together again. And perhaps she helps to mend the heart of a very sad little girl as well.

This is a warm evocation of the child's experience of loss, and how pain can be healed with a loving hand. It's beautifully illustrated in a photo-realistic style which also evokes the child's impressions of the world in suggestive imagery and symbolism.

## THEMES

Several **themes** are covered in this work:

- **Feelings**

**Activity:** Dolls are favourite toys. Discuss the feelings you have for your favourite toy. What does it mean to you? What does it remind you of? Write a brief description. **Question:** What other books are about favourite toys? eg *Dogger* by Shirley Hughes. Read some of them in class and compare them to *Mending Lucille*. **Question:** When Daddy says to the little girl who has brought him the injured bird, 'It's not your fault' is he simply referring to the bird or to something else?

- **Grief and Loss**

**Question:** Has the mother in the story died, or has she left the family? **Question:** Have you ever lost something you loved? Write how that made you feel.

- **Memory**

**Activity:** The child in the story associates her mother with leaving on a plane. What other memories does she have of her? Can you find any evidence of her in the pictures?

- **Families**

**Activity:** Discuss blended families and step-parents.

## LANGUAGE & LITERACY

Read the text aloud in class. Then consider some aspects of the writing:

- This description uses **alliteration** 'A *raging and roaring and rolling in the sky like a storm...It was my Mummy...going.*'

**Activity:** Write a description of your feelings, using alliteration like this.

**Activity:** The story is told in first person. Try to write it in third person instead. How would that change the story?

**Activity:** Find two **synonyms** for the following words which appear in this picture book.

<b>Mending</b>	eg Repairing	
<b>Raging</b>		
<b>Broken</b>		
<b>Hurt</b>		
<b>Better</b>		

**Activity:** Write an acrostic poem about Lucille.

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## VISUAL LITERACY

**Examine the illustrations.** The design of the book includes all the visual aspects and features listed below:

- **Medium:** The artwork in this book is 'photo-realistic'. The artist paints images based on pictures of real people. **Activity:** Take a photo of someone and then try to draw and paint a picture as close to the photographic image as possible. Examine other picture books which use this medium eg *Lucy's Bay* by Gary Crew and Gregory Rogers; or Anne Spudvilas's and Li Cunxin's *The Peasant Prince*.

- **Format:** Images alternate from the double page spread to smaller 'snapshots' of details. **Activity:** Paint a large picture and then choose three details from it to draw in three tiny vignettes which reveal more than is shown in the main frame. How does this enhance the telling of a story?
- **'Close Reading'** of pictures is important as they often contain suggestive images which aren't immediately obvious. **Question:** On the fourth double page spread in the book where the little girl is asking Daddy to mend Lucille what does the torn paper image in the centre depict? **Question:** On the opening page of the book the picture of the little girl is opposite three little images. What do these images suggest? **Question:** Look closely at the picture of the little girl meeting another girl when she and daddy are driving in the truck. There are tiny words written in the background of the picture. What are they part of? **Question:** Look closely at the image of the dolls' house with Lucille perched on top of a toy animal. What do the three little figures depict? **Question:** In looking at the picture of the little girl letting the bird fly into the sky, what does the bright blue picture make you feel? **Question:** In the picture of the wedding the little girl says Chrissie is wearing 'a white bird with long tail feathers'. What does she mean? **Question:** In this same double page spread, you can see words written faintly in the background of the picture. What is the writing from?
- **Perspective:** The pictures can be viewed from a variety of angles. **Question:** The second frame in the book shows the little girl's head from the back. Why did the artist choose not to show her face here? **Activity:** Choose a picture and try to paint your own version from another angle. What might you see instead?
- **Symbolism:** a) The dark shadow of a grey bird (dove) on the inside endpapers is transformed into a plane in the opening spread and then becomes the white bird lovingly embroidered by Chrissie on the closing endpaper. The symbol of the bird represents new life in this text. **Activity:** Discuss with students the various birds in this manuscript. b) Stitching and mending is obviously used visually in a variety of these pictures. **Question:** What does it relate to symbolically? **Question:** The shape of the Noskis' bird cage in the sixth double page frame in the book is echoed by the shape surrounding daddy in the same picture. What does this juxtaposition of images suggest?
- **Every part of a book works to tell the story.** **Question:** Compare the images of the birds on the front and back endpapers. What do they suggest? Compare the images of the hands sewing Lucille on the front and back endpapers. What's the difference between them? **Question:** Look at the title page and observe how the reel of embroidery thread appears to unravel into the next or first page of the book, where it

