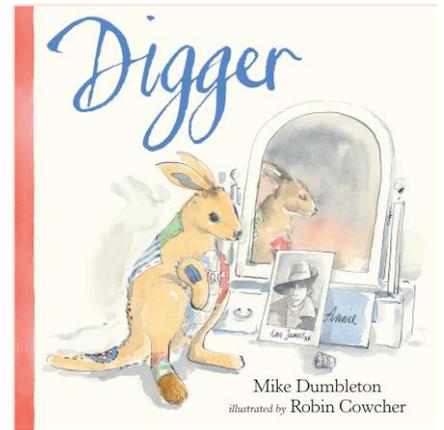


Digger

By Mike Dumbleton,
illustrated by Robin Cowcher

March 2018 ISBN 9781760296735 paperback
Recommended for 5 – 8-year-olds



Summary

Digger is the poignant story of a soft toy kangaroo given to James by his young sister, Annie, when he leaves for the Western Front. Safe inside the pouch of his top pocket, the small kangaroo is her brother's constant companion.

When Digger needs patching up after being in battle, Colette, a young French girl, is quick to assist. Then events unfold in a way that brings Annie and Colette together, even though they are on different sides of the world.

It is a touching insight into lasting relationships that flower in difficult times.

Digger highlights important events of the First World War and shows the impact of war on both soldiers and their loved-ones at home. Its imaginative telling of the story, including episodes seen from the perspective of a small fabric kangaroo, makes difficult-to-comprehend concepts about death and mourning accessible to young students.



The book specifically celebrates the enduring connection between Australia and the French town of Villers-Bretonneux, following that town's successful recapture by Australian soldiers on and about Anzac Day, 1918. This success is often cited as the beginning of the end of the war and Australia's main Western Front war memorial is located near the town.

It augments the focus on the achievements and sacrifices of Australians on the Western Front, which have sometimes had less prominence than the events at Gallipoli.

Use in the curriculum

Digger is an excellent addition to the many picture books and story books concerning WWI. Together, these books can support in-depth study of WWI and the ANZAC legend, meeting curriculum requirements in the areas of History, Geography, English, Visual Arts, Music, Technology and the General Capabilities of the Australian Curriculum.

Themes

- war
- loss
- friendship
- mementos and memorials
- WWI
- Villers-Bretonneux

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Mike Dumbleton on writing *Digger*

'I always wanted to write something about the events of that time, but I had no clear idea of what it might be, apart from not wanting it to be completely bleak. I finally made a start in 2015, after a repeat visit to the Australian National Memorial and the town at Villers-Bretonneux. The town was the scene of a remarkable Australian victory in 1918 and the final resting place of thousands of Australian soldiers. It is also filled with reminders of Australia such as a kangaroo on the town welcome sign, a school named 'École Victoria', and a large sign at the school saying, in French, 'Do Not Forget Australia'.

'Unfortunately, the start I made was a false start. The first drafts of the story didn't work. There were more facts than feelings, with too many historical details. However, I had found a character I felt attached to in my writing, a small kangaroo made of scrap materials, called Digger. Then I discovered a touching photo, from 1919, of French children tending graves at the Adelaide Cemetery, near Villers-Bretonneux. Finally, the story started coming together in a way that seemed to work. It was real and it was sad, but it was moving and uplifting as well.'

