

Ben & Gracie's
Art
Adventure

MARK WILSON

Frederick McCubbin

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TEACHERS' GUIDE

by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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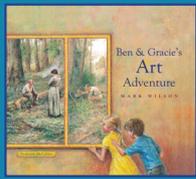
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Introduction

Ben and Gracie's Art Adventure: Frederick McCubbin is the first in a new Australian picture book series, in which Mark Wilson has used his outstanding artistic skills to bring to life the work of a number of 'iconic' Australian artists.

In this book, Ben and Gracie visit their mother at the gallery where she works, and 'enter' the works of colonial artist Frederick McCubbin. There they experience early settler life in Australia, at first hand.

Mark Wilson has paid tribute to an artist he reveres in faithfully interpreting McCubbin's style in the art which lian bush environment.

Then, on venturing deeper into the forest in search of wildflowers, the pair (with their friend) come across fairies and lose their way at nightfall. Will they be able to find their way back to the settlers and, more importantly, to the art gallery?

Themes & Curriculum Topics

This picture book touches on themes which might be used in conjunction with curriculum topics with primary or secondary school students in the following suggested areas:

Study of History, Society and Environment

Early Settlers in Australia

Discussion Point: What values or qualities did McCubbin's paintings suggest that these early 'settlers' possessed?

Discussion Point: Secondary students might read Henry Lawson's stories or poems to inform their 'reading' of these artworks.

Activity: Write a brief story interpreting any of the images of early settlers in the work. [See also Language and Literacy below.]

Activity: Read some non-fiction about early settlers as background to reading his work. [See list in Bibliography below.]

Visual Literacy

The visual text of a book works with the written text to tell the story using the various parts of the book's design and illustrations, as explored below:

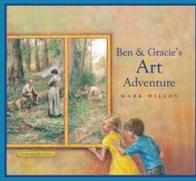
Activity: Mark Wilson has 'interpreted' the work of the great master Frederick McCubbin, by creating masterful works of his own. He is paying 'homage' to someone he admires, in cleverly making a story out of the paintings by having them represent successive scenes in the narrative he is telling. For example when the children give the wildflowers to their mother, the painting of the flowers appears in the next spread. Discuss how artists often draw on and extemporise on the work of previous artists in their own works.

Activity: Choose one of McCubbin's paintings and invite students to make comments on what it 'says' or 'means' to them, what techniques they observe in it, and then to create their own 'interpretation' of it. For example 'The Pioneer' (1904) is considered a masterpiece but has been said to have ambiguous meaning. Each painting in the triptych relates to the growth of settlement and to the lives of the man and woman, and one can see the city rising in the background beyond the bush. But there are many possible interpretations of each scene. [See also Blackline Master 1]

Activity: Have students identify the paintings interpreted in this book using the key at the back of the book provided by the artist, Mark Wilson. They can then look up the original artworks online or visit some of them at a gallery if they happen to be close to the collections where some of them are held, in order to view them and compare them to Wilson's works.

Activity: Have students research Frederick McCubbin's work. [See Bibliography below.] Then have them write a précis of ten interesting facts that they have discovered about him.

Activity: Research the work of other 'colonial artists'. Research the work of the Heidelberg School of which McCubbin was a part. What themes or styles did they have in common? Conversely, how was McCubbin unique amongst his peers?



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Activity: The cover of this book is an important part of its message. It depicts the painting 'The Pioneer' (1904) a triptych which demonstrates both the Impressionistic style of the artist and his uniquely perceptive insights into colonial and settler experiences which he paints with great empathy. Create your own triptych scene in which you tell a story about this era.

Activity: The endpapers are suggestive of the impressionistic landscape art of McCubbin. What other design might have featured here? Design your own alternative endpapers for this book.

Discussion Point: The title page is a simple image of the children running through the gallery; what other image might have appeared on the title page?

Discussion Point: The format of the book is square with some pages wordless. The layout of the storyboard is varied, and the text appears either to the right or to the left of, or below the artwork. Why do artists vary format in this way?

Activity: The medium or style employed is the impressionistic style where 'blobs' of paint create a layered image which is suggestive and evocative. Discuss the use of the medium and how the artist captures light and shade in his work.

Question: McCubbin's colours are flickering shades of green, gold and other subtle hues. Encourage students to study how he uses colours, then to try and paint a landscape they are familiar with.

Activity: Texture here conveys the idea that each artwork has been painted on a canvas. This adds to the painterly nature of the work included in the book. Draw a picture on paper, and then see how it changes when executed on canvas.

