

Crocodile Cake

Palo Morgan
with illustrations by Chris Nixon

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Synopsis

Crocodile Cake tells the story of a little girl who is bored with her busy family and decides to enlist the help of her grandfather to bake a cake shaped like a crocodile. However, the crocodile comes to life and begins to gobble up her family and only the little girl can save them.

Themes

Crocodile Cake is a story about the power of imagination and confronting your fears.

The crocodile begins as just an idea for the girl, but her thoughts are mischievous and perhaps even a little malicious. Tension grows as the cake is baking until finally it bursts out of the oven as the real-life incarnation of her imagination.

The girl runs, but the more she runs the bigger the crocodile grows ... and grows. Finally she can run no longer and must face the now massive crocodile. In this moment, she finds the courage and inspiration to face her fears and finally resolve the problem.

Writing Style

The story is written in fast-paced, first person rhyming couplets. The narrator's voice is interspersed with dialogue – both her own, the crocodile's and her family's.

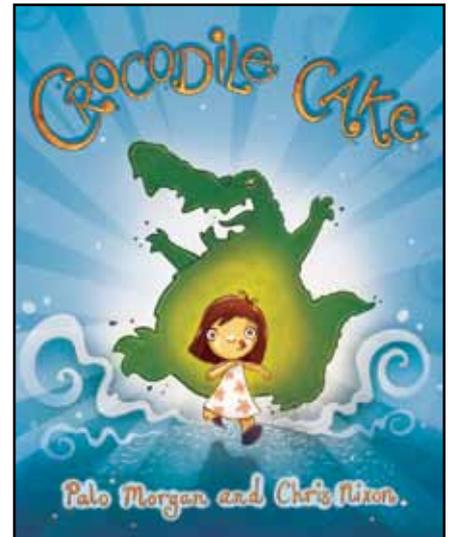
ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Author Background

Palo Morgan was born in Leonora, Western Australia. His parents were missionaries and he spent his early childhood in the Western Australian goldfields and Kimberley regions. Palo attended high school in Perth and trained as a teacher.

Author Motivation

Children are known for having wildly creative imaginations, so when Palo decided to write his second children's book he knew it had to be filled with adventure. Palo says for him,



writing children's books is a way of creating an experience that has its own special place in a child's life.

The idea of writing children's books came about when Palo was reading stories to his own children. 'I had some ideas, which were more a series of pictures than writing ... sometimes the idea provoked a picture, sometimes the words created another idea. Sometimes the picture needed other lines.'

'There is an Einstein quote, "we can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them," and that became part of the main idea for this story.'

The scary crocodile comes from my childhood ... I grew up in the Kimberley and have always had a great fear of crocodiles. Crocodiles are very clever hunters. I thought that a crocodile would be a good way of visually showing a large, fearful thing in the story.'

Illustrator Background

Chris Nixon is a freelance illustrator and adventure tour guide. He grew up in the foothills of Perth, spending all his spare time outside, and feels passionate about getting kids to experience the natural world. He graduated from Curtin University with a Bachelor of Design, majoring in Illustration.

Illustrator Motivation

'I'm interested in capturing the imagination and wonder of kids' explains Chris Nixon. 'I like to focus on how they see things.' When designing *Crocodile Cake*, the contributors agreed that it would be set in Fremantle, so Chris took plenty of photos of the houses and streets for reference. 'A lot of the house in *Crocodile Cake* is the one I live in. And the little girl ... some friends have a daughter who I drew a portrait of a few years ago, and the character in this book is very much based on her. The rest of the characters from *Crocodile Cake* are either based on my own family or close friends. It's all very close to home.'

Chris really enjoys illustrating for children and plans to continue with it for some time. While his ultimate goal is to work in animated film production, he sees children's books as a good avenue to get into that, 'because doing a kids book is a lot like illustrating a storyboard.'

STUDY NOTES

Pre-Reading

- Based on the title alone, what do you expect the book to be about?
- Based on the cover illustration and the title, what do you expect the book to be about?
- Are your answers to the first two questions different? Why?
- Write, draw or tell your own story, called *Crocodile Cake*, using just the title and cover illustration as the start point.
- Read the back cover blurb. Does this change your ideas about the book?
- Does the blurb make you want to read the book? Why/why not?

