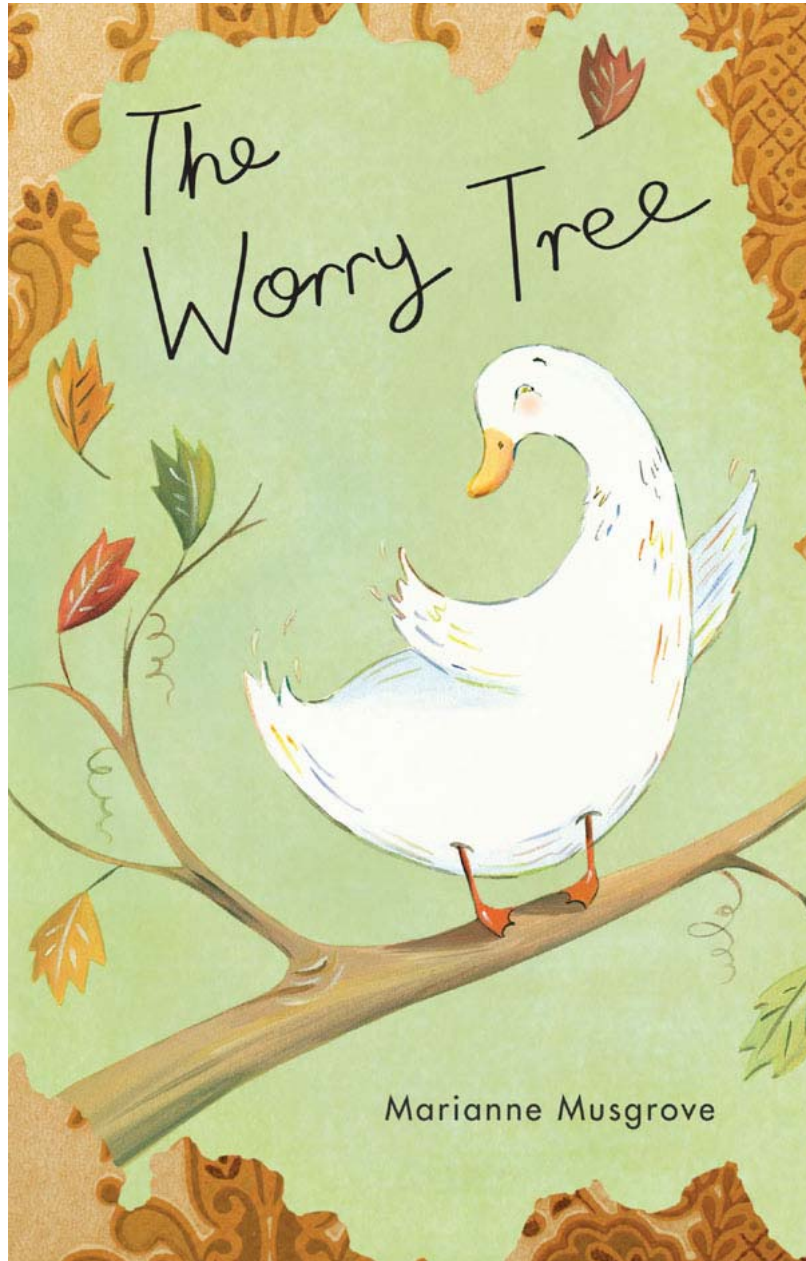


The Worry Tree

by Marianne Musgrove



Teachers' Notes

Copyright Marianne Musgrove © 2010

The Worry Tree Teachers' Notes

Contents

Introduction

Synopsis

Origin of *The Worry Tree*

Structure & style

Themes

Images & symbols

Activities

Discussion questions

Help for children with worries

Introduction

Juliet's a worrywart, and no wonder! Her little sister Oaf follows her around taking notes and singing 'The Irritating Song' all day long. Her parents are always arguing about Dad's junk. Nana's so tired of craft lessons that she starts barbecuing things in the middle of the night. And Juliet's friends, Lindsay and Gemma, are competing to see which of them is Juliet's best friend.

Juliet can't fit in any more worries!

But then she makes a remarkable discovery. Behind the peeling wallpaper in her new bedroom, Juliet uncovers an old painting of a very special tree. Nana remembers it well. It's the Worry Tree, and with the help of a duck called Delia and the other Worry Tree animals, Juliet just might be able to solve some of life's big problems.

