

Farmhouse



Sophie Blackall

TWO-TIME CALDECOTT MEDALLIST

TEACHERS RESOURCES

Farmhouse

by Sophie Blackall

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INTRODUCTION

'Over a hill, at the end of a road, by a glittering stream that twists and turns stands a house'.

***Farmhouse* is a lavish and moving tribute to a beloved place in the vein of *Hello Lighthouse* from two-time Caldecott Medallist, Sophie Blackall.**

Step inside the dollhouse-like interior of *Farmhouse* and relish the daily life of the family that lives there, rendered in impeccable, thrilling detail. Based on a real family and an actual farmhouse where Sophie salvaged facts and artefacts for the making of this spectacular work, page after page bursts with luminous detail and joy. Join the award-winning, bestselling Sophie Blackall as she takes readers on an enchanting visit to a farmhouse across time, to witness the way that history spins stories.

This book is a eulogy to the past and to the power of stories in recording our personal histories. Sophie Blackall writes in her **Author's Note** at the back of the book:

'I have always loved old things. Especially old, worn, mended things that show traces of hands and hearts and minds long gone, things that tell stories. Like a china doll with one hand-carved wooden arm, or much-darned stockings that once covered feet that must have walked miles.'

and she concludes her note:

'The pictures in this book are made of layers. I began with the reverse side of a roll of wallpaper and added floors and walls and furniture, made from scraps and fragments I found in the house. Most of the first layers are invisible now, hidden beneath embellishments and details, in the way that stories become layered as they get told and retold over the years. Stories about everything, and nothing much, that stay alive long after children grow up and houses fall down, while wildflowers nod their heads in the sun.'

The result is a stunning homage to memory, family, home and belonging:

'and back at my desk, I spread them all out and cherished my gifts from the falling-down house, then I sharpened my pencil and mixed some paint and dipped my brush and cut some shapes and began to imagine the things that took place'.

THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes covered in this book might be related to the Australian Curriculum, including:

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS)

<<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/humanities-and-social-sciences/>>

PERSONAL HISTORY, MEMORIES & BELONGING

Key Quote: 'Most of the first layers are invisible now, hidden beneath embellishments and details, in the way that stories become layered as they get told and retold over the years. Stories about everything, and nothing much, that stay alive long after children grow up and houses fall down, while wildflowers nod their heads in the sun.'

Discussion Point: How important are stories in keeping those who have passed, alive in our memories?

Discussion Point: Discuss with students the history contained in a home, street, suburb, or community. Engage in a research project on the history of a home which they value or have a connection with, and of the people who have lived in it.

FAMILIES AND FAMILY LIFE

Key Quote: 'in the home where twelve children were born and raised, where they ate and slept and worked and played and laughed and loved and grew quite old where they'll live on, now, in this book that you hold like your stories will, so long as they're told'

Discussion Point: Aspects of the Swantak family's life in the 1930s to 1940s are described as this story is told. They include **farm chores** (milking cows and mucking out their stalls, fishing for trout, picking apples, baling hay); **housework** (shaking the rug, washing the floor, preparing food, setting the table); **food and meals** (home-made pies, soup, bread, trout); **leisure activities** (sewing, knitting, playing with toys, reading, playing the organ); **schoolwork** (the boy is reading a text at the kitchen table in one frame while holding the baby); **illnesses** (the baby 'lay with a fever and a spotted tongue'); **pets and farm animals** (cats, cows, ducks, horse). Invite students to choose any of these topics and to examine the book closely to ascertain what it reveals about this sub-topic. Then invite them to write or illustrate a summary of the aspects of this topic which the book reveals.

HOMES

Key Quote: 'I was convinced then and there that I needed to honour this farmhouse. Even though it was falling down and beyond repair.'

This book details the features of this home in rich and vivid detail. Sophie Blackall has explained in her **Author's Note** that she loves old things and likes to collect pieces of fabric, paper, and 'found objects' to create collages in her artwork. These items reveal the history of the farmhouse and how people lived in it. The images of the home include the interior and exterior of the house and the landscape which surrounds it. [See **Visual Literacy** and **Creative Arts** below.]