Activity: In some images (pp 10, 11, 13, 14, 17, 22, 23) the artist varies the format to create a collage style including pencil sketches, or overlaid photos, or by juxtaposing a sketch (p 4) against the painted art. This creates an effect which is suggestive and often requires close observation from the reader. (He uses a similar technique in Angel of Kokoda and My Mother's Eyes) Discuss the meaning on any one of these pages. Why did he juxtapose the images which appear in any one of them?

Discussion Point: Discuss with students how paintings require planning, how an image is 'worked up' from these initial ideas, and how they might also use photographs, drawings and drafts in conceiving a finished artwork.

Discussion Point: Images of fairies appeared in several early classics of Australian children's literature such as Ida Rentoul Outhwaite's *Elves and Fairies* (1916). May Gibbs in *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* (1918) created her 'gumnut babies' and 'banksia men' as another response to the Australian bush. The images created by Aboriginal artists are much earlier imaginings. Have students imagine their own fantasy creature and give a name to the creature after they've drawn it.

English Language and Literacy

The text of this book might be studied in relation to the following aspects:

Question: This story is told as a third person, present tense account of the children's adventures. Dialogue also enlivens this account. Re-tell the story in first person by either Ben or Gracie, and see how much this changes the story.

Activity: The story falls into the narrative convention or trope of 'the lost child in the bush' which figures in the paintings of many colonial artists but has also continued to play a major role in our literature and other forms of cultural expression. There are many famous children's stories which are framed in this way. [Have students read such stories from the list in the Bibliography below. These are often told from the perspective of children of European origin. Read also some Aboriginal narratives about being lost. eg *The Quinkins* by Dick Roughsey and Percy Trezise or *Caden Wallaa!* by Karen Calley and Noel Pearson.] Teachers may also wish to consult Robert Holden's *The Endless Playground: Celebrating Australian Childhood* (National Library of Australia, 2000) which includes sections and excerpts which deal with this theme, or read the other adult non-fiction books [listed in the Bibliography below] as background.

Activity: Ask your students to write a story about being lost in the bush. What might they have found there? What obstacles, fears or threats might they encounter?

Activity: Have your students write a story about what they saw at an art gallery. (This might be based on an art excursion.)

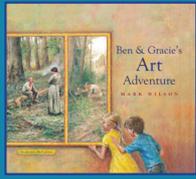
Activity: Have them 'imagine' an adventure/mystery/magic or horror story which might have occurred in an art gallery.

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Activity: Test your students' comprehension by having them answer some quiz questions. [See Blackline Master 2 below.]

Creative Arts

There are many creative activities suggested by this text:

Improvise a scene from one of the paintings included in this book. Try to convey the emotions which the painting suggests to you.

Create a diorama of one of the paintings.

After researching the paintings in this book, imagine how a gallery guide would conduct a tour of the works. What might she/he say about any one of them? Create your own guided commentary, including interesting facts about the artists Mark Wilson and Frederick McCubbin.

Further Topics for Discussion & Research

Research the work of Mark Wilson. Compare this book to other works such as *My Mother's Eyes* and *Angel of Kokoda*.

There are several picture books which explore the art of famous artists. You may wish to conduct a class unit on some of these. For example *Seen Art?* by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith (Viking, 2005); *Linea in Monet's Garden* by Cristina Bjork, Lena Anderson, and Joan Sandin (R & S Books, 1987); *The Hero of Little Street* by Gregory Rogers (Allen and Unwin, 2010). [See list in Bibliography below.]

Conduct a class visit to the local state, city or regional gallery. Create a list of questions which you'd like the students to answer about the works they see.

You might also conduct a virtual tour of a range of galleries by encouraging students to visit a number of collections online. [See list in Bibliography below.]

Conclusion

This work should encourage students to observe art more closely. It's about art, but is also an example of great art, for Mark Wilson is one of Australia's premier picture book artists.

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Author's Notes

By Mark Wilson

As a young artist growing up in the '60s, it was the era of 'flower power', The Beatles and 'doing your own thing'. For an artist, it was a time of total freedom to paint and express yourself however you wanted. That is, unless you were a student at art school.

Abstract painting – or more specifically, abstract expressionism – was the worldwide style of the moment. But I was a realist painter with slight abstract leanings, and that was frowned upon. I loved the paintings of William De Koonig, Manet, Fred Williams and Frederick McCubbin. The teachers knew my work was good, because I was the best student in the school in drawing (their words), and my paintings sold as fast as I could paint them. But as they weren't abstract, the teachers tried to fail me each year. Someone stepped in and gave me 50 out of 100, which was barely a pass, but I didn't care. I have never followed trends; not in my art, my music, and definitely not in clothes!

