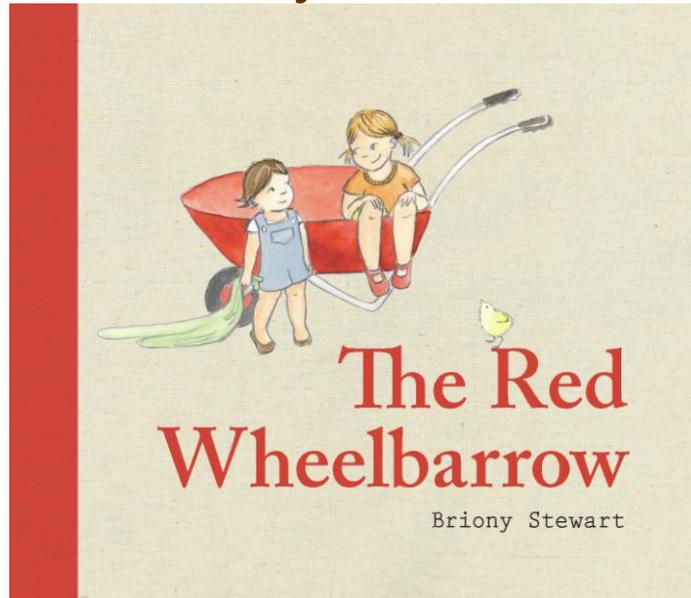


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THE RED WHEELBARROW

Briony Stewart



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising Teacher Librarian
in context with the Australian Curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

The Red Wheelbarrow is a wordless picture book that celebrates the simple games that young children play using their imagination. As the dual narrative unfolds, two sisters play in a red wheelbarrow in the yard as some chickens go about their usual business in the background.

THEMES

Play
Imagination
Family – especially sibling relationships
Friendship
Memories
Sharing

ILLUSTRATION STYLE

The illustrations in *The Red Wheelbarrow* are fairly simplistic. They use bright colours to evoke fun and life in the characters and settings.

STUDY NOTES

- After reading *The Red Wheelbarrow*, discuss with a partner what you think is happening in the two narratives – that of the chickens on the left page opening, and that of the sisters on the right.
- Looking at the body language and facial expressions of the sisters, explain what is happening in the story.
 - How does their body language help the reader to know what is occurring?
 - Likewise, examine the body language of the chickens.
 - Discuss how the illustrations make it possible for the audience to ‘read’ the story, even though there are no words.
 - Can you think of other books that use this same technique?
- On some of the page openings, the two narratives seem to coincide.
 - Find such page openings, for example when both the young chick and the little sister are eating what appears to be a worm. (The little girl is eating a lolly snake.)
 - Another example is when the girls go home and the chicks go back under the hen’s feathers.
 - Allow students to explore and discover these parallel narratives themselves before discussing as a group.
- A blanket is used in *The Red Wheelbarrow*.

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- Write a recount of a time that you and your sibling or friend invented a game using a blanket.
- With younger students, bring in some blankets and allow them to play their own games under the blankets.
- Use speech/thought balloons to create a comic strip version of *The Red Wheelbarrow*.
- Choose some other objects (to replace the wheelbarrow and blanket) and brainstorm ideas for a story based on these objects.
 - Try writing a whole class story based on these ideas.
- Brainstorm words that reflect *The Red Wheelbarrow*. Create a poster about the text on www.wordle.net
- *The Red Wheelbarrow* was inspired by William Carlos Williams' poem of the same title. Read this poem and discuss how Briony Stewart has interwoven the poem's sentiments into her picture book.

*so much depends
upon a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens.*

- In small groups, create a mime or a play to re-enact *The Red Wheelbarrow*.
- With a partner, create the text for *The Red Wheelbarrow*.
 - Each partner should choose one of the narratives on which to write the text (either the left or the right side).
- Write a reflection of your own childhood games.
- The two sisters have a squabble over the lollies, but this is fixed when the chicken jumps into the wheelbarrow. How has this helped the girls move on from their dispute?
- Create two story graphs to show what happens in each side of the page openings.

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- How are the children and the chicks similar?
- Briony Stewart has inserted a photograph of her and her sister playing in a red wheelbarrow.
 - Find a photo of you and your sibling/friend playing in the yard.
 - Use this photograph as inspiration for your own wordless picture book or flip book.
- Use other simple poems to use as stimulus for creating either a picture book or a short series of sketches that tell a story.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

The Red Wheelbarrow came about after I decided to try and tell a story with pictures. As a writer I often rely on words, so the illustrator in me wanted the challenge of taking all the words away. In order to do that I thought it might help think about someone else's words.

I have always liked the poem *The Red Wheelbarrow* by William Carlos Williams. For me it is a poem that captures a moment in time, as well as a whole scene, with a minimum of carefully selected objects. It also seems to suggest that there is an importance in small, everyday moments.

As Stanley Archer has said of the opening line of the poem, 'We wish to know what these things matter, to whom they matter.'¹ So I guess in my way the illustrations I came up with are both an imagined answer to Archer's question, as well as a visual equivalent of the poem. In my interpretation, however, I ask the reader not to imagine the images, but to imagine the words.

The poem reminded me of the simplicity of childhood; sometimes so much *does* depend on an old wheelbarrow and a chicken. As I remembered a summer afternoon I spent in a wheelbarrow with my little sister (a photo of which I included in the book) I started to draw pictures of the two of us, remembering things about the way we used to be. I remembered whole afternoons spent with something as simple as a wheelbarrow and a bag of lollies or an old box and a teddy bear, things like that. And in that time there would be a whole spectrum of small events – fights, friendship, silliness, selfishness, sharing, and mysteries experienced. I guess I was trying to capture this small joy we all had, that young children have, of living in the moment and enjoying nothing more sublime than the tiny miracles of everyday life.

¹ Stanley Archer, "Glazed in Williams' 'The Red Wheelbarrow'", *Concerning Poetry* (1976) 9:2.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Briony Stewart grew up in the inner-city suburbs of Perth, peeping over alleyway fences in search of great mysteries and honing her excellent tree-climbing abilities. Despite dabbling in entomology, crime solving and a desire to own a deli, Briony showed a talent for both art and writing during her school years. After graduating with a double degree in Creative Writing and Art from Curtin University, she published her first book, *Kumiko and the Dragon*, which won the Aurealis Award for children's short fiction, and was a CBCA Notable Book in 2008.