

PIERRE'S NOT THERE

By Ursula Dubosarsky

RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 8-12 years old **UPPER PRIMARY AND LOWER SECONDARY**

GENRE: Fiction

THEMES: Magical realism and creativity, friendship and family, identity, traditional literature and fairytales, freedom, post-war Australia, migration, refugees, puppet show, puppets

CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:

- **English:** Language, literature, literacy
- **The Arts:** Visual arts, drama

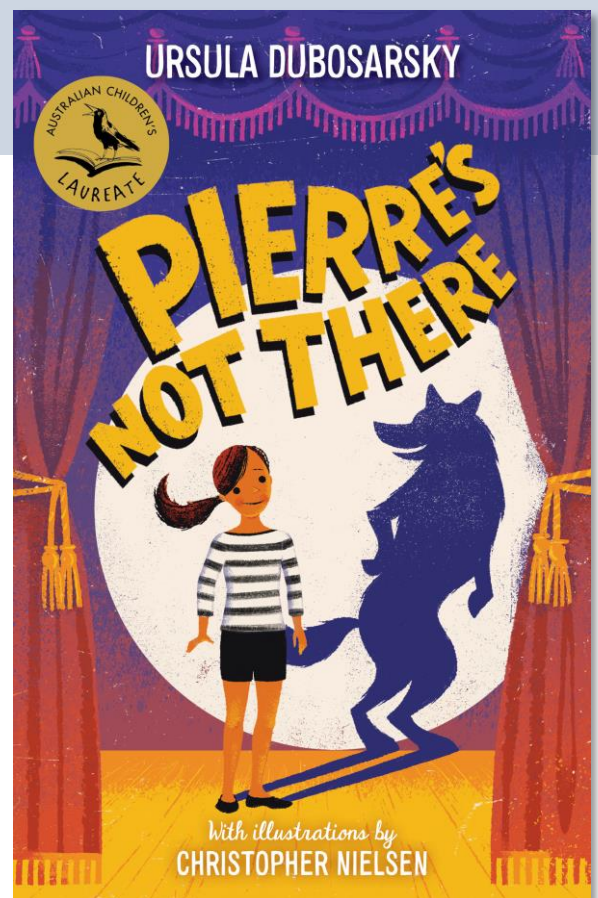
NOTES WRITTEN BY: Joy Lawn

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INTRODUCTION

Pierre's Not There is a highly original tale. It is unique in both structure and style.

It begins as a realist narrative, told in an engaging and lyrical writing style with short chapters. It then becomes a surreal, magic realist puppet play (incorporating elements of the fairytale and other genres from traditional literature) told as a play script. Finally, it resumes the initial realist narrative style – with a subversive playful twist.

STORY SUMMARY

It is the school holidays and Lara is travelling with her mother to work. On the Sydney ferry, and whenever she feels the urge to hurry or experience more freedom, she notices a black dog. Across the water, the house her mother cleans has a tattered flag with a bear surrounded by stars. At first it seems that the house doesn't want them to enter and a snarling clay figure in a pot plant in the hallway seems to reinforce this.

While waiting for her mother, Lara discovers a boy, Pierre, upstairs with his puppets and puppet theatre. He explains that his seven brothers and sisters and parents were eaten by a pack of wolves and he must go to his grandmother's house across the river. He asks Lara to choose a puppet and join him in creating the story of his journey.

Once inside the puppet theatre, Lara magically becomes the puppet she has chosen. Its identity is unclear: it may be either a dog or a wolf. Lara and Pierre encounter other characters – Mr Punch, the Old Horse, Zady and the Bear-King – in their quest to find Pierre's grandmother.

Satisfyingly, the tale employs a cyclic effect. It concludes by re-entering the 'real world', and once again a dog appears.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

BEFORE READING *PIERRE'S NOT THERE*

Refer to WORKSHEET 1: Cast

The cast of characters is shown in words and vignettes (silhouettes) before the book begins. Before reading the story, students predict something about each character and what they might do in the book.

Older students could create a sociogram showing how the characters may relate to each other.

