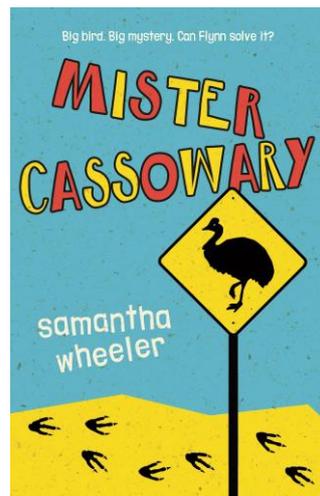


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MISTER CASSOWARY

Samantha Wheeler



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

When Flynn goes to Mission Beach in north Queensland to help sell his late grandfather's banana farm, he realises just how far he and his fly-in-fly-out father have drifted apart. Not only that, he wonders why there is so much secrecy surrounding Grandad Barney's death.

Flynn slowly begins to uncover more about his grandad but still has many unanswered questions. Why was he called Mister Cassowary? Who was Big Blue? And why did his dad leave home at such a young age?

Can local girl Abby help Flynn discover the truth? And will two lost baby cassowaries hold the key that will unlock the secrets and bring Flynn and his dad closer?

Mister Cassowary is an engaging novel about trust, growing up and relationships.

THEMES

Relationships:

- As Flynn's dad is a fly-in-fly-out worker, he and Flynn have grown apart. Their relationship is slowly rekindled as a result of their journey north.
- Flynn regrets not knowing his Grandad Barney better. He feels closer to him now than when he was alive.

Grief:

- Flynn's dad is grieving not only the loss of his father but the loss of their relationship over the years as well.

Growing up:

- Flynn is frustrated that his father won't let him grow up. He is determined to prove that he can take on responsibility and is worthy of his dad's trust.

Cassowaries/Endangered Species:

- The plight of endangered cassowaries battling with the loss of habitat and threats to their survival is integral to *Mister Cassowary*.
- The diet, behaviour, habitat and appearance of cassowaries are included.

Environment:

- Development and growth is affecting Australia's native flora and fauna.

Cyclones:

- Flynn is caught in a cyclone while in north Queensland.

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WRITING STYLE:

Mister Cassowary is written in first person, past tense. The narrative voice is tangible and realistic. Younger readers will enjoy the adventure and easily identify with Flynn and his plight to save the two cassowary chicks, Peanut and Jumble.

STUDY NOTES:

- From the first page, Samantha Wheeler takes the reader straight to the ‘moment of change’, introducing the narrative’s problems almost immediately. Discuss the importance that tension plays in stories.
- Flynn quickly becomes a ‘fish out of water’ because he finds himself in unfamiliar territory, firstly by spending so much time alone with his father and secondly in leaving Brisbane to head to the far north. How does this deliberate isolation of the protagonist help *Mister Cassowary* to engage its audience?
- Flynn talks briefly about the things he usually does during summertime such as watching cricket and playing new computer games. How is this summer different for Flynn? Write a journal entry about how you normally spend your summers.
- Locate Mission Beach on a map of Australia. Use Google Earth to capture a visual image of the rainforests and environment in which the story is set.
- Throughout the text, Flynn’s dad refers to him as ‘Flynnie’. Why does this annoy Flynn so much? Have you ever felt like Flynn in this way? Discuss the theme of growing up as it’s presented in *Mister Cassowary*.
- The author uses effective descriptive language to create vivid images throughout the text, such as the humidity and denseness of the rainforest on p72 and the cyclone on p124. Re-read these passages and discuss the use of descriptive language to create these scenes. Try some of these techniques in your own writing.
- Discuss Samantha Wheeler’s use of figurative language and the way in which this contributes to the text. Some examples include:
 - Tall palm trees bending like old men towards the waves p4
 - My pulse throbbing like a jackhammer in my ears p6
 - The animal’s long legs were cycling around frantically p6
 - His eyebrows were clashing together like dark storm clouds p7
 - I tore my eyes from the spidery lines p7
 - The house looked lonely and sad p9
 - The sun on my head felt hot enough to roast a lizard p9
 - The house was flooded with afternoon light p10
 - My hammering heart settled p10
 - Ice-cream towered in delicious piles in the cabinet p28