Discussion Point: Encourage students to identify images which relate to the times in which this family lived in this house. Built in the 1850s, the house is depicted in the 1930s to 1940s. It is a house lit by lamps in which the food was largely home-made. In the later frames, after the house has been abandoned, a radio and a wooden framed television set, hark from the 1950s or 1960s. Sophie Blackall's **Author's Note** refers to finding a calendar dated July 1970 on the wall. The last resident member of the family obviously left sometime after that as the farm ceased to be a working dairy farm in 2006. Early in the book a horse-drawn cart is used to collect and transport hay. When the last resident leaves, she is driven away in a car. What other details did you notice which give some idea of the date or year in which these events may have happened?

Discussion Point: This home is a **farmhouse** with an exterior landscape depicted in the opening frames and with scenes which relate to the work done on a farm. The interiors also reveal how this farming family relate to this landscape. Discuss the differences between this home and an urban dwelling, and to how a family might live in such a dwelling.

Discussion Point: The **exterior and interior** of this home are depicted in the case and the

cover. Discuss with students the architecture of a house, the design of its interior spaces, and how the rooms contain different activities engaged in by families.

Discussion Point: The **aerial view of the house in the surrounding landscape** gives the reader a ‘birds’ eye view’ of the locality. What details did you notice in this landscape?

Discussion Point: This home contains many items of **furniture** which also denote the period in which this work is set and the rustic hand-made quality of many items. There are iron beds, antique wooden chairs, a chaise longue and a decorative parlour organ. Invite students to examine each page and to identify furniture which is unusual or interesting. For example, in the children’s bedroom a bedside table and bookshelf is made from an old packing case; in the kitchen the children sit on a long form at the large table and there is a smaller table and form for the younger children; the wood stove is depicted in the background.

Discussion Point: Designs and patterns appear on wallpaper, bedspreads and quilts, upholstery, carpets, curtains, clothing. **Folk art** is evident in the frame hanging in the ‘serious room’ featuring the word ‘Matrimony’ and in one of the bedheads in one of the children’s bedrooms. Encourage students to look closely at each double page spread in this book to identify patterns on domestic items. [See **Visual Literacy** below.]

Activity: Compare the **three images of the kitchen**, two when the family were living there, and one much later when the house has been abandoned.

Discussion Point: The family’s **clothing** is typical of the era, and of the lifestyle. Dresses are comfortably shaped and are patterned in florals and checks; men and boys wear overalls; Sophie Blackall rescued actual frocks of the residents and there is an image of them at the end of the book. Research clothing of the 1930s to 1940s.

Discussion Point: Domestic implements for household tasks, such as cooking, washing and cleaning include large decorative jugs, kettles, mixing bowls, pie-dish and a rolling pin. Tea-towels are hung over the wood stove to dry; carpets are beaten and shaken and then brought back into the home; logs are chopped for the fire and brought inside. What implements did you notice but fail to identify?

Discussion Point: There are **paintings** hung on walls and the children also paste images cut from magazines on their bedroom walls. What did you notice in any of these wall images?

Discussion Point: Paper from shopping catalogues gives a hint to how people shopped in these days with no automotive transport readily available. What other facts or details did you discover in the collaged texts in this book?

GROWING UP & LEAVING HOME

Key Quote: ‘from the children who all grew up in this house, who went off to school or to work on a farm, or to drive a truck or train as a nurse, or study the stars or have babies themselves, until one day, the youngest child, who was now quite old, took a last look around and picked up her case and opened the door’.

Discussion Point: At the end of the book, there are leaf-shaped images of the twelve children and what became of them. The photographic portrait taken early in the narrative appears in the centre of these images. The next frame depicts the youngest child, now quite old, leaving the home for the final time, clutching that same framed portrait. These images remind the reader that families disperse, and places lose their connections to individuals, as time passes. What else does the book suggest about growing older and families dispersing? [See **Visual Literacy** below.]