Award-winning author Marianne Musgrove brings her light touch to a story of family, friends and coping with worries, that is laugh out loud and heart-warming in equal measure. *The Worry Tree* is suitable for readers aged 7 to 11.

Synopsis

What lies beneath the wallpaper in Juliet's new bedroom? And how can this discovery help a highly anxious ten year old with an obsession with collecting, a need for excessive orderliness and a belief in doing things The Proper Way?

Juliet lives in a very old house with her parents, her seven year old sister, Ophelia (Oaf), and her nana. Juliet has been managing her eccentric family for some time and this has left her burdened down with worries, not to mention a nasty nervous rash.

Oaf conducts various psychological experiments on Juliet, such as timing her in the toilet and hiding in her wardrobe making notes. The situation escalates and Mum decides Juliet needs her own room. Dad's study is cleared out and inside this room, beneath the peeling wallpaper, Juliet discovers a tree painted on the wall with animals in its branches.

Nana recognises the painting from her childhood and explains that it is a Worry Tree. She encourages Juliet to talk to the animals each night about her problems, and hang these worries on the branches of the tree until morning.

Juliet's problems mount. Her parents fight about the boxes in the hallway (the result of Dad clearing out his study for her); Mum cuts Juliet's hair with disastrous results; Juliet's best friend, Lindsay, competes with the new girl, Gemma, for Juliet's attention; Hugh, the school bully, persecutes Juliet; Nana behaves oddly, lighting bonfires in the middle of the night. Juliet is almost at breaking point. Without the Worry Tree and its animals, she wouldn't be able to cope.

Things come to a head one night and Juliet decides it is all her fault. The girls fail to set the table and Mum loses her temper, serving the spaghetti bolognese straight onto the table without any plates.

The atmosphere at the dinner table worsens when Dad and Mum start fighting about the boxes in the hall. Distraught, Juliet offers to give up her room so the boxes can be removed from the hall and order can be restored.

At school, the following day, Juliet's friends once again push her to choose between them. Juliet snaps. She refuses their demands and, reluctantly, her friends accept this.

Later, Juliet's parents explain that their fights are not her fault; some things are her problem and some things are not her problem; a revelation to Juliet. They say she can keep her room as they are going to build a shed in the backyard to house Dad's boxes.

At school the next day, Juliet and her friends band together and finally stand up to Hugh, the bully.

Juliet is feeling more positive but there is still something bothering her: Nana's depression. Juliet decides Nana needs her very own Worry Tree so she gives her a bonsai tree for her birthday.

Juliet at last knows she is a capable person who can handle any crisis.

Origin of *The Worry Tree*

I was sitting in the backyard one day and an idea popped into my head about a worrywart whose younger sister likes to torment her by timing her in the toilet. It made me laugh so I thought some more about what these sisters would be like (remarkably similar to my sister and me, as it turns out). I came up with further ideas but the story didn't hang together yet. It was just a collection of disjointed scenes. I had never written a book before so my writing endeavours stalled for some time.

Months later, I came across an interior design magazine featuring a photo of a girl's bedroom. There was a painting of a tree on the wall with animals in its branches. Thus, the idea for the Worry Tree was born and so, too, was the structure I would now hang my story on.

First novels are often autobiographical and I will confess that there is a lot of me in Juliet. My sister is a lot like Oaf and my parents are quite similar to Karen and Martin. I am, however, not Juliet, my sister is not Oaf and my parents are not the parents in the book. The more I wrote, the more the characters took on a life of their own. My sister did say, however, that while she didn't do any of the things Oaf does, she would have if she'd thought of it.

Structure & style

The story is told in the third person from the perspective of Juliet, the main character. It consists of twenty-six chapters and the action takes place over a couple of weeks. Juliet regularly talks to the Worry Tree animals about her day and these scenes provide the structure that holds the story together.

The style is humorous and light-hearted although there are some dramatic scenes that address the very real worries of children. The story is told from the perspective of a worrywart so there is a sense of urgency throughout as she tries to sort out her problems. Juliet's pesky little sister, Oaf, provides much of the comic relief.

In the back of the book, there is a Worry Tree and a section devoted to each animal with a space for the reader to record their worries and 'give them' to those animals.

