



TEACHERS' NOTES

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The Light

Written and illustrated by Jo Oliver

Synopsis

The Light is the story of a family living one hundred years ago at Montague Island Light Station, 9 km offshore from Narooma, on the south coast of NSW Australia. The story begins by chronicling one day in their lives, as they work together and play when a change of weather brings a storm and a shipwreck.

Music in *The Light* is a source of expression, solace, entertainment and connection between family members in their isolated situation. Light, music and warmth create a place of security and comfort into which the shipwrecked men are welcomed.

Background

Shining across the sea in all weathers, lighthouses protect ships and sailors from dangerous shoals, headlands, bars and reefs. Shipping was the main form of transport for passengers and goods to the south coast until roads improved in the late 1950s. Lighthouse beams could be seen from one to another, lighting the NSW coast 'like a street with lamps'. Lights such as Montague protected thousands of lives from the fate of shipwrecks common earlier in the 19th century.

The book's endpapers show the original plans for the light station by Colonial Architect James Barnett 1878, with permission of National Archives of Australia. The Montague Island Lighthouse was built in 1881. The tower is constructed of interlocking granite blocks quarried on the island. In 1910 the light was upgraded to 250,000 candlepower shining 40 nautical miles out to sea. The keepers were housed in what were described as 'lofty and commodious' quarters, high on the granite summit, steadfastly facing east above the relentless pounding of the Tasman Sea.

Eight lightkeeper's families lived on the island over the 100 years of operation supplementing weekly stores visits by boat with caught seafood, milk, cream and butter from their cow, vegetables from their



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garden, eggs and homemade bread and preserves. Schooling of children was undertaken by mothers and later School of the Air. Help in emergencies was restricted by the weather and sea conditions and two children John & Isabella died when medical aid arrived too late.

Music was a common evening activity for families before radio and television. Such was the value placed on musical entertainment that a piano was brought by boat to Montague Island in the late 1880s and hauled up to the light station by horse and cart. Celtic folk music was popular and sheet music of new tunes was available around the world within a year of publication. The music score in *The Light* is 'When Irish eyes are smiling' published in 1912.

After over one hundred years of service, in September 1986, the old light was turned on manually for the last time and the last lightkeeping family left the island. The huge lens from the Montague Island Lighthouse was removed and is now on display at the Narooma Lighthouse Museum which also houses many other lighthouse artefacts. The present light is unmanned and operates on solar power under the care of National Parks and Wildlife Service NSW.

NPWS run visits to the island by boat from the mainland and have fully restored the central keepers residence to a close approximation of its 1890 condition. People can walk through and experience life as a keeper as though the family had just stepped out. The island is a Nature Reserve with protected colonies of Little Penguins, Australian Fur Seals, Crested Terns and Shearwaters.

Author/Illustrator style or medium

The illustrations for *The Light* are solar plate etchings, a medium in which drawings are transferred to a metal plate using light exposure. The plate is then inked and rubbed back before printing. Ink left on the surface of the plate, or print tone, gives gradations of light and dark in addition to the etched lines. The prints are then hand coloured in watercolour. The colour palette for the illustrations was derived from the original plans.

Author/Illustrator Background Information

Jo has worked as a children's librarian for many years and feels privileged to have shared hundreds of books with children. She lives on the outskirts of Sydney with her husband. They have three sons who all love the sea.

Jo was awarded the biannual Australian Library and Information Association Marjorie Cotton Award in 2004 for recognition of outstanding contribution to children and youth library services.

Jo's first book *Pilgrim* was released in 2008. It is the story of a boy's first time on the sea with his father in a boat called Pilgrim. The Children's Book Council of Australia awarded *Pilgrim* a Notable Book and Jo was shortlisted for their Crichton Award for new illustrators in 2009.

Her second book, *Tatiara*, was published in 2010 and tells the story of a friendship between a girl and a seal and their experience of healing. Both *Pilgrim* and *Tatiara* are listed for the NSW Premier's Reading Challenge and were well reviewed.

Jo writes and envisages images at the same time. She enjoys the unexpected nature of printmaking and the clarity and tones of watercolour for her stories about the sea.



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Educational Applicability

The Light supports themes of Australian history, the environment, relationships and music. It can be used in looking at how daily life, family relationships, work and play have changed in the past hundred years.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think it would be like living on an island? What would be fun and what would be difficult?
2. What jobs do you do at home? How are these similar and different from jobs children did 100 years ago?
3. What activities do you enjoy doing with your family? What skills have your parents taught you?
4. Do you play a musical instrument? Have you played with other people? What is it like to participate in a group or team activity?
5. Have you ever been in danger in the sea or elsewhere? How did you feel? What was it like to be safe again?
6. Are you afraid of the dark or were you when you were younger? Have you ever been in complete darkness such as a cave? Why do feel safer in the light?
7. Light is an image of truth and goodness. What things in the world are 'lights'?
8. How can you be a 'light' in your school, family and community?

Art, Craft and Music Activities

1. Printmaking forms could be explored including potato printing, foam or linocut and collograph. Prints can be made using water-based ink without a press.
2. Watercolour, wax resist and washes can be used to make artwork based on the sea and its creatures.
3. Children could draw maps of an imaginary island marking places which would be fun to play.
4. The class could listen to Celtic music. Folk dances could be also be learned.
5. Children could play instruments or sing together.



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