SEASONS

Key Quote: ‘and they waited for spring, which eventually came, as it did every year, with blossoms and rain, which leaked through the holes that had grown in the roof, collecting in bowls and pans and pails, staining the wall in the short front hall with the flowers and leaves and measures and marks’.

Discussion Point: The life lived in this text is detailed via the seasons which determined both the farming cycles and the domestic routines of this family. Read other books which detail the seasons visually. [See **Bibliography.**]

RURAL FARMING LIFE & THE ENVIRONMENT

Key Quote: ‘Even though there were houses just like it collapsing across the countryside, as small dairy farms sold their cows and gave up fighting to survive in a changing world.’

The landscape of the West Catskills region of New York State, and a vanished way of life, is richly depicted in Sophie Blackall’s charmingly whimsical and very astute observational style.

Discussion Point: The flora of the region is depicted in beautiful images and in the written text, for example, ‘which was when I came and cut a path through prickly burdock and nettles and grass’. What did the images in this picture book text further reveal about the flora of this region?

Discussion Point: The animals that have invaded the abandoned farmhouse are typical of this environment, for example, squirrels, swallows, moths, raccoons, mice, bats, wasps and a bear! Research the wildlife of this region and the other animals you might find there.

Discussion Point: If a house were abandoned in your local area, which animals might be likely to visit the abandoned house to take shelter there?

Discussion Point: The house is abandoned because farming life demands continuity and none of the children (save for one woman) remained on the farm. But what other reasons might there be for the farm declining and becoming abandoned? Invite students to research this area of the West Catskills. [See **Bibliography.**] Then invite them to consider similar rural decline in Australia.

Discussion Point: The history of this region includes that of the First Nations, the Haudenosaunee, followed by successive immigrants. Try to discover more about the West Catskills in New York State’s history. [The farm is now named Milkwood Farm<<https://www.milkwoodfarm.org/>>, a retreat for children’s writers and illustrators established by Sophie Blackall.]

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

<<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/english/>>

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

Discussion Point: The first thing to note about this text is that it is written as **one long uninterrupted sentence**. This style of narrative reflects the passing of time evocatively. Such narratives allow a writer to engage in a lyrical meditation on a personal history. Invite students

to write a short story in this style.

Discussion Point: It is also reminiscent of **traditional cumulative tales** which consist of lists of events escalating via repetition, and then culminating in a resolution. For example: 'The Old Woman and Her Pig' and 'There was an Old Lady who Swallowed a Fly'. Use this style of cumulative tale to tell a story about events which have occurred in your family life.

Discussion Point: The text also contains an **irregular pattern of rhymes**, for example, 'where they pored over books about planets and **stars**, then climbed into beds where they dreamed of **Mars** (or they dreamed of cats or the distant sea and whispered secrets, played truth or **dare**, and lost their teeth and brushed their **hair**,' Create rhyming sentences like these. [See also **Worksheet 2**.]

Discussion Point: The text also contains several examples of **literary devices**, for example, *Personification*: 'and the house gave a sigh and slumped on the stones', *Simile*: 'where the wallpaper peeled like onion skins', *Alliteration*: 'in its beams and its bones'. Identify other examples of literary devices.

Activity: Test your students' **comprehension** by asking them questions about the written and visual text. [See also **Author's Note** in the back of the book.]

VISUAL LITERACY

<<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/the-arts/visual-arts/>>

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

Discussion Point: The **outer packaging** of the book contains both a **jacket** and a **case (or cover)** – the former showing the exterior walls, and the latter the interiors of the house, just as a dolls' house does. The **cover** of a book is an important part of its message. Here it indicates that the life lived behind these outer walls, although ordinary and in some senses lost to us, also remains present, by virtue of the artefacts and more importantly the stories which are contained within those walls. Discuss the impression gleaned from these two 'covers' for this book. [See **Creative Arts** below.]

Activity: The **endpapers** are a rich collage of many of the items of domestic detail contained in the book. Invite students to identify each of the artefacts.