They could also create a second sociogram after reading the story, to show how the characters actually do relate.

(A sociogram is a visual tool or 'map' to show relationships. In this instance, the name of each character could be written on paper or a white board. An arrow is drawn from one character towards another character if they have a positive connection or relationship. Arrows can be reciprocal. Arrows in a different colour could show negative relationships.)

ENGLISH

LANGUAGE

Text structure

The author Ursula Dubosarsky is a master at incorporating sensory descriptions, figurative language and active well-chosen verbs into her writing to enhance her interesting plotlines and characterisation.

Students find examples of these from the narrative texts at the beginning and end of *Pierre's Not There*.

Table them as either sensory descriptions, figurative language or active verbs.

Examples could include: pale morning p1; trundled p3; whinnying p3; muddle of passengers p3; churned p5; smear of a beach p10; curled like cream on a birthday cake p14; like a lit match p20; buzzing and humming p25

Imagine another world

Early in the story, the protagonist Lara has what could be a premonition or clue: "Lara felt as if she was heading into another world" p3. Before reading further, students imagine what this world could be.

LITERATURE

First sentences

The first sentence in a book is important. The first sentence in *Pierre's Not There* is:

Lara had always wished she was a dog, and one day, just for a short time, she actually became one. This is how it happened.

After reading the whole story, students explain the significance of this sentence.

Identity: Dog or Wolf?

Once inside the puppet show Lara's identity is unclear. She may be a dog or a wolf.

Students find examples from the text to try and discover which she is, e.g. a dog is helpful and is a friend with a big heart, p54; it growls at Mr Punch p67; Old Horse doubts Lara's identity p84; howling p92-3, 112; shining eyes p101; it looks like a wolf in the wanted poster p111.

The teacher provides enlarged templates of a dog and wolf for students working in pairs (these pictures could be adapted from the illustrations in the book, sketched or found elsewhere).

Each pair finds examples from the text and (for older students) further discussion to give reasons why Lara might be a dog or a wolf. They write brief summaries onto their templates.

They complete this task by weighing up the evidence to see which animal Lara is more likely to be.

Share and tally the class results.

Correlate the real and fantasy worlds

Elements in the story from the 'real' world reappear in the fantasy world of the puppet play.

Students revisit the text, particularly looking at Lara's experiences on the way to Pierre's house and when she first arrives there.

In a table with two columns headed 'Real World' and 'Fantasy World' students draw and label [thumbnail sketches](#) of elements or episodes that occur in both worlds. Draw lines linking the events in both worlds. (Optional: include page numbers)

For example, in the very first sentence Lara wished to be a dog, she then saw the black dog on the way to her mother's work and later became a dog or wolf.

Traditional literature and fairytales

What are the similarities and differences between the puppet play and fairytales, e.g. the number seven, the character who has been asleep for a long time and the character who changes from human to animal (or vice versa) or shapeshifts?

The *Little Red Riding Hood* fairytale could be studied in particular. It has some similarities with *Pierre's Not There* such as where Mr Punch offers Pierre a lift to his grandmother's place, p73 in the latter.

(Students with a good knowledge of fairytales could also analyse whether *Pierre's Not There* is a fairytale or not.)

Respond to the story (SIT response strategy)

Pierre's Not There is such an unpredictable, intriguing, suspenseful, surreal and even dark mystery that it lends itself well to the SIT response strategy.

[SIT' response strategy](#). Students respond to the story using the SIT strategy to identify something

- Surprising
- Interesting and
- Troubling

Shuffle sequencing

Refer to WORKSHEET 3: Shuffle Sequencing

View the establishing shot for each scene in the puppet play, beginning with Scene 1: The Forest.

Individually or in pairs, students sequence the establishing shots of each scene into a different order.

They then summarise the plot lines of their new plays using dot points.

Illustrations

The black and white illustrations throughout the book by Christopher Nielsen play an important role. They are generous in number and increase and change in style when the play begins.

Read 'In the words of the illustrator' at the end of these notes and then return to the book to note and appreciate these contrasts.