During Reading

- What sort of person do you think the girl is based on the first couple of pages? Do you think you'd like her? Why/why not?
- The girl is not named. Why do you think the author chose not to name her? What name would you choose for her? How can names change the way we feel about things? Would you expect the story to be different, for example, if you knew it was about a girl named Grizelda Gretch and a crocodile named Rosie?
- Why won't anyone in the girl's family help her cook? What excuses do they use? Are they good excuses? What sort of excuses do you hear at home or at school from you parents/siblings/teachers?
- What are some of the things members of your family do for fun? Do you watch footy on TV? Does your family all support the same team? Does anyone take dance lessons? Who likes to cook in your family?

After Reading

1. This story is about baking a cake. Use this as a platform to involved students in cooking with these questions and activities:
 - Hanging from the ceiling in the kitchen are lots of different utensils. What might they be used for? Bring in an unusual kitchen utensil from home. See if others can guess what it is used for. Make up some alternative uses.
 - Some of the ingredients you usually find in cake recipes include butter, sugar, eggs, flour and milk. Does the little girl use a recipe for her cake? What extra ingredients does she add?
 - Find cake recipes and compare them. Which ingredients are essential, and which ingredients vary? Are there any ingredients that all cakes use?
 - Bring your favourite cake recipe to share with the class. Put the recipes together in a class cake book.
 - Write out the steps for making your favourite cake on several cards, e.g. card #1 cream the butter and sugar, card #2 add the eggs, etc. Don't number the cards. Mix up the cards and swap with a friend. Ask them to place the cards in the correct order to make the cake.
 - Make a crocodile cake. For decorating inspiration look at <http://www.coolest-birthday-cakes.com/cake-decoration-idea.html#c11>
2. Investigate the chemistry of cake baking with students. An excellent article to start with is available at <http://nzic.org.nz/ChemProcesses/food/6D.pdf>:
 - Why do cake ingredients need to be added in a particular order? Why do cake ingredients need to be used in particular proportions? What happens if you add all the ingredients at once? What happens if you change the proportions?
 - What happens when a cake is baked? Why does it change from liquid to solid, wet to dry, small to big?
3. Encourage students to imagine their own story about an animal-inspired cake with the following activities:
 - Substitute the crocodile cake for something else, like a puppy pie or a fairy flan. How would this change the story?
 - Invent your own animal cake. Make up the craziest recipe for it you can think of. Write your own story based on your animal cake.

4. Use the rhyming verse of the story to prompt students to think about language and writing:
 - Why do you think the author chose to write the story in rhyming verse? How does his choice affect the way you read the story?
 - Rewrite a couple of pages from the story as narrative. How does that change things?
 - Choose two lines from the story, and make up the next two rhyming lines yourself.

5. Have students discuss the importance of the illustrations to the story:
 - How much of the story is told by the illustrations?
 - Why do you think the illustrator chose to hand-write the text? How would it change the look and feel of the book if the text were typed?
 - Using the text you created in question 4, experiment with typefaces on the computer, and different styles by hand. How does the way something is presented change the way it is read?
 - How do the colours in the illustrations change as the story progresses? How does the change in colour change the feel of the story?
 - Would the story work just as well with different illustrations?
 - Choose a spread from the book and re-illustrate it yourself to change the meaning of the text.

6. The crocodile in the story is a manifestation of the girl's fear. Encourage students to talk about their own fears and how they can respond to being scared:
 - What do you think the crocodile represents in the story?
 - Make a list of the things you fear.
 - Share your top three fears. How many of your fears do you have in common with other people?
 - Make a list of the things you could do to overcome your fears. Make some suggestions for how others can overcome their fears.

7. Find out about real crocodiles!
 - Research crocodiles and their behaviour. A couple of useful sites to start are http://www.kidcyber.com.au/topics/crocs_oz.htm, or <http://www.divethereef.com/Guides/AboutCrocs.asp>.
 - Does the crocodile in the story behave like a real crocodile?

8. Have students imagine more adventures the girl might have:
 - Write, draw or tell the story of what happens when she bakes slug pie.
 - Write, draw or tell the story of another amazing adventure the girl has.

9. Write to the author and/or illustrator of your favourite book and tell them what you liked about it or how it made you feel. If you'd like to write to the creators of this book, send your letter c/o Fremantle Press.

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