joins together the pictures opposite the little girl. The thread appears again later in the book. What does the thread symbolise?

- **Colour:** The images alternate between light and shade, sombre and more vibrant hues. **Question:** What do these different colours make you feel?

**Activity:** Design a different cover for this book. **Activity:** Draw a bird on paper like the one on the inside back cover. Cut it out and trace the drawing onto a piece of fabric. Choose some rich embroidery thread and stitch the bird like the image in the book. Sew the bird onto a cushion cover.

### **FURTHER TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION & ACTIVITY**

1. If you found a bird lying in the park, what would you do?
2. Why don't we learn the name of the little girl? What do you think her name might be?
3. Visit Sarah Davis's website and have a look at some of her artwork.
4. Try to find other books about loss or grief [See list below]. Read and compare them to this one.
5. Write a brief review of this book.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**J.R. Poulter**, born in Sydney and educated on the Gold Coast, gained an Arts Degree and library qualifications before working in the State Library of Queensland, as a book reviewer for Queensland Education, a research assistant and associate lecturer/academic editor at the University of Queensland, and has even worked in a circus. As J.R. McRae she writes and illustrates poetry and reviews books, music and film. J.R. has published eight other books and teacher resources. She lives with her husband and five children in Queensland.

### **AUTHOR'S NOTES ON RESPONSE TO THE TEXT**

*The response to this story, not just from teachers who can see its application with children, but from adults and teenagers who have experienced trauma, separation, family break up, loss/death of parent/carer has been extraordinary. Adults have broken down and howled (literally) and have told me they felt a sense of release from feelings long buried/pent up, for sometimes decades, through reading the story. They seem to immediately and spontaneously identify with the child.*

*I hope that this story can be used beyond the classroom:*

- *as a tool for teachers, AVT Behaviour Management Teachers, counsellors, psychologists and social/welfare workers and psychiatrists.'*

*I believe that it can also be used:*

- for counselling children experiencing loss of a parent/carer
- for helping children through the trauma of family break up

Specifically, it might help them to deal with:

### **Loss and Grief**

*Parents caught in a tragedy or an emotional upheaval involving a partner have a double crisis – they have their own emotional trauma, and they have the child or children who are the innocent onlookers, and are sometimes also the victims. Often it is assumed ‘they are too young to understand,’ or ‘they will get over it, they’re just children.’ But children do sense drama in the home; they do feel the loss when a parent/carer dies or leaves for whatever reason, but they do not always know how to express their loss/grief, and the grieving/emotionally traumatised parent is often unable to reach out to the child and communicate with them at a level at which they will understand.*

### **AUTHOR’S NOTES ON CHARACTERS:**

#### **The child**

*The child has no name – she is everyone who has experienced such a loss at a young age. The story, seen through her eyes, also reflects the child’s world, the things that impact her and how she sees them – everything is from her perspective. There is no rationalisation; there are no reasons, just a series of impacting events that the child sews together in her mind to make her story of what happened. When she grows up she will elaborate with the complexities of an adult mentality and the benefit of hindsight. Now, she is a little girl who has lost her mother and needs to tell someone in her own way, her own story. That someone is you, the reader.*

#### **The mother**

*The scenario surrounding the mother in Mending Lucille is deliberately vague – she has left, and she may have died; she may have walked out for unexplained reasons, but the result is the same for the child – Mummy is no longer there for me. Death is terrifying but there is closure. Abandonment has no closure.*