LITERACY

Opening sentences

Compile a chart or class book of interesting first sentences from other books. (These could be used as future story starters or to stimulate writing ideas.)

Puppet show

In small groups, students make sets for the puppet show of *Pierre's Not There*.

They also make hand puppets of the seven major characters (listed at the beginning of the book).

Where possible, each group paints 2 or 3 (of the 9) scenes and 1 puppet.

With adult help, another group makes the puppet theatre, with red and white vertical stripes and velvet (or equivalent) curtains.

(See the description and illustration on p28-29.)

Perform the puppet show as scripted in the book.

THE ARTS

VISUAL ARTS

Dog vignettes

Dog (or wolf) vignettes are shown in silhouette at the end of the chapters and scenes throughout the book.

These add to the beguiling ambiguity of whether Lara becomes a dog, wolf or both and also serve as a dinkus.

A [dinkus](#) is a symbol, illustration or line that shows scene or other breaks.

Students find these in *Pierre's Not There* and then design their own dinkus that is appropriate to the story.

Wolf wanted poster

'Wolf Wanted' posters and banners appear on pages 111 and 158-9.

What information is shown in these? What formats are used? (poster and banner)

What further information would it be helpful to provide? e.g. where the wolves might be, who to contact if you know where they are, a reward.

Incorporate this additional useful information into a multimedia interactive Wanted Poster using [Glogster](#) or equivalent.

DRAMA

Puppet play and performance

In a surprising change, from page 59 when 'The Curtain Rises' and onwards, the written text changes from a narrative to a script. Instead of chapters, we read scenes. We are magically taken from a house in Sydney to a forest.

Play scripts for primary school are quite difficult to find so this is an ideal opportunity to read and perform a script. ([The School Magazine](#) is a good source of play scripts.)

The play script can first be read from the book with students taking roles. It can then be performed as a puppet play as a class (or in small groups).

Before performing the play script, students analyse differences in writing between narrative and play scripts e.g. how dialogue is written and how actions are described – italics, brackets.

Older students' attention can be directed to how the sensory descriptions (and setting) of the narrative at the beginning and end of the book become 'play instructions' in the play.

Students read and compare differences between narrative and play script texts, then write another episode of the story in both styles.

Paint sets/scenes

As an introduction, glimpses of the play scenes in words and pictures are shown on pages 48 and 49. Clear pictures of the sets are shown at the beginning of each scene.

Each group could paint a set based on the written description of the scene and the establishing shot illustration at the beginning of each scene e.g. Scene 1: The Forest, p60-61; Scene 8: The Royal Ballroom, p148-9.

Puppets

The puppets in *Pierre's Not There* are hand puppets. Students can make hand puppets, base them on words and pictures from the novel and play. There are many websites online which demonstrate how to make hand puppets.

Background to Mr Punch

Mr Punch is a fascinating puppet character, originally deriving from the Italian *commedia dell'arte* (another rewarding area to be explored itself) and the traditional Punch and Judy slapstick (and often violent) puppet plays. Punch is a trickster and is usually a marionette or glove (or hand) puppet. Some of his characteristics are incorporated in *Pierre's Not There*. These include his hooked nose and stick.

Where appropriate, students could research the character of Punch further on Wikipedia and at the online [World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts](#) and compare his portrayal in *Pierre's Not There* with his traditional and other guises such as wearing jester's motley.

Refer to WORKSHEET 2: Mr Punch

Extension activity

Older students could script the beginning and end narrative sections of the book as [Readers Theatre](#). This would allow for contrasting performance styles and the opportunity for more students to have performance roles.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ursula Dubosarsky was born and grew up in Sydney and wanted to be a writer from the age of six. She is now the author of over 60 books for children and young adults and her work is published all over the world. She has won several national literary awards and internationally she has been nominated for both the Hans Christian Andersen award and the Astrid Lindgren prize. Her most recent novel for children, *Brindabella*, was short-listed for the 2019 CBCA awards. Ursula Dubosarsky is the current Australian Children's Laureate.