Discussion questions and activities

- Ask students to bring in or describe their most precious stuffed animal or toy. Would they ever give it to somebody else? Under what circumstances? Make a display of photos of the children with their toys.
- Find images (or, better still, the real things) of a digger's slouch hat and a red poppy of remembrance. Elicit discussion about the significance of these images and what they represent.
- Have students research the Battle of Villers-Bretonneux and answer the following questions:
 - How many Australian soldiers died in the battle?
 - How did Australia help rebuild the town after the battle?
 - What is inscribed above the board in the Villers-Bretonneux school classrooms?
- Have your class examine the front and back cover images of the book and in a whole-class discussion ask students:
 - What in the image tells you this story will be about an Australian soldier?
 - What sort of flower is the girl putting in the vase on the back of the book and what is the significance of this flower?
 - What are the three most prominent colours in the front and back covers? Explain why you think the artist chose these colours.
 - [Back cover text] What do you think Annie means when she says, 'A Digger for a digger? Why does the first use of the word 'digger' feature a capital letter and the second does not?
- Turn to the first double-page spread of the story showing Annie sewing the name Digger on the toy kangaroo. Ask students what the dominant colour on this spread is and what this colour suggests about Annie and James' home life in Australia? Do they think it was a happy and comfortable life? What are the dominant colours when James and Digger are on the ship sailing to Europe and what does these colours tell us about their journey? Now turn to the double-page spread where James and Digger are advancing into battle. What is the dominant colour here and how does this colour make the students feel about the conditions of war?



In the classroom...

- Explain to your class that authors are very careful about the words they include in a picture book and that every word serves a purpose. Now ask students why Mike Dumbleton might have used the words 'whizz of bullets' and 'crump of shells' on the page showing James and Digger going into battle.

Extension question: what is the literary term for words that mimic the sound or action the word refers to? Can you name five other words that do this?

- Turn to the page showing Digger at the moment of an explosion on the battlefield and ask students how the artist conveyed the strength of the blast using line, colour, framing and perspective? Do students think the drama of the moment is intensified by just showing Digger and not James? Why?
- Examine the illustrations on these pages:
 - 'And before long, James had fully recovered as well.'
 - 'Digger was tattered and torn...'
 - 'When Annie opened the package...'

What extra information is in the pictures, but not in the words? As well as Digger, what was sent home to James' family?

- Ask students to retell the story of Digger in their own words, starting with 'Digger is the story of a toy kangaroo...'
- Write a letter from Annie to Colette thanking her for patching up Digger and telling her how she felt when he arrived back home without James.
- In a whole class discussion, point out to students that the copy on the back cover of Digger describes the story as 'beautiful and heartwarming' and ask them if they agree and to explain, in their own words, why they think this.
- Ask students to examine the end-papers and to talk about the mood that they set at the beginning and end of the book. Also, ask them to translate the French shown here and explain its significance to the story.
- Children could be involved in craft activities of knitting, making a memorial patchwork quilt ('friendship quilt' of the class, based on the endpapers and featuring their own favourite toys) and making stuffed animals. (See *Bessie's War* and *Once a Shepherd: a story of love and war* – books from the lists below.)

Picture books about WWI

Villers-Bretonneux

The Promise: the town that never forgets, n'oublions jamais l'Australie by Derek Guille, illustrated by Kaff-eine. One Day Hill 2002
In English and French.

Do Not Forget Australia by Sally Murphy, illustrated by Sonia Kretschmar. Walker Books Australia 2012

The Poppy by Andrew Plant. Hybrid Publishers; Ford St Publishing 2014

ANZAC Day and Gallipoli

My Grandad Marches on Anzac Day by Catriona Hoy, illustrated by Benjamin Johnson. Lothian 2006

Lest We Forget - Kei Wareware Tatou by Feana Tu'akoi, illustrated by Elspeth Alix Batt. Scholastic NZ 2011

A boy who hates war comes to an accommodation with ANZAC Day ceremonies after hearing the stories of war from his own family.

A Maori edition, retold by Katerina Mataira, was published in the same year.

Harry and the Anzac Poppy by John Lockyer, illustrated by Raewyn Whaley. Reed NZ 1997

Gallipoli by Kerry Greenwood, illustrated by Annie White. Scholastic Australia 2014
More text than usual. Emphasises the mateship and selflessness of the soldiers.

Lone Pine by Susie Brown and Margaret Warner, illustrated by Sebastian Ciaffaglione. Hardie Grant Egmont 2012

Based on a true story, tells about the many memorial trees planted in Australia from the seeds of a Gallipoli pine tree.

