

## These notes are for:

- Years 5, 6, 7 & 8
- Middle Years

## Key Learning Areas:

- English
- HSIE/SOSE
- History

## Example of:

- Prose Poetry
- Junior Fiction
- Historical Fiction

## Experience of:

- Australian History
- Australian Goldrush Period
- Cultural Diversity

## Values addressed:

- Doing Your Best
- Respect & Freedom
- Understanding, tolerance & inclusion
- Honesty & Trustworthiness
- Care & Compassion

## Themes:

- Poetry
- Multiculturalism
- Traditions and Heritage
- Individuality & Identity

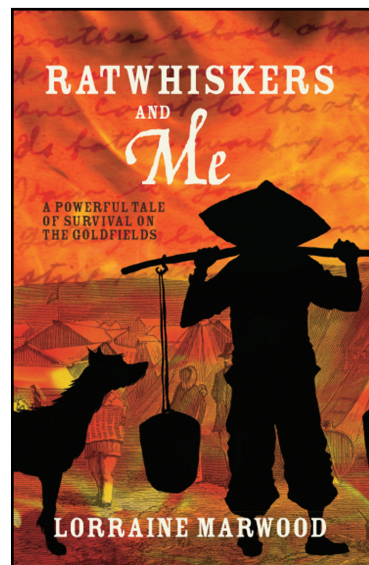
\*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

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## Ratwhiskers and Me - Overview



### Ratwhiskers and Me

By: Lorraine Marwood  
 ISBN: 9781921150395  
 ARRP: \$14.95  
 NZRRP: \$16.99  
 No. of Pages: 128  
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## Outline:

**Ratwhiskers and Me** is a powerful atmospheric verse novel set in the Victorian goldfields in the 1800s.

Traumatised by a fire, the narrator takes on a new identity on the goldfields as Lin. There, Sun Song, a Chinese market gardener, is the only one to show any kindness. Lin flees to the Chinese camp but Ellery, a man with links to Lin's past, is determined to take over all rights on the goldfields, setting in place a dangerous sequence of events. To survive is a test of friendship and loyalty, and a catalyst to the remembering of Lin's tragic past.

## Author Information:

**Lorraine Marwood** was born and raised in rural Victoria and has lived for most of her married life on a dairy farm with her husband and their six children. Lorraine is an award-winning poet who has been widely published in literary magazines across Australia, as well as magazines in the UK, USA, New Zealand and Canada. She has also published several childrens' novels and collections of poetry.

Lorraine is the Australian editor of the UK literary magazine *Tears in the Fence* and is a writer of poetry ideas and teaching plans for *Literature Base*. She also conducts workshops on poetry and story writing skills and is a judge for many writing competitions including the *Dorothea Mackellar Poetry Awards*.

## How to use these notes:

These notes were prepared by Lorraine Marwood and Melissa Hamilton. This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Please select accordingly.

## Lorraine Marwood on writing *Ratwhiskers and Me*:

"I grew up not far from the remains of a goldfield – it was turned into the local rubbish tip – but I could walk my dog and imagine miners, tents and frenetic noise. My father pointed out the differences in mineshaft openings – square for Cornish miners, round for Chinese miners. I was always stunned that so many life-changing events had happened across the road from our small farm, yet all that was left were deep mineshafts and scars on the landscape. Fertile ground for my imagination.

We also lived in what was once a Chinese house, a Chinese market garden. I love history, not the boring facts, but the fleshed out everyday 'breathe and shout' kind of history. This is my kind of story, my kind of writing.

I have been a poet for 20 years and also love to write stories. Suddenly I could see a way to write about Lin and Sun Song in a sharp style that suited the life and death goldfield – prose poetry.

Once I had the tone for the entry point, "Boy." *They call me boy...* (pg. 8), I was right and away it flowed. Not always as steady as a vein of gold, but after detours and stumbles the story kept flowing until the final resolution."