IN THE WORDS OF THE AUTHOR

'I've wanted to write a book about a puppet show and the mystery of theatre since I was a child, when I made my own puppets and puppet plays to put on for my family. I would either write my own plays or put on plays I found in books in the library or adapt fairy stories – and once my brother and I put on a marathon performance of *The Hobbit*. We made the puppets out of papier mâché and painted the scenery and made the props. We used a chest of drawers as a stage and hid behind it.

'We made puppets at school as well and put on shows – I remember making a papier mâché Sneezzy for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and my mother made the red-checked dress for it. While all these memories are of hand puppets, I was also as a child taken by my parents to see shadow puppets from Indonesia, which made a great impression, as did the marionettes of *The Tintookies*.

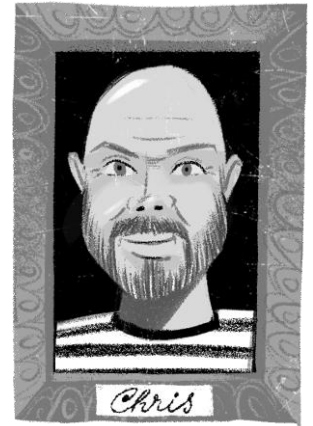
'I love to see puppet shows when I travel – because of course every culture in the world has some sort of tradition of puppets, as it is essentially a folk art, a travelling show, cheap to produce to bring entertainment and mystery to all levels of society. Puppetry is very associated with folktales and traditional stories – this certainly influenced *Pierre's Not There*. But it is also an art form that has attracted distinguished writers such as George Bernard Shaw and Federico García Lorca. As a writer, the form definitely attracts me as something out of the everyday.

'I think for children the magic of puppets is a sense of their toys coming to life, being given a voice and their own story. Children, I think, love being in control of the performance – but at the same time at the mercy of their imagination. I hope I have managed to convey this sense of excitement in *Pierre's Not There*.'

– Ursula Dubosarsky

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Christopher Nielsen is an award-winning Sydney-based illustrator specialising in children’s books, advertising and packaging. His artwork is inspired by a passion for mid-century design and has been short-listed for the CBCA Crichton Award and acknowledged by The British Book Design and Publication Awards, AGDA Awards, 3x3 Awards, Communication Arts, American Illustration and Society Of Illustrators NY. He has received Gold, Silver and Bronze medals in the Illustrators Australia Awards.



IN THE WORDS OF THE ILLUSTRATOR

‘My illustrations for *Pierre’s Not There* are inspired by my love of vintage mid-century artwork. I was struck by the imaginative way that the text shifts forms as Lara moves from her world into the puppet world, and I wanted my illustrations to also reflect this.

‘The main story that exists in the “real” world is illustrated in a basic style without many tones to indicate the reality and black and white nature of the here and now. These are small vignette-style illustrations, a couple per chapter.

‘As Lara enters the puppet theatre narrative and the story shifts into the dreamlike world of the screenplay, “the curtains rise” and the amount of artwork increases. Each new “Scene” in the play is introduced with a double-page illustration of the landscape to mimic the way a piece of background artwork changes in a puppet show between the curtains opening and closing. Each Scene also has a handful of full-page illustrations scattered throughout. The artwork style itself also changes. I have introduced more variety in tone and depth, to imply that in this world much more is possible, and that it’s almost a hyper-reality.

‘When Lara leaves the puppet world and the play script moves back to a narrative text, “the curtain falls”, and the illustrations revert to vignettes without much tone. This change in illustration to match the change in text gradually and subtly helps readers move back to the “real” world at the same pace that Lara does in the story.’

– Christopher Nielsen

ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE NOTES

Joy Lawn is a freelance writer and reviewer for *The Weekend Australian*, *Magpies* magazine and her blog, [PaperbarkWords](http://PaperbarkWords.com), specialising in children’s/YA and literary fiction. She has judged the Prime Minister’s Literary Awards, the NSW Premier’s Literary Awards, the Queensland Literary Awards, the CBCA Awards and others. Joy has taught in schools and universities, has worked for indie bookshops as a literature consultant and has an MA in Children’s Literature and Literacy. Joy is fascinated by ideas and images and how authors and illustrators express these with truth and originality.

CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

Brindabella by Ursula Dubosarsky, illustrated by Andrew Joyner

Ask Hercules Quick by Ursula Dubosarsky, illustrated by Andrew Joyner

The Boy Who Could Fly and Other Magical Plays for Children by Ursula Dubosarsky

The Word Spy and *The Return of the Word Spy*, *The Deep End* and *Tibby's Leaf* by Ursula Dubosarsky

The Blue Cat, *The Golden Day* and *The Red Shoe* (for upper primary to junior secondary) by Ursula Dubosarsky

'The Cryptic Casebook of Coco Carlomagno (and Alberta)' series by Ursula Dubosarsky:

The Perplexing Pineapple

The Looming Lamplight

The Missing Mongoose

The Dismal Daffodil

The Quivering Quavers

The Talkative Tombstone

Too Many Elephants in This House, *One Little Goat*, *Tim and Ed* and *The Terrible Plop* are picture books by Ursula Dubosarsky and Andrew Joyner

Jelly-Boy illustrated by Christopher Nielsen, written by Nicole Godwin

The Dream Peddler illustrated by Christopher Nielsen, written by Irena Kobald (for mature readers)

Little Red Riding Hood (traditional fairytale)

Woolvs in the Sitee by Margaret Wild, illustrated by Anne Spudvilas

The Wolves in the Walls by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Dave McKean

The Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy of Mr Punch by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Dave McKean (for mature readers)

The School Magazine includes play scripts

ADDITIONAL ONLINE RESOURCES

Ursula Dubosarsky's website: <http://ursuladubosarsky.squarespace.com/>

Christopher Nielsen's website: <http://www.chrisillo.com/>

Glogster: <http://edu.glogster.com/>

SIT strategy response: <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/s-i-t-surprising-interesting-troubling>

Dinkus: <https://www.nownovel.com/blog/dinkus-scene-breaks-uses/>

The School Magazine: <https://theschoolmagazine.com.au/>

World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts: <https://wepa.unima.org/en/punch-and-judy/>

Readers Theatre: <http://www.aaronshep.com/rt/>

Thumbnail sketches:

http://victoriatorf.com/media_design/thumbnails_sketches.html#:~:text=Thumbnail%20sketches%20are%20drawin g%20quick,an%20inch%20or%20two%20high

WORKSHEET I: CAST

Before reading *Pierre's Not There*, predict what the cast members will be like based on their names and pictures in the cast list. What do you think are some things they might do in the book?

CAST

(in order of appearance)