#### **The father**

*The father in the story is caught in his own emotional cage, and he can’t reach out to his little girl and help her at the level she needs. He tries to normalise their lives – he goes back to work on the road, and tries to get his daughter back to school. (The illustrator’s use of the cage captures the locking in of emotion and the inability to break out of where he is emotionally to reach out to his child.)*

#### **Chrissie**

*For every child in such circumstances there is, hopefully, a Chrissie – someone who can reach out to them, communicate at their level, comfort and help to heal. Chrissie is not the child’s mother, nor does she try to be the child’s mother, but she is there for the child and she understands. Through mending the doll Lucille she starts to mend the child. The*

*mending thread is present throughout the story – an umbilical cord initially, then a lifeline, then the mending stitches.*

### **Lucille, the doll**

*Lucille is symbolically the torn life; the wounded heart of the child. Lucille is the only link with the missing mother – a damaged link. The mending of the doll parallels the mending of the child, enabling her to relate again to a female role model. The doll is also the child's link to a past which was secure, where life was predictable; where Mummy and Daddy were there; where life had a pattern that was predictable.*

### **The bird**

*The found, injured bird symbolises the heavy, grounding, flightless effect of grief – it is also a pervading, present symbol of the flight of the mother. Again, it is the spirit, first wounded and then beginning to mend and reach then soar again! The letting go of the bird is release for the child too – a new beginning. The bird is present throughout the story, symbolising the psychological stages and emotional landscape the child is travelling through.*

### **The Noskis**

*This old couple represent stability that has gone (Mrs Noski's hip) and the inability for the child to move forward because of the unresolved grief/sense of loss. The Noskis part in looking after the bird and in its restoration and release symbolises the return of the stability and security of 'family' in the broader sense to the child's life.*

### **The girl bully**

*Although the child does not need any more traumas, they come, in the shape of a return to her education at a new school where a bully awaits her and where the precious link with mother, her security, is threatened in a new and terrible way.*

### **The truck**

*The journey of the broken family unit (father and child) to recovery is symbolised by the truck. It is a long and difficult journey for father/parent/carer and child, and the attempt to provide a degree of normalcy (return to school, new doll offer) interrupts the journey with near disastrous results – the child is just not ready. (The illustrator's inclusion of a crinkled map in the background symbolises the cracks appearing in the fabric of the child's life, in what is left of her 'family'. It is also, figuratively, the crinkled tissue we weep into.)'*

## **AUTHOR'S NOTES ON CURRICULUM TOPICS:**

**1. HPE (personal development)** *Using a dolls' house and small people, create the typical family scenario – two parents and one or more children – have one of the dolls disappear and have the children talk about*

- *what might have happened*

- *what this will mean to the family (no mum – who cares for the kids; no dad, who brings the income in or visa versa)*
  - *what do they think the children feel*
  - *has something like this ever happened to them – not just of a parent but loss of friend, pet, relative, or disaster such as loss of home etc*
  - *has something like this happened to anyone they know – friend or relative; how could they help*
  - *have they read/seen something like this on the news or in a magazine or at the movies?*
  - *Suggested viewing –*
    - *The Parent Trap [Disney – either version <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120783/> 1998 starring Lindsay Lohan or <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0055277/> 19 with Hayley Mills ];*
    - *Lilo & Stitch [<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0275847/> ]*
- Discuss the ‘family’ scenarios in these films- parental divorce and remarriage; orphans(?) with big sister parenting little sister.*
- *In these days of varied family configurations, there are numerous Disney cartoons that make a useful platform for discussion. Disney, generally, creates some interesting ‘family’ scenarios – Mickey and Minnie have no children, just nephews – Morty and Ferdie - <http://www.cmpense.org/English151C/A%20BIOLOGICAL%20HOMAGE%20TO%20MICKEY%20MOUSE.html> ; Donald and Daisy, similarly, have no children but three nephews - Huey, Dewey and Louie[ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0046593/epcast> Season 6, Episode 23: This Is Your Life Donald Duck 11 March 1960]. Cinderella has a stepmother. Princess Jasmine, Nemo, Ariel, Bambi, and Pocahontas have no mother.*