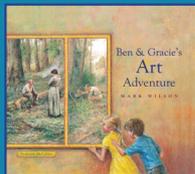
I went on to study the paintings of McCubbin, Monet, Manet, Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton, and that became my picture book illustration style (called impressionism) and still is today. The strange thing is that now, my big paintings and murals are generally abstract!

Ben and Gracie's Art Adventure is my tribute to one of the greatest painters of all time.

Note to students: don't follow trends, follow your dreams, but in your own way.

About the Author/Illustrator

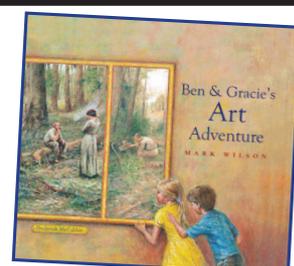
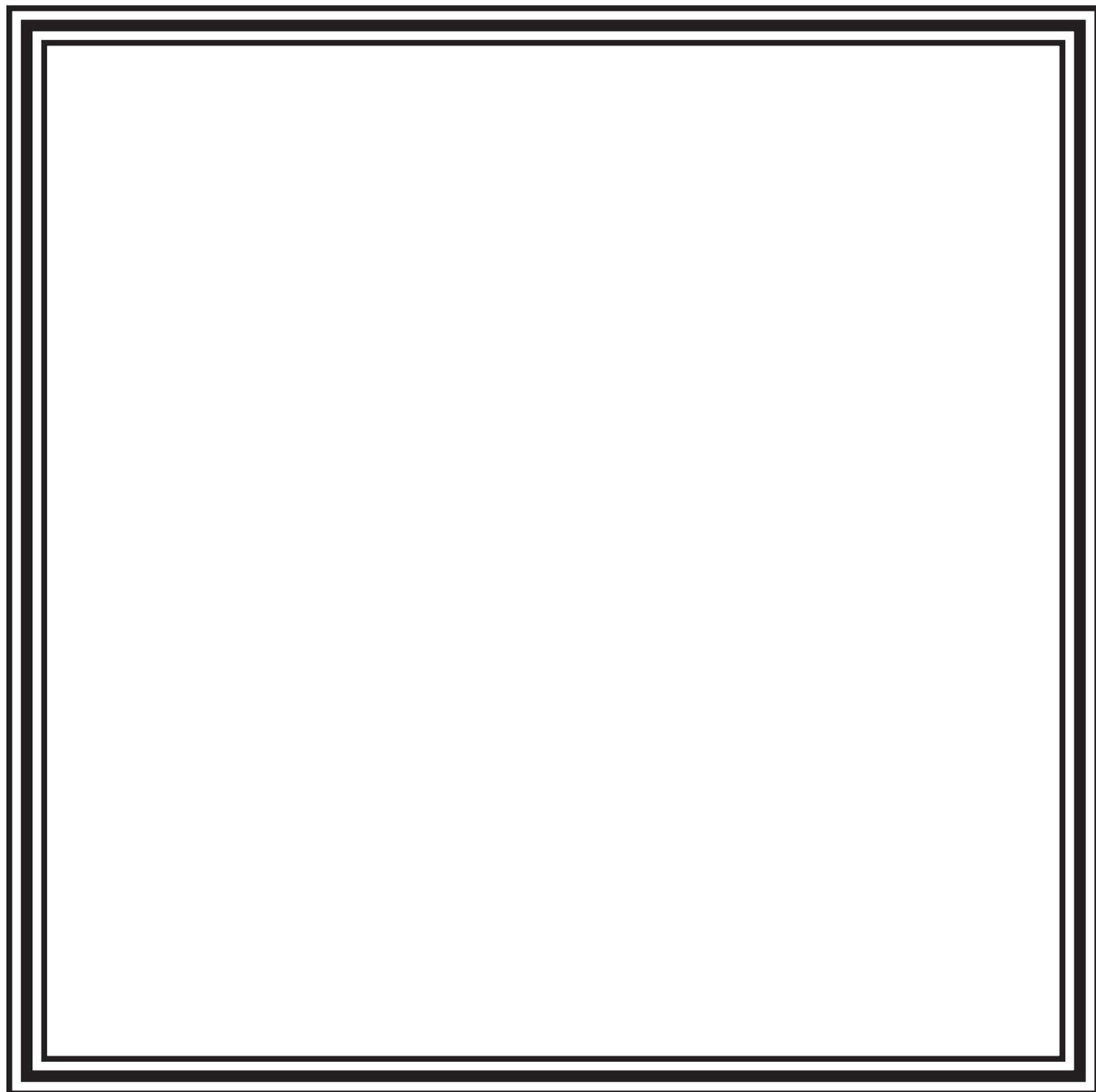
Mark Wilson was born in Brunswick, Victoria. He took to drawing from a very early age, and also loved comics. He went on to spend most of his teenage years 'pretending to be a drummer in a rock band (and trying my hardest to sing like John Lennon)'. He studied mural design and painting at C.I.T. (now Monash, Caulfield Campus). He also did National Service, followed by a Diploma of Education. In the early seventies, he became designer and illustrator for The Education Magazine and Pursuit Magazine, and also started illustrating for various publishers including Penguin, Rigby and Brooks Waterloo. In 1981 he held his first solo exhibition of paintings and drawings. Recently, he has focussed on writing and illustrating children's books and also picture book presentations in schools and at literature festivals. His recent books include *Journey of the Sea Turtle*, (2010 Whitley Award, Children's Picture Book), which highlights the fragile existence of sea turtles, *Last Tree* (2007 Whitley Award for Children's Picture Books), which deals with the effect deforestation has on the creatures that inhabit our forests, and *My Mother's Eyes-The Story of a Boy Soldier* (2010 CBCA Notable Picture Book Award and Eva Pownall (CBCA) Notable Picture Book Award), which is about World War One, were published by Hachette Australia in 2009, and *Angel of Kokoda* which is about World War Two, in 2010. <<http://www.markwilson.com.au/>>