Discussion Point: The **title page** is a double page spread with the title depicted against a patterned wallpaper with a framed portrait of the house above it. On the left hand frame, there is a dedication and further images of artefacts which appear in the book. What messages does this title page convey?

Discussion Point: The text appears variously on the left and right hand panels or beneath the illustrations in each double page spread. How does the **layout of the storyboard** and the **format and design** of the book influence your reading of it?

Activity: Creating characters entails studying **facial expressions and 'body language'**. View for example the baby crawling towards the photographer in the second frame, with the children gathered on the staircase for their portrait. What does this tell you about each of them? Or view the naughty child on the left-hand side of the fourth double page spread, having been discovered painting the cat. Study each image for insight into how characters are conveyed visually.

Activity: Try to **match the children in the family** with the adults they become who are

depicted later in the book. What clues do the illustrations contain which reveal which adults they might become?

Activity: Medium is integral to how picture books are created. 'The illustrations for this book were created using Chinese ink, watercolour, gouache, and coloured pencil, as well as materials salvaged from a falling-down nineteenth-century farmhouse in New York State: wallpaper, composition books, newspapers, brown-paper bags, clothing, handkerchiefs, curtains, and string.' Encourage students to use such materials and found objects in their own work to create a response to this picture book text. [See also **Worksheet 1**.]

Discussion Point: The **colours** used in this book are rich, warm and vibrant with life. Paint your own portrait of this farmhouse employing colour in this way.

Discussion Point: Research the **American Folk Art** of this region and other areas in the US. Study how it was used in homes of this era. See the ninth double page spread in this book where the children are picking apples from a tree. This image is very reminiscent of folk art images of trees. How does this picture book incorporate folk art in its images? [See **Creative Arts** below.]

Activity: Prediction is an important part of picture book reading. The reader's perspective in observing strong left to right movement across a double page spread is also important in a picture book, encouraging the reader to follow the action sequentially in a filmic way. Encourage students to read and predict from hints in the visual and written text, what might appear on a subsequent page.

Activity: Invite students to draw, paint, or collage another scene to accompany the story they wrote above. Create a classroom mural using all the images. [See also **Worksheet 1** below.]

CREATIVE ARTS

There are many creative activities suggested by this text:

1. Read about dolls' houses and how they depict the lives being lived behind the exterior walls of a home. Visit exhibitions of dolls' houses or websites which depict them. For example, the *Dollshouse.live* website which is an online magazine: <<https://www.dollshouse.live/about/>>.

See also:

'1/2 The Private Life of a Doll's House with Lauren Child' *YouTube*

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9q1TZa53Ns>>

and

Banks, Tom 'Lauren Child's Dolls' House' *Design Week* October 29, 2015

<<https://www.designweek.co.uk/inspiration/lauren-childs-dolls-house/>>

Make a cardboard box dolls' house using cardboard to create stairs and walls, and decorate with patterned wallpaper. Make furniture out of paper. See for example, 'Paper Doll House Furniture to Make' by Dana Hinders

<<https://crafts.lovetoknow.com/paper-crafts/paper-dollhouse-furniture-make>>

OR '5 DIY paper furniture for Doll House/easy origami furniture making/paper miniature craft for doll' Craft with Sahar *YouTube* October 15, 2020

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpCqIf5pWZk>>

Create paper cut-outs of people and furnishings, typical of the period you are recreating and tape them to the floor of the rooms you have created. [See **Worksheet 3**.]

2. The children in this book cut patterns out of potatoes to print on the walls of their family home as a pattern of flowers and leaves. Conduct this activity with students to create patterned wrapping paper or a wall hanging.