**2. English/The Arts** *Encourage the children to illustrate how they feel /would feel in such a situation as is described in the story – they may use cutouts, drawings, words, or colours and symbols.*

**3. The Arts/SOSE** *Have the children build a cardboard doll house and people it with cut out characters – this is a good approach for children from multicultural backgrounds for whom a typical home may differ from the typically western home. Discuss in class why they have built the house the way they built it, why they have included certain items and who lives in the house. Discuss why some family homes are different to ours and why this might be.*

**4. The Arts/English/HPE (personal development)** *Make masks in class representing members of the family portrayed in the story – mother, father, child, Chrissie:*

- *children pick the character they want to act out, using their own original script/story and wearing that mask and then discuss why/reflect on why they picked that mask and chose to write that script/story*
- *children make a mask in art that represents one of the main characters in the story and show in their mask how the character is feeling – in a journal, they reflect on why they picked that character and why they showed them feeling that particular emotion (e.g. the father may be sad – his wife has left/died, or he may be happy – he has married Chrissie)*

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Sarah Davis** was born in England in 1971. She moved to New Zealand when she was six and spent most of her childhood wearing gumboots and falling into rivers. She has an Honours degree in English literature from Canterbury University and a Diploma of Teaching from the Christchurch College of Education. Sarah taught English, Art and Art History in secondary schools for several years before deciding that being an illustrator would let her get covered in paint more often. She now lives and works in Sydney with her mathematician partner and three children. *Mending Lucille* is her first picture book.

<http://sarahdavisillustration.com/>

## ILLUSTRATOR'S INSPIRATION (Sarah Davis)

### Painting Lucille

When I was first sent the story I thought it was really beautiful. The first thing I had to do was read and re-read it to sort out my ideas – I had to go through a few boxes of tissues because every time I got to the end I'd get all teary! The text on its own had a very distinct atmosphere which I tried to capture in the paintings. It evokes that feeling you have as a small child when things go badly wrong and nothing is fully explained to you – everything is surreal, frightening and lonely, and you make up your own mythical explanations for what has happened. When I was two my family were in a bad car crash. I still have vivid memories of it, and I've never forgotten that feeling.

It seemed important to me that the entire story was about a memory. As the little girl speaks, it's not happening to her right now, she's remembering it from a safe place. I thought about how memories work – how you hang on to scraps, images, vivid moments. When you're a child small details have big significance. I tried to present the pictures not just as straightforward realistic scenes but as memories overlaid with the meaning of what was happening – so there's the little snapshots of detail that the child holds on to, the torn edges like scraps of memory, moments framed like photographs, the collage made from things that were part of the memory like the map, thread, and sewing pattern. The map and thread and pattern also have significance because they're about finding a way, making sense of chaos, mending.

I loved the symbolism in the text – it wasn't just a straightforward story, but very rich and layered. Part of the fun of illustrating this book was figuring out how to pick up on the symbols in the text and develop them through the pictures. The bird was the central symbol, but I added a few of my own. Even though sewing isn't really mentioned in the text (except when Chrissie makes the dresses), it became important in the pictures. The torn edges and stitching in the book are all about the mending process. At first I just assumed Lucille would

be a modern plastic doll, and was trying to imagine fixing her with glue, but it just wasn't right! So I went back to a more traditional way of mending, which was somehow much more evocative.

I wanted to control the colors in the book carefully, so I actually painted all the pictures with just six tubes of paint (including black and white). This meant that the same colours would run through the whole book to tie it together nicely. I wanted the early scenes to be very faded and monochromatic, and then color begins creeping back in to the little girl's world after she meets Chrissie. So the really dark paintings and the bright cheerful ones were all painted with the same six colors – I just mixed them differently.

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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 also 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. Her latest publications are *Paper Empires a History of the*

*Book in Australia 1946-2005* (co-edited with Craig Munro) (UQP, 2006) and *Kookaburra Shells Port Curtis Literature* (justified text press, 2006).