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- My words whooshed out in a rush p32
- Fingers of light filtered down through the circular palm fronds above me, making a kaleidoscope of brightness and shadows p44
- Heavy rain drumming on the roof p52
- Hanging vines twisting like party streamers above us p72
- Their winding roots were like octopus arms twisting around our feet p72
- As if the mention of the centre was like being stabbed in the arm with a fork p77
- I felt like lava was suddenly bubbling in my chest p86
- The wind made the green shade clothes...billow about like sails on a boat p109
- The rain slashed down like daggers p127
- Why does Flynn think Grandad Barney's house looked 'lonely and sad' (p9)?
- Why is Flynn's dad so reluctant to talk about his feelings with Flynn?
- How does Flynn's relationship with his father change as the story develops?
- How would you describe the relationship that Flynn has with his mum? How is it different from his relationship with his father?
- What correlation is there between Flynn's relationship with his dad and the one between his dad and Grandad Barney?
- What role does Abby play in *Mister Cassowary*? Why is she a necessary character to include?
- Choose a scene from *Mister Cassowary* to illustrate, using the author's imagery to help.
- Why isn't Flynn's dad more honest about his fears and weaknesses?
- Why are Peanut and Jumble such an important inclusion in this text?
- Create a picture book about the hide-and seek chicks, Peanut and Jumble.
- Compare *Mister Cassowary* with Jeannie Baker's *Where the Forest Meets the Sea*. Discuss the way in which both authors have addressed the conflict between development and the environment.
- Choose a theme or scene from *Mister Cassowary* on which to write a poem.
- Research rainforests and their importance. Create a presentation to share your understanding.
- Why are cassowaries so important to the ecosystem?
- Write your own newspaper article about Flynn and his adventures to help save the cassowary chicks.
- Discover more about cassowaries and their relationship with dinosaurs.

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- View footage of a cyclone on YouTube. Using this footage, create an 'X Chart' to brainstorm words and phrases that could be used to describe a cyclone. In each section of the 'X', jot down what you would 'See', 'Hear', 'Smell' and 'Feel'. Use this chart to help write your description. See Samantha Wheeler's description on p133 for more ideas.
- Read the Cool Cassowary Facts at the end of the text. Visit the websites about cassowaries suggested by Samantha Wheeler. Take notes on this endangered creature. Create an information report, photo journal, podcast or brochure about cassowaries, including their diet, appearance, habitat and threats.
- Develop an 'Action Plan' to help raise awareness of the plight of the endangered cassowary.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I first stumbled on the idea of writing about the cassowary when researching PowerPoint presentations for the re-write of *Smooch & Rose*. My publisher, Kristina, had suggested Rose make a mistake in her first presentation about a koala and I was asking students about their experiences. One student I was speaking to was called Mekai, in Grade 3, and he had to do a presentation on the dunnart. He said he'd rather do the cassowary as they were so endangered and so scary, so we started to look them up. I didn't really know much about them before this conversation, and I was amazed at how beautiful they were, and how dangerous!

I made a trip to Mission Beach to find out more, stayed with a writing friend and tossed about some story angles. This was getting exciting. Then we went exploring, being scared witless (and running away) when we heard a cassowary making booming sounds from within the scrub. We also saw lots of road signs warning of cassowaries crossing, lots of fresh piles of poo, and met the great folk at C4 Environment Centre. Peter Rowles at C4 explained about the plight of the cassowary, with land clearing, cars, dogs, etc, but then he really got my attention when he mentioned Lot 66. Lot 66 is a large piece of land near Mission Beach, saved from development by Peter Garrett, then returned to developers, only to be bought back by locals and government funding, just in time. It provides a safe corridor for cassowaries between the forest and the coast, but there is still a lot of work to do to save the cassowaries from extinction. The buyback scheme mentioned in the book is the cassowaries' only chance, as it will save their land from being cleared, and ensure they have rainforest trees for years to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samantha Wheeler fell in love with animals when she received a tortoise at the age of 6. After a childhood of rescuing animals, she studied agriculture, worked with dairy farmers, and taught science in high schools. Her first book, *Smooch &*

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Rose was inspired by koalas, and her second, *Spud & Charli*, tackled bats, horses and Hendra virus. Her third book, *Mister Cassowary*, is a mystery that evolved after an exciting expedition into the north Queensland rainforest.