

Gus Dog Goes to Work
Rachel Flynn / Craig Smith
TEACHER NOTES
By Janet McLean

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Author: **Rachel Flynn** was born in Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, and attended Bacchus Marsh Primary School and High School. At 17 she went to Ballarat to train as a teacher, and taught in primary schools in Melbourne before having two children. Since then she has written several books for children and studied for two degrees, a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Education. She currently teaches at the Council of Adult Education (Melbourne) in the Professional Writing and Editing course and at RMIT. Rachel has written numerous picture books and novel for children.

She is best known for her hugely successful *I Hate Fridays* series (also illustrated by Craig Smith) including *I Hate Fridays*, *It's Not Fair*, *Worried Sick*, *I Can't Wait* and *Messing Around*. She is the author of more than 20 books for children including *Whisper Wild*, *Freedom Child*, illustrated by Anna Pignataro, *The Goat, the Duck and the Bale of Hay*, illustrated by Tom Jellett, and *My Mummy and Me*, *My Daddy and Me*, *My Grandpa and Me*, *My Grandma and Me* and *My Sister and Me*, all illustrated by Craig Smith. Some of her books have been translated and republished in French, Spanish, Dutch, Chinese and Korean. Rachel lives in Melbourne, Victoria.

Rachel's work is defined by themes related to ordinary suburban life and children's culture, and her stories usually start with something that has really happened. *Gus Dog Goes to Work* is based on a true story that happened a few years ago in Kerang, a rural town in Northern Victoria, where a shearer, Tom, was working. One day his dog, Gus, went missing. Tom found him at the end of the day in a purple Ute, even though Tom's Ute was white.

"This sounded like a good picture book idea to me, so I wrote all that down and added a few more things, like how he smelt everything, listened to everything and looked at everything, and how he learnt a new word, mongrel". Rachel Flynn.

Illustrator: **Craig Smith** is one of Australia's most prolific, popular and award-winning illustrators of children's books. He began illustrating in 1976. His first book was Christobel Mattingley's *Black Dog* followed soon after by Geoffrey Dutton's *The Prowler*. His witty and humorous artwork combines a wonderful sense of the absurd with a fine attention to detail. Craig has illustrated book covers, fiction series, including *Too Cool* written by Phil Kettle; *The Cabbage Patch* series by Paul Jennings' and Rachel Flynn's *I Hate Fridays*. His many picture books include *Where's Mum?* (Honour Book in the 1993 CBC Picture Book of the Year Awards), *Billy the Punk* (shortlisted in the 1996 CBC Picture Book of the Year Awards), *Bob the Builder and the Elves* and *Sister Madge's Book of Nuns*. Most recently he made his debut as a writer/illustrator with his book about a notorious local cat, *Remarkably Remy*.

Craig grew up in the Adelaide Hills, and studied graphic design at the South Australian School of Art. He worked at a variety of jobs - including undercoating the Sydney Harbour Bridge - while slowly building a career as an illustrator. He has done the illustrations for over 370 picture books, junior novels and educational readers. The humour and pathos of home and school life, and a fondness for unusual perspectives are features of his work. Craig lives in Melbourne with his partner Erica.

Craig says

"The peculiarly Oz country drawly way that Tom and everyone else use to talk - or yell - at Gus takes me back in time to my South Australian childhood - in particular Uncle Dave organising the cows and the dog in his sing-song way. Or back at home with Mum in an irritable mood. I hear Rachel's use of this idiom with recognition and affection. Rachel has got it perfectly. My hope in these pictures was to capture something of this country life that I remember as a kid. In my mind I picture it as somewhat like Orrorroo - Mum's birthplace.

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SYNOPSIS *Gus Dog Goes to Work* is a warm and comical story of a not-so-usual day in the life of a sheep dog. Every day Gus Dog goes to work in the back of the Ute with his owner, Tom the shearer. But... *One day in October, when Gus Dog (wakes) up, something (is) different.* Tom and the Ute are gone, so he decides to go to work on his own. Along the way he stops to listen to everything, to smell everything, and to look at everything. He has some fun, gets up to some mischief, ruffles a few feathers, and learns a new word. Eventually he finds the Ute - but, as in all good stories, that is not the end!