One Minute's Silence by D. Metzenthien and M. Camilleri. Allen & Unwin 2014

A class of students imagine Gallipoli fighting during the one minute's silence held at school.

WWI

Once a Shepherd: a story of love and war by Glenda Millard, illustrated by Phil Lesnie. Walker Books Australia 2014

Features a cloth toy, made of the child's father's military great coat. This child will never know his father.

Bessie's War by Krista Bell, illustrated by Belinda Elliott. Windy Hollow Books 2017

Shows the contribution of women at home via the Australian Comforts Fund. The theme of knitting could pair with the sewing in *Digger* for craft activities.

A Soldier, A Dog and A Boy by Libby Hathorn, illustrated by Phil Lesnie. Hachette Australia 2016

No battles are featured: Albert is joyfully walking through the French countryside. He shows empathy and compassion to a French orphan.

Picture books illustrating well-known poems and songs from WWI

We're All Australians Now by Andrew Barton (Banjo) Paterson, illustrated by Mark Wilson. HarperCollins Publishers Australia 2015

A modern interpretation of a nationalist poem written by Banjo Paterson at the beginning of the First World War.

In Flanders Fields by Norman Jorgensen, illustrated by Brian Harrison-Lever. Fremantle Arts Centre Press 2002

One of the most famous WWI poems, written by John McCrae, a Canadian military doctor, May 1915. The poem is said to have inspired two women, one American and one French, to campaign to have the red Flanders poppy adopted as a sign of remembrance of war.

And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda: the unforgettable song about Gallipoli by Eric Bogle, illustrated by Bruce Whatley. Allen & Unwin 2015

Perhaps for older students, but the song is a modern classic.

Along the Road to Gundagai by Jack O'Hagan, illustrated by Andrew McLean. Omnibus Books 2014

Though perhaps not written as a war song, this book places the lyrics of a popular folk song against a young soldier's experience of WWI.

I Was Only Nineteen by John Schumann, illustrated by Craig Smith. Allen & Unwin 2014. NOT about WWI. But illustrates one of Australia's most famous anti-war songs (about the Vietnam War.)

Animals in WWI

Torty and the Soldier, A Story of a True WWI Survivor by Jennifer Beck, illustrated by Fifi Colston. Scholastic NZ 2017

A remarkable story of survival and of the work of medical officers during the war. Torty is still alive in New Zealand.

Midnight: the story of a light horse by Mark Greenwood, illustrated by Frané Lessac. Walker Books 2014

A true story of one of the last great cavalry charges in history, by the Australian Light Horse at Beersheba.

The Anzac Puppy by Peter Millett, illustrated by Trish Bowles. Scholastic NZ 2014

Based on a real NZ mascot and featuring life in a British training camp.

Simpson and His Donkey by Mark Greenwood, illustrated by Frané Lessac. Walker Books 2008



The author

Mike Dumbleton is a writer and literacy consultant. He has worked in South Australian high schools, New York City schools and as a Literacy Curriculum Officer for the South Australian Education Department. In addition to children's books, he has written a range of educational texts. Mike's picture book *Passing On* was shortlisted for the Children's Book Council of Australia 2002 awards, and Mike was also the recipient of a 2005 Minister's Award for Outstanding Contribution to Improving Literacy, which recognises his work both as an educator and a writer over an extended period. In his spare time Mike enjoys travel, trying to keep fit, jazz and watching most sports, especially basketball, soccer and tennis.

The illustrator

Robin Cowcher is an illustrator who enjoys drawing people, animals, food, fashion and for children. She spent many years working at *The Age* newspaper as a designer and illustrator and lastly as the illustrations editor. Her book *Little Dog and the Christmas Wish* (written by Corinne Fenton) was chosen as the subject for the 2015 60th anniversary Myer Melbourne Christmas windows. It was also shortlisted for the CBCA Crichton Awards for first time children's book illustrators. She contributes editorial illustrations regularly to *The Age* and other publications and also illustrates cookbooks. She lives in Melbourne and enjoys travel, watercolour sketching, printmaking and reading.