BLACKLINE MASTERS

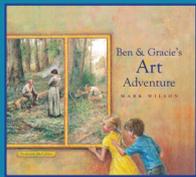
BM 1 CREATE YOUR OWN MASTERPIECE

In the frame below, draw and then colour in or paint a picture which is similar to one of McCubbin's works.



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BM 2 QUIZ

These questions can all be answered by reading or interpreting the art and text in this picture book.

Questions:

1. What is the magic item which gives the children access to time travel?
2. What do they notice in one of the galleries?
3. In Image 5, the walls of the gallery are hung in what is called a 'salon' style. What does that mean?
4. When they travel to the forest with the man and woman, what do they do after they boil the billy?
5. Why do they leave this couple?
6. What are the men engaged in doing in the forest?
7. How do they get lost in the forest?
8. How do they find their way back?
9. What is their mother's name?
10. In the picture on the title page what are the children doing?

Answers: 1. A ticket given to them by a man as they enter the gallery. 2. A strange glow emanating from one of the paintings. 3. A 'salon hang' is where the curator chooses to arrange works on a wall in close proximity to each other, and sometimes in a non-symmetrical manner, which was popular in the nineteenth century. These days, works are generally hung in isolation with a large amount of white space around them, but in some state galleries you'll still see works hung in 'salon' style. 4. They read the woman's journal about the long journey from England to Australia. 5. They go to collect wildflowers and hear a baby crying and go to investigate. 6. They are cutting and collecting wood on a cart. 7. They go to find Mary, and she is watching fairies so they play with them, and then find themselves lost. 8. They follow the cattle path. 9. Mrs Green. 10. They are running through the gallery.