## Classroom activities for *Ratwhiskers and Me*:

- *Ratwhiskers and Me* is about identity. Lin experiences loss and pain because of her experiences on the goldfields. It is her experiences that change her identity.
  - What are some strong memories you have of your early childhood?
  - How do you remember them – is there a particular smell, song or food taste that reminds you of the past?
  - What helped Lin to remember her past?
  - What characteristics make you unique?
- Throughout the book, Lin writes to Sassie to tell her about the happenings on the goldfields, Sun Song and her fears and memories.
  - Try keeping a diary for a week. Aim for half a page of writing. Talk about the physical world around you and then talk about your inner world. You don't have to share this with anyone.
  - Date each entry.
  - After a week, look back over your diary – were you surprised by what you wrote?
  - Does writing something down help you to think through a problem or a feeling?
  - Have you ever kept a holiday diary or journal?
- Write a letter to yourself from where you are today. Think about what you like, what's making news, what you are thinking, what you plan to do in the future, or remember an incident from the past and write it down.
  - Date the letter, seal it and keep it for six months or a year to read and reflect upon. You may like to do this as a class and create a time capsule.
- How was life different for a child in Australia during the gold rush? How was it the same? Make a list of differences and similarities. Decide when you would have preferred to live and why.
- The author researched life on the goldfields for writing *Ratwhiskers and Me*. Identify aspects of the book that reflect this research.
- Use *Ratwhiskers and Me* as an introduction to the multicultural life that teemed through the goldfields.
- *Ratwhiskers and Me* is an historical novel. The time and place are real, the children and events are not. How much of an historical novel should be factual? Discuss. Read the author's note at the back of *Ratwhiskers and Me* to help answer this question.
- Divide the class into small groups. Each group is given one topic to research relating to the historical and cultural background of *Ratwhiskers and Me*. Present this research to the class.
  - Possible topics:
    - shelter on the goldfields, gold, food at the goldfields, mining tools, shops on the goldfields
    - transport, families, cultures, clothing, law and order, songs of the era.
- Research other places in Australia that had goldfields. Create a map of Australia and mark these places.
- Read the poem *The Roaring Days* by Henry Lawson, also about the gold rush period. Compare this with the story of *Ratwhiskers and Me*. How do these stories show different aspects of this time and place? What are the different perspectives that are taken?
- Mutton chops and damper were the mainstay food. Find a recipe for damper and as a class have a go at cooking it in foil or in a pan – you need hot coals to cook it the miners' way.
- The Chinese tended their gardens – what might have been grown? What sort of vegetables did Sun Song keep watered?
- *Ratwhiskers* loved visiting the butcher's tent. How was the meat stored? Think of the hot summers and the cold frosty winters.
- *Ratwhiskers* is a dog that has had a hard life. Write a letter, paragraph or newspaper article about an animal on the goldfields. How tough was it for them?
- The cover of *Ratwhiskers and Me* is a combination of images of fire, letters, artwork by Rhian Nest James and an engraving by ST Gill.
  - What collage, bits and pieces would you use to design a book cover of your life? Create your own collage.

## A study for creating your own prose poetry by Lorraine Marwood:

### Prose poetry with your class –

#### Discussion questions:

What is prose poetry?

Prose poetry is a pared down, swift moving, storytelling technique. It relies on action and a story to tell. Do further research on prose poetry and find other examples from your school library or on the internet.

What types of stories can be told in prose poetry?

Create a list of the different types of stories that can be told with prose poetry. You can start with these two easy suggestions:

- Fairy Tales
- The regular stories of childhood

Try the following technique with these suggestions first, then use the stories of students in the class – they might be multicultural or historical like *Ratwhiskers and Me*, or just the story of an incident that happened recently.

#### Steps to prose poetry:

1. Start with the character in the first line and develop the problem for the first four or five lines.
2. Turn the story on its head, have fun. Come at it from a different angle, give it a modern twist – it may help to refer to the three pigs model as shown below.
3. Each line should be no more than six to eight words.
4. Use verbs and nouns. These are the strong building blocks of poetry and certainly of prose poetry.
5. Prose poetry works best with a story, so there will be conflict, a main character, emotion and a resolution.
6. The five senses are always important in poetry – a sixth one is emotion. The story will come more to life if it has emotive language and we can smell, hear or touch the scenery.

Using the big bad wolf in the three pigs as a model, answer the following questions:

#### Example:

*I'm wolf, the three pigs kind of wolf,  
a building inspector with a grudge  
against mud brick or straw bale  
hovels. Sustainable energy  
be blowed and I can blow and huff  
really grumpily when the wrong  
sort of building gets in my way.*

1. Who is the main character here?
2. What is the conflict?
3. What is the modern twist?

#### Task A:

- Write three more prose poetry stanzas for this story.

#### Task B:

- Write a group prose poem based on an incident from the year's school activities. Or ask each child to mine their own history and write a prose poem about a family happening – a photograph from the past can help set the scene, a local monument, or a member of the local historical society can help with research.