Gus Dog Goes to Work is a wonderful example of a picture book where the author and the illustrator work as a partnership, using their own special skills to create an engaging and believable story. Before even opening the book we know Gus Dog is a working dog. Gus Dog's appearance and character are shown in the illustration on the front cover. His name, Gus dog, implies there is a warm bond between him and his owner. His body language is loose, but alert - friendly and lively – alert eyes, pricked ears, and his tail waving in the air. The illustration on the back cover shows Tom driving the Ute past a paddock of sheep. This image provides a few more hints about the story. The warm earthy background colours tell us that the story is set in the country. The house and the sheep hint at a farm and shearing.

WRITING STYLE Rachel Flynn (Rachel) tells Gus Dog's story through action and dialogue. She uses a straightforward, rhythmic pattern of language, and verbs and nouns that focus on action and dialogue. Rachel begins the story simply:

*This is Gus Dog.
He has a house, a yard, a Ute, and a man.*



Speech balloons are used for most of the dialogue throughout the book. This is a wonderful way to introduce to readers what Craig Smith calls '*the peculiarly Oz country drawly way that Tom and everyone else use to talk - or yell - at Gus*'

After meeting the characters on the first page, the next couple of pages give enough background information (the pre-existing situation) to set up the story that is to follow. We learn that Gus Dog already knows '*lots of the same words*', has '*Working dog Formula*' for breakfast every morning, and goes to work with Tom in the '*back of the Ute*'. On the next page, a 'problem' arises for Tom: '*One day in October, when Gus Dog woke up, something was different. The house and the water tank were still there. The ancient red gum and the magpies were still there.*'

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But there was
NO TOM
NO UTE
NO BREAKFAST!

Rachel then establishes a predictable storytelling pattern over five episodes, each with two double-page spreads. Each of the five incidents follows the same pattern.

- Gus Dog arrives at a place
- He *listens to everything, he smells everything, and he looks at everything*
- At each place he causes a ruckus
- At most places he gets yelled at, (in a speech balloon), and runs away
- In the next to last scene there is slight change to the pattern, when Gus rolls in a *dead thing* that smells *fabulous*, and *after that he felt much better*

A warm and funny conclusion is created in the in the last part of the story. Gus finds a Ute, and jumps in the back to wait for Tom to come and say *goodboy* and drive them home. However, the reader knows something Gus doesn't know – he is in the wrong Ute. This is when Tom turns up and the two friends are reunited at last.

'Gus is a working dog, but with initiative and resourcefulness and not much respect for authority.'
(Rachel Flynn)

ILLUSTRATIONS The illustrations for this book are done as pencil sketches, then coloured digitally using Corel®Painter software. Craig Smith says that this software is good at mimicking real paint, yet allowing for the efficiencies of digital production. Rachel's straightforward style of storytelling allows Craig to bring his own perceptions to the story. Rachel says Craig's *'witty and humorous artwork combines a wonderful sense of the absurd with a fine attention to detail'*. His warm, comical pictures of the characters and place expand and enrich the story.

Gus Dog, Tom and the Ute are depicted as quintessential Australian country characters. Gus is shown as an alert, blue/black-and-tan kelpie/cum/heeler sheepdog. Tom, with his moleskins, blue singlet, check shirt, wide-brimmed hat, pull-on leather boots, and his laconic *'Giddy'*, is portrayed as a loose-limbed, laid-back shearer. Specific details in the drawings include – the type and colour of the dog, Tom's clothing, and the use of a speech balloon to draw attention to the colloquial language that is used throughout the book.

The special bond that exists between Gus and Tom is clearly shown in the illustration on the first page. They eye each other closely as Tom saunters over to give Gus his breakfast – a bowl of *Working Dog Formula*. Gus is looking back over his shoulder at Tom. He has his paw on the bowl, and his mouth is watering. He is bristling with anticipation.

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In every illustration Craig has thought about the characters and the setting. What will the different characters look like? What will the characters be doing? Where will they be situated on the page?

Craig has added many other characters that are not mentioned in the text. The extra characters include: magpies, chooks, a bull, flies, a great variety of school children, birds on the fence, a boy on a bike, people on holiday in a hippie van, a petrol station, crows, farmers, rabbits, galahs, a kangaroo, a shearing shed and plenty of sheep.

