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CHOOK CHOOK: MEI'S SECRET PETS

Wai Chim



Teachers' Notes

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

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Synopsis	2
Themes	2
Family and Relationships	2
Grief	2
Kindness	2
Pets	2
Chinese Culture	3
Writing Style	3
Study Notes	3
Author Motivation	7
About the Author	7

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SYNOPSIS

Since the death of Mei's father, her mother has forbidden any animals from living on the family farm. When Mei finds two baby chickens, she hides them from her ma, confiding only in her older brother, Guo.

When Ma discovers the chickens, she sells them to the forbidding one-eyed butcher, much to Mei's dismay. Mei is fearful that her beloved chickens will meet with a terrible fate.

This is a heartfelt story about love, kindness and the importance of family. It is also the story of grief as Mei and her family learn to deal with the death of Mei's father.

THEMES

Family and Relationships:

- Mei and her brother Guo have a loyal and loving relationship.
- Trying to provide safety and security for her family, Ma runs the farm the best way she can, even at the risk of alienating Mei.
- The relationship between Bao and his father, the one-eyed butcher, in turn helps Mei.
- Ma is very strict, however when she lets down her hardened exterior, it is clear she only wants the best for her family.
- Mei has a very nurturing and loving relationship with her chickens Little and Lo.

Grief:

- Mei and her family are grieving the death of her father.
- Since Pa's passing, Ma won't have animals on the farm. But when she finally sees the 'soft heart' of her husband in Mei, she changes her mind.
- Mei and Ma have been scared to miss their father and husband. When they admit that they do miss him, they begin to heal.

Kindness:

- Mei gives her pinwheel to a boy she meets at the market. It is his birthday.
- Mei's act of generosity is repaid with the best possible outcome.
- Ma also shows kindness in letting Little and Lo come back to the farm and allowing Guo to become a farmer.

Pets:

- Pets play an important role in family life.
- Mei is willing to make sacrifices to safeguard her chickens.

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Chinese Culture:

- Many scenes in the story are based on Wai Chim's parents' experiences of growing up in rural China and Hong Kong.
- The story was inspired by a traditional Chinese nursery rhyme, which is featured in the text.
- Aspects of Chinese culture are introduced in the text.

WRITING STYLE

Chook Chook: Mei's Secret Pets is written in first person, past tense. Mei's narration is innocent and endearing. Wai Chim uses an effective range of figurative language and description to draw the reader into the text. It is suitable for younger readers, aged 7+.

STUDY NOTES

- The first word the audience reads is '*pip*'. This is repeated later on the first page, shortly followed by a '*peep*'. Discuss the way in which the author has broken up the first page of the narrative. Why has she chosen to do this? How does it help the reader to be drawn immediately into the text? Does it intrigue you as a reader and make you want to turn the page? Why is it so important that introductions work quickly to entice the reader?
- Wai Chim uses original and effective figurative language throughout the text, for example, to describe the baby chickens on p4. Use her description of the 'two tiny puffs of soft yellow down' to explore poetic devices such as onomatopoeia, repetition and alliteration.
- Discuss examples of figurative language from the text including:
 - Like a small plane trying to take off (p5)
 - Young shoots...waving hello to the distant mountains (p5)
 - Sssss (p6) (to describe a snake in the grass)
 - BOOM! (p7) (to describe a clap of thunder)
 - Cold wet drops peppered down (p8)
 - Looked like miniature yellow porcupines (p11)
 - Like a band of termites had set up camp (p39)
 - Like maggots crawling over his skin (p44/45)
 - Like an out-of-control windmill (p63)
 - The pinwheel fluttered away, tap-tap-tapping with the bursts of wind (p92)
 - Lines of bok choy and cabbages were bent over, worshipping the powerful gusts (p93)
 - Beams of moonlight cascaded softly into the room (p124)

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- Stop reading at page 10. Make predictions about the relationship Mei shares with her brother, Guo. What inferences can the reader make about this relationship? Track their relationship as you read the text. How is this different from Mei's relationship with her mother?
- What do you think happened to Mei's father? How has his passing affected the family?
- Mei names the chicks Little and Lo. Why has she chosen these names? How did your family choose the names for your pets?
- On p30, Mei talks about Lo doing martial arts. Try sketching Lo performing martial arts. Examine how illustrators use physical features such as wings and beaks to show emotion and action.
- Compare *Chook Chook: Mei's Secret Pets* with a range of picture books that also feature chickens. Examples include Lisa Shanahan's *Bear and Chook* series, Libby Gleeson's *Shutting the Chooks In*, Briony Stewart's *The Red Wheelbarrow*, Mark Svensden's *Whacko the Chook* and Gus Gordon's *Wendy*.
- Using the description of the toy that Mei sees at the market, predict what this special toy might be (p40/41). Try writing your own description of another toy such as a kaleidoscope or a kite.
- Keep a journal of the Chinese customs that are shared in *Chook Chook: Mei's Secret Pets*, for example, calling elderly women 'Paw Paw' or 'Grandmother'; foods eaten; language such as 'Jie Jie' meaning 'Sister' etc.
- Re-read the description of the one-eyed butcher on p44/45. Examine the descriptive techniques used by the author to describe this character. Sketch the butcher. Use a graphic organiser to create a character profile of the one eyed-butcher. (A range of graphic organisers are available at <http://my.hrw.com/nsmedia/intgos/html/igo.htm> – Holt Interactive Graphic Organizers.) Include extracts or examples from the text to show the role he plays in the story. Afterwards, discuss this character. Is he as fearsome as Mei first thought? Would Mei and Ma perceive this character in the same way? What about Guo? Discuss.
- What does Mei mean when she says that 'my screams caught in my throat'? (p45)