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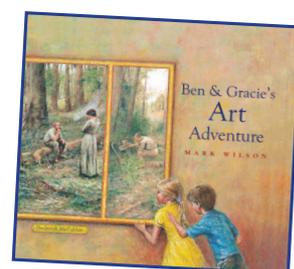
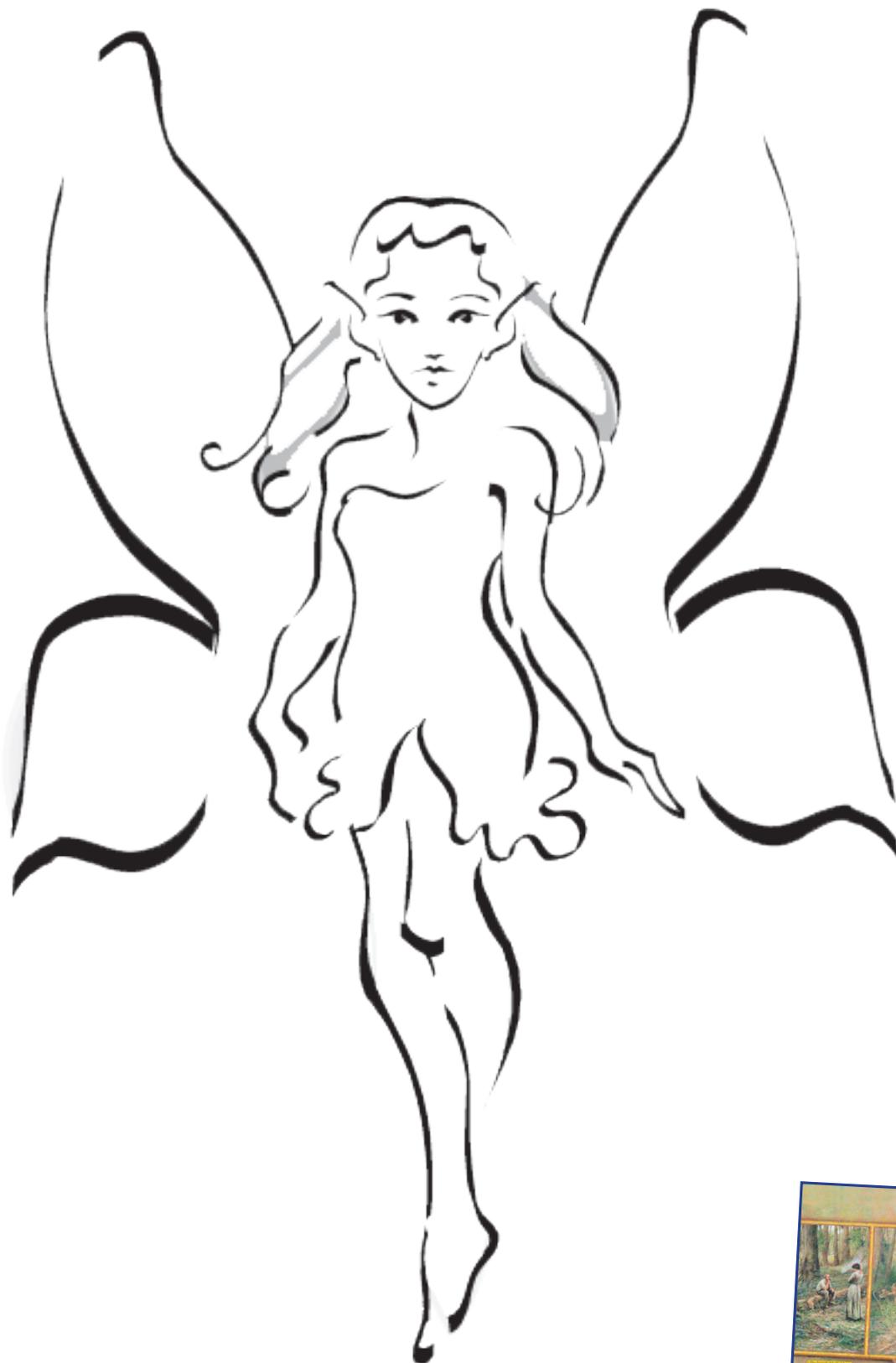
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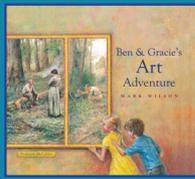
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BM3 FASHION A FAIRY

Here is an image of a fairy to decorate. Glue onto the image some glitter, or stars, give the fairy a head-dress and a wand, and enhance or colour the image with whatever you'd like. Bibliography



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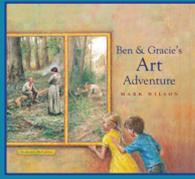
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About the Author of the Notes

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright has operated justified text writing and publishing consultancy services since 1997, is widely published on children's and young adult literature, publishing history and Australian fiction, and manages publishing projects, including the APA's biennial Residential Editorial Program (REP). She writes reading group and teachers notes for several publishers, and judges a number of literary awards. She was the founding director of the QWC (1991-7) and a co-founder of Jam Roll Press. She has taught at a number of universities as a casual lecturer, including a UG course on writing for children and young adults at Griffith University (Gold Coast), where she also gained her PhD (2005) for her thesis To Market to Market on the development of the Australian children's publishing industry. Her books include Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946-2005 (co-edited with Craig Munro, UQP, 2006), and Hot iron Corrugated Sky 100 Years of Queensland Writing (co-edited with Stuart Glover, UQP, 2001). She is a member of the ASA Management Committee and president of the Curtis Coast Literary Carnivale Inc Committee.

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