3. Decoupage a folk art image to a wooden box, or another small domestic item. [See **Worksheet 4.**]

4. Embroidered Samplers were often framed and hung on the wall of farmhouses in the past [See the framed 'Matrimony' in the fourth double page spread.] Encourage students to create a simple sampler using folk art flowers and a saying such as 'Home Sweet Home' or 'Speak Little, Listen Well, Learn Much' or 'Welcome to Our Home'. These can be stitched in a simple chain stitch or in a mixture of embroidery styles including cross stitch. More advanced patterns might include an image of a house. [See **Bibliography.**]

5. Create a poster to advertise this book.

6. Create a Book Trailer to promote this book. [See **Bibliography.**]

FURTHER TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH

- Research the work of Sophie Blackall. Compare this to her other books.
- Students might research this book in comparison to reading other picture books such as those listed in the **Bibliography.**
- Investigate any other topic not covered in these notes which you consider is suggested by this text.

CONCLUSION

Sophie Blackall has created a richly stratified work depicting history via her multi layered artwork and expressively nuanced text. The layers of history represented by the farmhouse in this book, and the lives of the family who lived there, are reverently depicted in a written and visual text which together create a portrait of ordinary lives lived honestly and well. Individual memories may fade, but stories like these keep memories alive for future generations, long after buildings disappear, landscapes are altered, and people pass away.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR/ ILLUSTRATOR

Sophie Blackall AM is an award-winning illustrator of over 50 books for children, including the *New York Times* best-selling *Ivy and Bean* series, the 2016 Caldecott Medal winner, *Finding Winnie: The True Story of the World's Most Famous Bear* and the 2019 Caldecott Medal winner, *Hello Lighthouse*, which she also wrote. She is the four-time recipient of *The New York Times* Best Illustrated Picture Book Award and has worked with UNICEF and Save the Children, UK on global health and literacy initiatives. Originally from Australia, she now splits her time between Brooklyn, New York, and the Catskill Mountains, where she has built a retreat for the children's book community called *Milkwood Farm*
<<https://www.milkwoodfarm.org/>>

In June 2022 Sophie was awarded the Order of Australia (AM) for significant service to children's literature. See: <<https://www.sophieblackall.com/>>

See also:

Bird, Betsy 'Review of the Day: *Farmhouse* by Sophie Blackall' *School Library Journal* June 3, 2022

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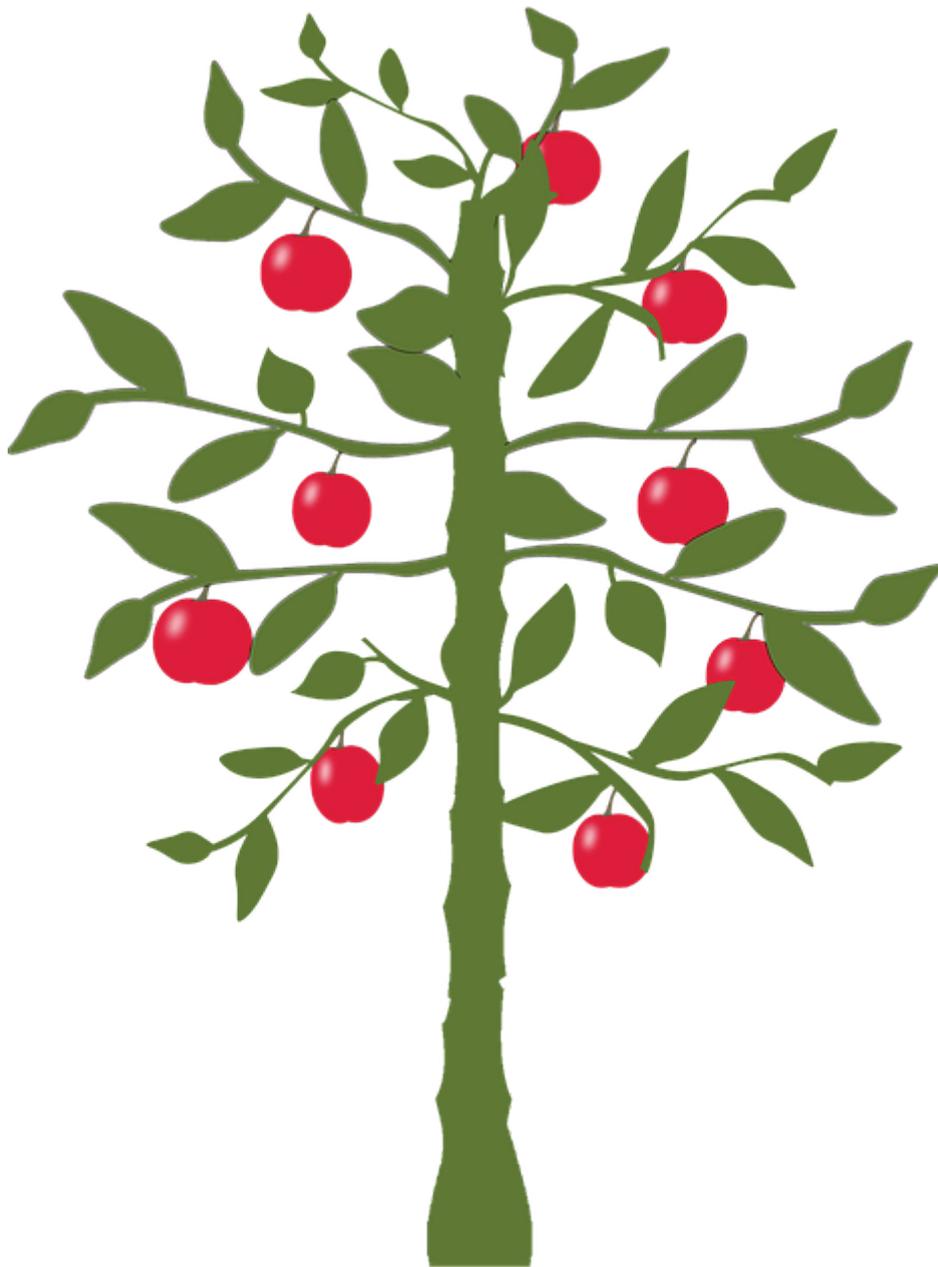