Themes

- Coping with worries
 - The book explores the worries children have and how they manage them.
 - A core message of the book is that worries do not magically disappear overnight so each person needs to learn ways to manage their worry load.
 - Some children, such as Juliet, take excessive responsibility for worries that are better carried by adults. Juliet learns to tell the difference between worries she can legitimately carry and worries her parents need to take care of.
- Family
 - Juliet's parents regularly argue over Dad's junk which is piled up in the hallway. Juliet fears they will divorce.
 - Oaf, the quintessential little sister, persecutes Juliet on a daily basis by doing such things as timing her big sister in the toilet and refusing to set the dinner table when it is her turn.
 - Nana, who lives in the granny flat out back, is also a source of some conflict as she is newly retired and is being driven mad by the tedium of craft classes for seniors. Her grumpiness leads to arguments at the dinner table.
- Conflict
 - See family, friendship and bullying.
- Friendship (competitiveness, jealousy)
 - Juliet has been friends with Lindsay for a long time. When Gemma starts attending their school, Lindsay fears she will lose Juliet's friendship. Lindsay and Gemma compete over who will be Juliet's best friend. They try to force Juliet to decide. After much stress, Juliet gives

them a choice: either they can both be her best friends or she will be friends with neither of them.

- Bullying
 - Juliet is targeted by the class bully, Hugh. She is assisted by her friends to overcome this. The message, here, is that successfully dealing with a bully is rarely achieved by keeping things to yourself.
- Coping with change
 - Juliet moves into a new bedroom. In some ways, she is glad she no longer has to share with her sister, Oaf. In other ways, she is lonely by herself and needs to get used to the new arrangement.
 - When Gemma starts at Wattle Street Primary and becomes Juliet's friend, Juliet has to deal with how this changes her friendship with Lindsay (when two become three).
 - Nana is adjusting to retirement and to not being as agile as she once was. Juliet helps her with this.
 - Dad has to throw out some of his possessions; a big change for him as he usually saves everything. His struggles causes significant conflict in the family.
- Siblings
 - See family.
- Intergenerational relationships
 - Juliet and Nana are very close and their relationship is one of mutual support. Nana grew up with the Worry Tree so she explains to Juliet how it works. She also encourages Juliet when things go awry, eg, when Juliet draws a texta fringe on her forehead. In turn, Juliet helps Nana cope with her deteriorating health by giving her her own Worry Tree (a bonsai tree).

Images and symbols

- The Worry Tree

This is the central image of the book. The Worry Tree is an old mural found hidden beneath the wallpaper in Juliet's bedroom. Animals live in the tree and each looks after a different type of worry.

- Petronella the pig looks after worries to do with school
- Dimitri the dog looks after family worries
- Wolfgang the wombat looks after worries to do with friends
- Piers the peacock looks after worries to do with lost things
- Delia the duck knows it's hard to get used to change
- Gwyneth the goat looks after worries to do with illness
- The hollow is where you put those worries you don't know how to describe.

Key quotations:

1. A description of how to use the Worry Tree can be found on pp.20-21.
2. Beneath the wallpaper was a painting of a tree, its branches stretching out along the wall like a climbing rose ... 'Look at this!' she said. 'There are animals in the branches. I can see a wombat, a peacock, a dog, a pig, a goat and a duck.' ... The colours of the tree had faded to dusty cinnamons, billy-tea browns and soft olive greens, and the colours of the animals, which must once have been bright, were now watery blues, lemony yellows and pale rose pinks. (p.19)
3. The yellowy-green carpet spread out across the room like a windblown wheat field, leading to the foot of the Worry Tree. Six strong branches spread out along the wall, just as if they'd grown there. Juliet liked the idea of nature creeping quietly indoors and taking root. Not many people had a garden growing in their bedroom. (p.38)
4. 'Delia,' she said, talking to the little white duck, 'Nana says you look after changes in people's lives. I've just changed rooms and it doesn't feel right. I feel kind of . . . uprooted.' (p.38)
5. Nana unwrapped the present and balanced it on her lap. It was a small, black pot containing a tiny tree with tiny branches and leaves ... 'Mr Castelli says Japanese people spend ages and ages imagining what their tree's going to look like. Then they trim the branches with tiny hedge clippers until it looks exactly like the tree in their imagination.' ... 'There's something else,' said Juliet, leaning in close so only Nana could hear. 'It's actually a Worry Tree. I know you haven't had a tree in your bedroom for a very long time, so I bought you one.' (p.121)

- Juliet's initials: JJJ

Key quotations:

1. three fish hooks in a row (p.6)
2. three monkey tails in a row (p.26)

3. three upside down walking sticks in a row (p.70)
4. three saxophones in a row (p.107)
5. three umbrella handles in a row (p.121).

