

You Are My Special Baby
Carol Chataway / Danny Snell
TEACHERS' NOTES
By Janet McLean

Title *You Are My Special Baby*

Author Carol Chataway

Illustrator Danny Snell

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Author **Carol Chataway** was born in Southall England in 1955 and came to Australia in 1963. She has worked as a school assistant with the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services since 1975. She began writing in 1996 as part of her Bachelor of Arts degree at Flinders University, graduating with Honours in Creative Writing in 2006. Her published works include *The Perfect Pet* (Working Title Press, 2001), *Wings* (Lothian, 2004) and *Edwina Sparrow, Girl of Destiny* (Lothian, 2007). She lives in the Adelaide Hills with her husband Richard, three grown up sons, and a magnificent Labrador named Hudson. When Carol Chataway wrote *You Are My Special Baby* she was thinking about creating a book that would be suitable for babies 6 – 12 months. She says,

“Given that the babies wouldn't be reading the book, but rather someone who loved the baby, I thought that two needs should be addressed. Firstly illustrations that would engage the baby, and secondly, words that the reader felt expressed their love to the person to whom they were reading. I thought about babies being nurtured, protected and learning about their world. A natural progression for me then was to think about animal babies because they are so engaging and are physically capable of a lot more than humans from quite early on! Australian animals became the theme when I used the word 'laugh' and immediately thought of Kookaburras. I like its warmth, gentleness and hopeful feel, just like the soft fur of a possum.

Illustrator **Danny Snell** grew up in Adelaide, and trained at the Central School of Art and the University of South Australia before graduating with a Bachelor of Design (Illustration) in 1992. His first major picture book *Whose Tail Is That?* written by Christine Nicholls, was shortlisted the following year for the Children's Book Council's Crichton Award for first time children's book illustrators. His second book, the best selling *Bilby Moon* written by Margaret Spurling, was nominated as a Notable Book for 2001 and shortlisted for the 2001 Kids Own Australian Literature Award (KOALA). Since then he has illustrated as well as *The Long Way Home* by Emily Rodda, *Scary Bear* by Tania Cox and *Seadragon Sea*, also written by Margaret

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Spurling and *Crocodile River* by Diana Lawrenson. He lives in Adelaide with his partner Louise and his two daughters, Leilani and Daisy. When doing the illustrations for *You Are My Special Baby* Danny Snell wanted to keep the compositions simple, to ensure that the focus was on the animals and their babies, making them easily recognized. He says,

I've added a fair amount of detail to most of the animals, particularly their faces, which makes them the focus, but kept many sections of the background quite loose, fresh and simple - and if you look closely you can still see brush strokes and even pencil lines from the initial sketches.

SYNOPSIS *You Are My Special Baby* is a delightful book to read and look at with infants, preschoolers, and kindergarten / prep children. The words and pictures together delightfully explore the bond that exists between parents and young children. On each page a different Australian animal is featured – depicting a parent and a baby. The words tenderly capture the love hopes and dreams parents have for their children. The parents will keep the babies safe and cared for until they are ready to step out on their own and “*discover the magic of this wonderful world*”.

WRITING STYLE Carol Chataway has written this story to engage both babies and adults. She wanted the words to express the love the reader feels for the child who is listening. The pacing and placement of the words, phrases and sentences on each page invites adults to read slowly, and to take time to look at the picture with their babies and children. This provides adults with an opportunity to point out in a simple way some of the linguistic features of the writing. For example: ‘*You are my special baby and I love you so!*’

The exclamation mark adds emphasis to the emotion, and invites the adult to give the baby an extra squeeze. When reading with toddlers, preschoolers and kindergarten/prep children, the adult can point out how the exclamation mark changes the emphasis of the meaning. On the same page the adult can point to the picture: “Look, the Mummy / Daddy is whispering in the baby’s ear – “She’s saying, ‘I love you so!’” In this way the adult helps the child to connect the words with the picture. In the first part of the book the parent tells the child *how* she will love the child – with kisses, hugs, laughter, play, songs and just being there. The story ends

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reassuringly with the parent staying alongside the child as she ventures out to discover '*the magic of this wonderful world.*'

ILLUSTRATIONS Danny Snell used acrylic paint on illustration board for the illustrations in *You Are My Special Baby*. He says that acrylics have a similar feel to oil paints but dry much quicker. When illustrating a book, an artist has many decisions to make. In *You Are My Special Baby* each double page spread features an Australian animal - parent and baby. Danny Snell says:

Initially I wasn't going to have any background colour or detail at all - so the animals would simply appear on a white background. But I soon realised that some colour and detail was needed to give the animals a sense of scale and place.

... I've tried to find a balance between adding detail and leaving other areas loose and under-painted.

The background colours and compositions help to create a setting for each of the animals. For example: there is no horizon line in the pictures where the animals are up in trees, giving the sense of looking up. In other pictures animals are placed firmly on the ground, suspended in water, or leaping through the air. The background colours help readers to sense the warmth of the desert, the coolness of the water, the cosiness of a wombat hole.

Danny Snell has focused on the body language and facial expressions of the animals. They are gazing at each other, lovingly touching, or curled up together. Initially Danny Snell had a different idea for the last page. He tried to create a composition that contained all of the animals seen in the book. However he felt that in order to keep the book unified he needed to have a single animal and baby on the final spread. He says, "I decided upon a Southern Right Whale and her calf for their sense of 'wonder'. It was also important to suggest a little more in the background through the illusion of the water and clouds in the sky to give dimension to '*...the magic of this wonderful world.*'

DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

- *You Are My Special Baby* is a book for parents and grandparents to share with their own special babies. It is also a perfect book to use in childcare centres, preschools, and kindergarten/prep classes. Tell families about *You Are My Special Baby*. If you have a

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borrowing library, let families borrow this book to share with their children at home.

- Hold a Sharing Books With Your Children session at your centre. You can use *You Are My Special Baby* to demonstrate to parents / grandparents how literacy begins at home through sharing books with babies, toddlers and preschoolers. You can use, and adapt some of the following suggestions / activities, and add more of your own. You can also use them yourself when reading with the young children in your centre.
 - This is a great book to use with a child cuddled up on your knee, or snuggled up close beside you.
 - Read each phrase / sentence with feeling, without hurrying. Allow time to look at, and talk with the child/ren, about the pictures. E.g. *"I think that baby dingo loves getting kisses from her Mum"*. (The pictures *show* what the words *say*). *"Look how she's smiling and closing her eyes"*. (Pointing out the simple lines the artist has used – a curved line for a smile, a small line for a closed eye. *"Let's smile and close our eyes like that puppy. 'Mmm', says baby dingo what lovely kisses"*, (You can imagine how the baby dingo feels).
 - Read the book over and over, acting out the story and talking as you go. As the child become familiar with the story they will begin reading along, anticipating the words. Pause at the end of a phrase or sentence so that the child can fill in the missing the word, e.g. *"I'll give you lots of (pause)... hugs"*. *"We'll (pause)... laugh and (pause)... play"*. The child will begin to connect the words with a particular picture.
 - Make simple puppets of each animal. Laminate and attach to an icy-pole stick. The children can match the puppets to the animals as they read the story, or use them to make up their own stories.
- Other suggestions
 - Make wall posters using pictures of the animals, putting all of the animals together
 - Draw and paint pictures of the animals.
 - Display an Indigenous language map of Australia and link each animal to their natural habitats.
- Simply enjoy reading this delightful book with a baby, toddler or preschooler on you knee.