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WORKSHEET 2: MR PUNCH

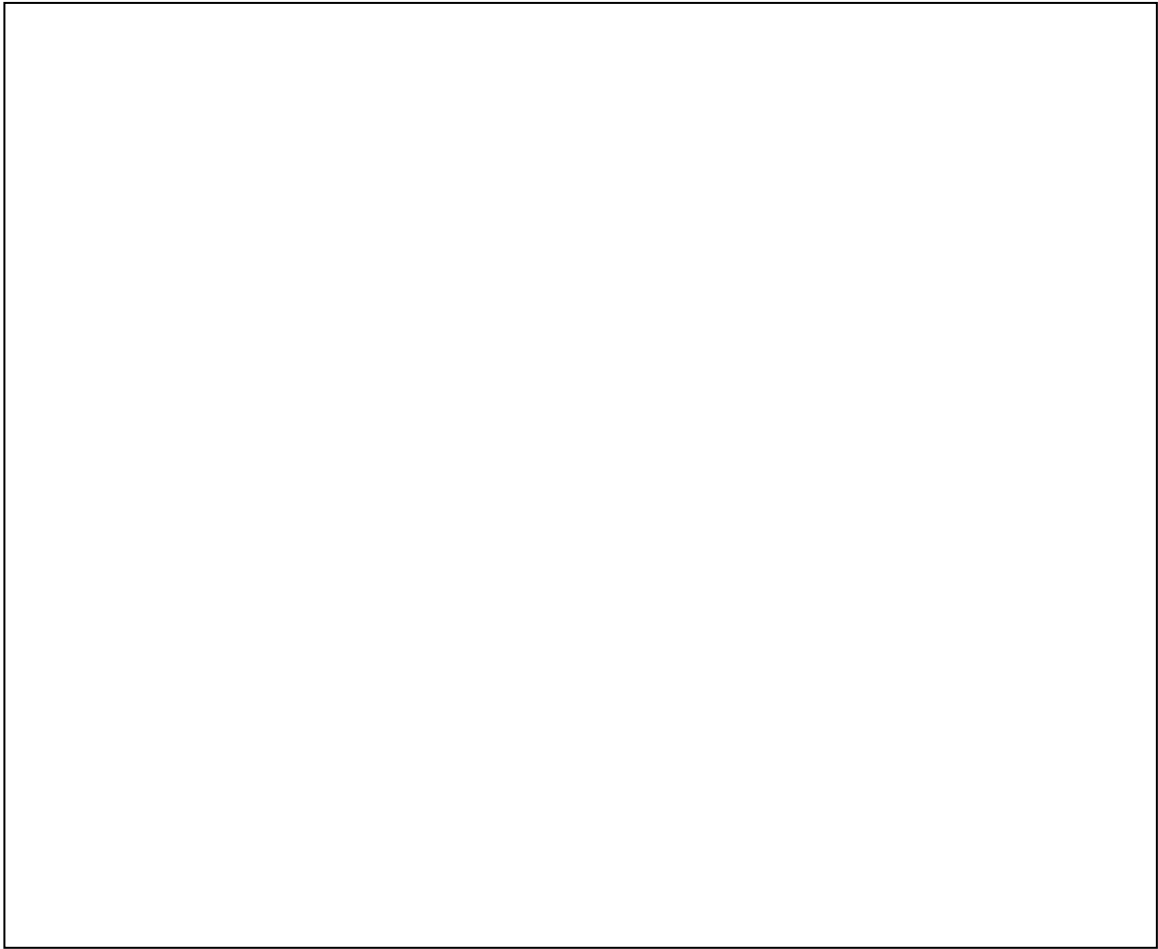
Mr Punch appears in a variety of guises in puppet plays over different times and countries.

Compare and contrast Mr Punch from the illustration and the written text on page 70 in *Pierre's Not There* with your research about Mr Punch in traditional puppet plays such as Punch and Judy.

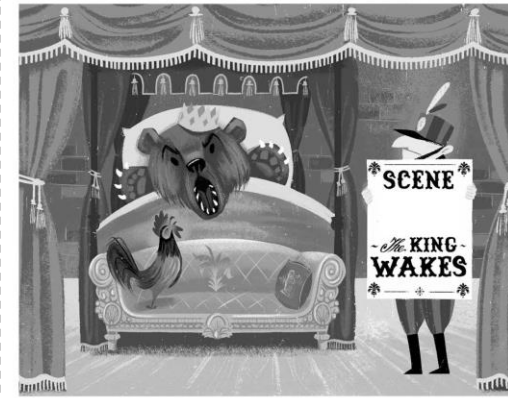
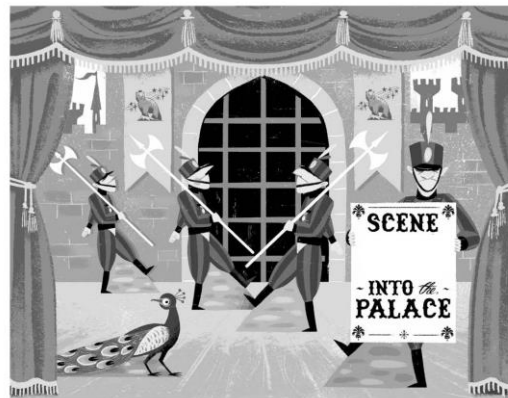
Draw a version of the traditional Mr Punch beside Christopher Nielsen's Mr Punch. Label typical characteristics of Mr Punch onto your picture and draw lines between those that match Mr Punch in the book.



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WORKSHEET 3: SHUFFLE SEQUENCING



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