Activities

Coping with worries

1. Draw your own Worry Tree:

Students can draw a Worry Tree each to take home and stick on their bedroom wall. They could also make some wallpaper on a separate sheet of paper which can be glued over their Worry Tree (glue only around the edges). They can then tear off the wallpaper as Juliet does in the book, revealing the tree.

2. Make a class Worry Tree:

Draw, paint or stick a trunk on a large sheet of paper or cardboard. Students can trace their hands on different coloured paper to make leaves which can then be stuck on the tree. Others can make or draw the different Worry Tree animals. Each student then writes or draws a worry they have on a small piece of paper. This is then glued over so no one else can read it, then taped to the Worry Tree.

Optional: As in activity 1, some students could make a big sheet of wallpaper to cover up the tree, again, only glued around the edges. It can then be torn off to reveal the tree.

3. Badge making:

Students choose an animal they would like to give their worry to. They can then draw this animal and write or draw something that is worrying them on the back of their picture. This is then made into a badge and sealed up with their worry inside so their animal will look after it for them.

NB: a picture of the Worry Tree can be downloaded at:

www.randomhouse.com.au/Kids/

This can be printed out or saved as computer wallpaper.

4. Sociogram

The purpose of this exercise is explore the relationships between each of the main characters.

- Draw a circle in the middle of a sheet of paper and write 'Juliet' inside it.
- Draw four other circles surrounding the first circle, leaving as much space as possible between the circles.
- In addition to Juliet, pick no more than four of the main characters and write each name in a different circle.
- Draw a picture of each character inside their respective circle.
- Draw two lines between each of the outer circles and the central circle. Also draw two lines between the outer circles if those characters relate to each other, eg, draw a double line between Gemma and Lindsay.
- Choose an adjective to describe how Juliet feels about each character and another adjective to describe how that character feels about Juliet. Choose a quotation from the book to illustrate this, for example, along the line running from Juliet and Oaf, you could write the word 'irritated' followed by the quotation, "Mum! Oaf's timing me in the toilet again!" (p.1) If you can't find a relevant quotation, invent something you imagine that character might say to the other.

5. The Worry Tree has a recurring line regarding Juliet's initials, JJJ. What are the different images? Think of your own initials. What images do these letters conjure up? Draw.

Discussion questions

Worries

1. List off each of the different animals and give some examples of the types of worries they could help look after, eg, since Petronella the pig looks after worries to do with school, you might include such things are school marks, having to play sport when you're not very good at it or going away on a school camp.

2. If you could design your own Worry Tree, what other animals might live in it? What worries would they look after?
3. Why does Juliet offer to give up her room? Why did her parents tell her she didn't need to do this?
4. If there was a Worry Tree for adults, what sorts of worries would those animals look after? How would they differ from children's worries?
5. What are some of the changes Juliet has to cope with?
6. What are the types of changes children have to cope with in their lives? What might make it easier to cope with them?

Friendship/bullying

1. Why do you think Hugh treats Juliet the way he does?
2. Why doesn't Lindsay speak up when Hugh bullies Juliet?
3. What makes Juliet a good friend?
4. What about Gemma and Lindsay?
5. How could Gemma and Lindsay be better friends to Juliet?
6. What qualities do you look for in a friend?

Intergenerational relationships

1. Why is Nana so fed up?
2. What do you think older people should do when they retire?
3. What would you like to do when you retire?
4. How does Juliet help Nana? How does Nana help Juliet?
5. Do you have a friendship with an older person, eg, a grandparent or neighbour? If so, what do you like about being friends with them? How is your friendship different to your friendships with people your own age?

General

1. What do you think happens next in the story? Plot the sequel to *The Worry Tree*.

Help for children with worries

- Talk to a school counsellor.

- Talk to an adult you can trust, eg, a parent/guardian, teacher, doctor, relative.
- Kids Helpline is Australia's only free, private and confidential, telephone and online counselling service specifically for young people aged between five and twenty-five. ph: 1800 55 1800.