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- In the market, Mei accidentally knocks over a bin full of sheep's eyes. Re-read this passage on p45, discussing the descriptive techniques used by the author. Try writing your own piece of description. Use an X-Chart (see, hear, feel, smell) to help brainstorm ideas for this piece of writing.
- In small groups, re-create the scene of the marketplace in a dramatic performance.
- Ma is very strict and serious. What do we know about Ma? Why do you think she is such a stern character? How does she change from the beginning of the novel to the end?
- Re-read the nursery rhyme on p58/59. Discuss how this nursery rhyme fits so well within *Chook Chook: Mei's Secret Pets*.
- Read some other Chinese nursery rhymes. As a class, frame ideas for a narrative based on one of these nursery rhymes. Include a range of possible characters, settings, and complications to suit this narrative. Write your own story based on some of these ideas.
- Mei says that she 'felt a growing sense of dread settling onto my shoulders. I tried to undo the knot in my stomach.' (p64/65) Discuss the physical signs that Mei experienced. Write a reflection of a time when you too have felt a sense of dread or fear. Include a description of the way you were feeling, both physically and emotionally.
- Re-read p70. Carefully examine the vocabulary and phrasing chosen by Wai Chim, discussing the effectiveness of these choices. Examples include:
 - She yanked the dress roughly over my body, the scratchy wool scraping my skin
 - I couldn't find my voice; it was buried under the prickly dress
 - The heavy fabric strangling my feet, binding me to the ground
- The one-eyed butcher visits Mei's farm, bringing with him some early springtime ducks. Re-read the description of these ducks on p74/75. Why do you think the author has included this scene? How does it bring together some of the other elements of this story?
- The author uses flashbacks and dreams to share Mei's memories of her father with the reader, for example on p76/77 and p79/80. Discuss these techniques. Try using them in your own writing. Notice that these dreams and flashbacks are not over-used. What do we learn about Mei's father from these parts of the narrative?

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- Mei describes a man working at the markets as being like a rabbit (p108). Discuss the importance of readers visualising as they read and how writers encourage this through their writing.
- Why does Mei give her beloved pinwheel to Bao? What does this tell us about Mei's character?
- Ma tells Mei that her father 'always had a soft heart' (p125). Why does Ma tell Mei this? How does this help us understand Ma better?
- Mei tells Ma that she misses her father (p125). Ma replies, 'Oh Mei, I miss him too' (p126). They hug and cry until they 'could hug and cry no more' (p126). Why is this scene so significant to the story? Do you think either Mei or Ma had been able to grieve properly prior to this?
- Guo and Mei have a really strong relationship. Find examples of this in the text.
- Write an additional chapter to show how you think things changed following the return of Little and Lo to the farm.
- Why do you think Ma wanted Guo to continue his education rather than become a farmer?
- How are the one-eyed butcher and Ma similar?
- Were you surprised by the ending of the story? Were you expecting Bao to be the butcher's son? Discuss the importance of endings in stories. Should readers be able to correctly predict the endings or is an 'unexpected yet expected' ending more effective?
- Create your own picture book version of *Chook Chook: Mei's Secret Pets*. Remember that most picture books are 32 pages long. Use a storyboard to plan the pagination of the story. Create a dustcover and blurb as well.
- Choose a scene from *Chook Chook: Mei's Secret Pets* to re-create in another form such as a dramatisation or script.
- Create a digital representation of the themes of kindness and friendship as shown in *Chook Chook: Mei's Secret Pets*. You could use Photo Story or Prezi.

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- Create a word cloud reflecting your understanding and thoughts of *Chook Chook: Mei's Secret Pets* using www.wordle.net.
- Create a sociogram to illustrate the relationships between the various characters in *Chook Chook: Mei's Secret Pets*.
- Having explored Wai Chim's use of figurative language throughout the text, write some poetry that reflects the themes of *Chook Chook: Mei's Secret Pets*. Brainstorm ideas and images before writing. Include your own examples of figurative language.
- Discuss the idea that Mei may have pre-judged the one-eyed butcher. How was she influenced by the fact that he was a butcher and had a disfigured face? How might meeting Bao have changed her perceptions of his father?
- Make your own pinwheel, following the instructions carefully. (www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Pinwheel)
- Write your own procedural directions for making a pinwheel or another toy such as a chatterbox.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Writing *Chook Chook: Mei's Secret Pets* gave me the chance to step into a world that was very personal and important to me, albeit entirely unfamiliar. The setting and events that happen to Mei are largely based on the stories of my mum and dad growing up in semi-rural Hong Kong and in China. Both of my parents are immigrants and when they came to the Western world, they found the customs and cultures quite surprising and strange. Mei is the perfect tour guide to take us through her world, bringing to life the sights and sounds of rural China, with an amazing sense of childlike wonder.

Mei's love for all creatures great and small is something I hope young Australian readers will be inspired and moved by. *Chook Chook: Mei's Secret Pets* speaks to what I believe is a very important truth, one that defines me as a writer – that with kindness and hard work, amazing things will happen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wai Chim grew up in New York City but has spent the past several years living in sunny Sydney. When she was five years old, she started her first book about

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a 'daddy chicken'; it came to three pages, most of it pictures. It only took her more than twenty years to come up with the rest!

Chook Chook: Mei's Secret Pets is Wai's first published book. Part of the internet generation, Wai currently works in digital marketing. You can find her online at www.waichim.com.