WORKSHEETS



WORKSHEET 1. DRAW AND COLLAGE THIS IMAGE

Decorate this image with drawings of the children playing as they are included in this book. Use collaged materials to decorate their clothes.



WORKSHEET 2. RHYMING WORDS

These rhyming words appear in the text. Write another word to rhyme with each of them in the third column.

crawl	hall	
lied	cried	
played	made	
stars	Mars	
dare	hair	
cars	stars	
flies	pies	
floors	chores	

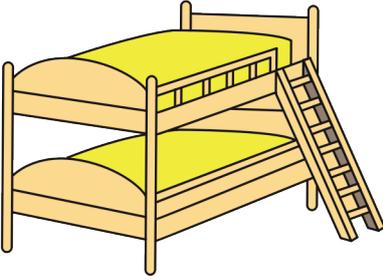
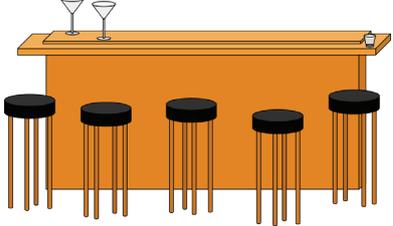
Then write a sentence using each of these sets of three rhyming words:



WORKSHEET 3. PAPER CUT-OUTS

Cut out the items below and use them in your cardboard box dolls' house.

[These items could be used as starting points but children could do their own research to find paper cut-out items that they would like to include in their own versions of a dolls' house. They can be photocopied and enlarged to suit the space you are decorating.]

Bedroom	Lounge/Dining	Patio/Verandah
		
		
		

WORKSHEET 4. FOLK ART DECOUPAGE

Apply one of the patterned images below to a wooden box and/or to another small domestic item. Follow these instructions to complete this exercise: 'How to Decoupage' *WikiHow* <<https://www.wikihow.com/Decoupage>>



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<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9q1TZa53Ns>>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright AM operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. In 2011 she was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld Branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, in 2012 the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Australia, and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award. In 2021 she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia.