He has thought about how will each scene be composed, and about the places Gus would/could go to on his way to work. He takes the reader on a trip through a small Australian country town and its outskirts – we see paddocks, a school-ground, a backyard, the main street, the petrol station, full rubbish bins ready to be collected, and tipped-over rubbish bins that Gus rummaged through to *find something to eat for breakfast*.

The colours Craig uses are the colours of an Australian the rural landscape. Craig's pictures are full of action, dust, sunshine and attitude. As Rachel says, '*Gus is depicted as a working dog, but with initiative and resourcefulness and not much respect for authority. Craig's pictures are full of action, dust, sunshine and attitude.*'

DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

- Much of the pleasure and humour of this story is achieved through dialogue. Before sharing the story with children, practice reading the dialogue aloud so that you can capture '*the peculiarly Oz country drawly way that Tom and everyone else use to talk - or yell - at Gus*'.
- If you aren't sure how to pronounce the words, maybe you can find someone who can demonstrate how to say them in an *Oz country drawly way* - giddy, getup, getdown, come'ere, getoutovit, gohome, goodboy and mongrel. Children will love the sound of these words and will soon be reading along with you, and maybe even using them using them spontaneously as they go about their day.
- Gus is a working dog. Have a chat about what kind of work he does – helping Tom round up the sheep. Show a video of a dog rounding sheep – preferably one where the owner uses 'working dog' language.
- The story has a pattern of moving from one incident to the next, starting on the morning there was NO TOM, NO UTE, NO BREAKFAST.
- With the children talk about how each incident is a little story. How does each story-within-a-story start? What does Gus listen to, smell, and look at along the way? Why does he get into trouble? Why do people yell at him? What words do they use that Gus understands? How does he leave each story and where does he go next?
- In small groups retell and illustrate each story, and put them together to make a class story. The children can write or dictate their stories, and draw the pictures for each incident. They can also use their own words to go in to the speech balloons.
- Many tiny details in the illustrations add interest to the story. Look through the illustrations to find separate other stories going on: the magpies in the red gum, the girl in the school office, any of the children in the playground, the woman with the white chooks, the hippy in the van playing the guitar, stickers on the purple Ute, and Tom in his white Ute.
- Gus doesn't know where Tom is and sets off on his own. The text doesn't tell us but there are clues in the pictures as to Tom's whereabouts. Ask the children if they can find these clues? Are they on every page or just some?

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- When the *real* Tom told Rachel the story about the day the *real* Gus went missing, she asked him, ‘*Why would he think the purple Ute was yours?*’ Tom said, ‘Dogs are colour blind.’ You might want to find out more about how and what dogs see. Is it true that they are colour blind and what does this mean? Talk about how colour blindness affects some people.
- Rachel also asked Tom what words Gus knew. ‘*A few,*’ said Tom, ‘*getup, getdown, come’ere, getoutovit, gohome and goodboy.*’ Ask the children what words they use when they are talking to their dogs. Make recordings or videos of the children ‘talking’ to their dogs. Can they use Tom’s way of talking?
- Another question Rachel asked Tom was, ‘*What do you think he did all day?*’ ‘*Well,*’ said Tom, ‘*he probably ran into the school yard, chased a rabbit, knocked over some bins, rolled in a dead thing and rounded up someone else’s sheep. He might have thought he was at work by then.*’ Then Rachel had an idea for a picture story book. Ask the children about some of the silly things their dogs (or other pets) have done. These could be compiled into a class book.
- Craig uses the colours of an Australian rural landscape. Look carefully at the different colours in the book and use a colour chart to find the names of colours. How many hues of reds, yellows, browns, greens, blues can you find? What other colours are used in the illustrations?
- Ask the children to create their own pictures using the colours and style of illustrating - drawing with pencils, charcoal, and watercolour using paints and brushes, or digitally programs are available.
- Look carefully at how Craig uses line, colour, light and shade, to show how Gus are feeling throughout the story. Look for examples of happiness, fear, contentment, joy, uncertainty.
- Children in small groups can choose an illustration they think is the funniest, and make up their own funny story
- Links - Craig Smith <http://craigsmithillustration.com>