

My Superhero

Chris Owen

Illustrated by Moira Court

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Synopsis

My Superhero is about a young child who is comparing the superheroes that you find in comic books and cartoons with a different kind of superhero - his dad. The child rejects the idea that superheroes must have amazing strength, x-ray vision or other such superhuman powers so typical of the superheroes found in modern fiction. The child argues that his dad's more down-to-earth and less celebrated skills and qualities are far more important. At the end of the book the true identity of his superhero is finally revealed.

The child and his dad both take the form of a numbat, a small, furry mammal that is found in Western Australia. Numbats are endangered due to habitat destruction and predation by feral animals. The other superheroes in the book are depicted as different animals from around the world, that each have incredible abilities.

Themes

My Superhero recognises and celebrates dads and other positive role models in our lives. It reminds us that simply by doing normal, everyday things they can have a tremendously positive impact on our lives. At the same time, it makes us think about what a hero really is and whether fictional characters, or indeed real individuals (sportspeople, pop singers, actors etc), who might be given hero status in the media, are always worthy of the tag.

Because the book demonstrates the amazing natural abilities of various animals, *My Superhero* also provides an entertaining and engaging introduction to the study of the diversity of animal species and the special adaptations that help creatures survive in different habitats.

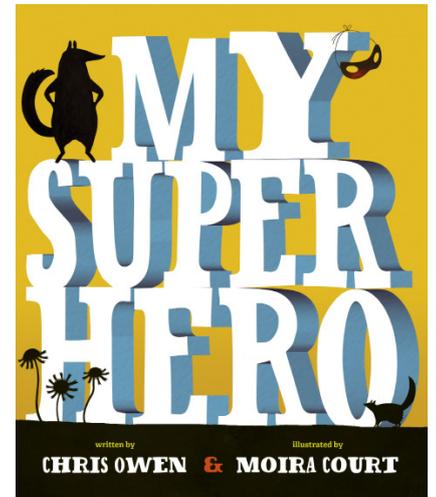
Writing Style

The text is written in the first person, with the narrator's voice belonging to the child. It uses rhyming couplets that combine to create four line stanzas. After every second stanza, the same 'chorus' is repeated – 'Kaboom! Kapow! Kabam! Kasplat!' – as the introduction to every third stanza, which describe the child's superhero. These descriptions are revealed from beneath 'flaps', which further enhances the element of mystery surrounding the superhero's identity.

Onomatopoeia and alliteration combine, particularly in those Kaboom! Kabam! sections, as a means of engaging a young audience and as a reference to the comic book superhero genre.

Author Motivation

As a former journalist and as someone with a keen interest in the English language, writing a book was an ambition I'd held for a while. For some reason rhymes seemed to be the form that I found easiest and most enjoyable to write. Interestingly, *My Superhero* began life as something quite different to the final text. I was trying to write a narrative poem about a superhero that kept making mistakes and who wasn't very good at his job. I spent a lot of time on it, but I was struggling with the ending and felt close to abandoning it altogether. Thankfully, I didn't delete it from my computer.



Around the same time, I became a dad. With children of my own, I felt a new level of responsibility, and a fair degree of pressure, to be a good role model. It was something I thought about a lot, and still do. After a while it occurred to me that rather than aiming to be a ‘superdad’, just spending time with your kids, reading to them, playing games with them and simply being there for them, is probably a good starting point for new fathers.

It was around these experiences and thoughts about being a parent that *My Superhero* began to take shape. Some of the lines from the original narrative poem have ended up in the final text.

About the Author

Chris Owen hails from Sussex on the south-coast of England. A former radio journalist and newsreader, he migrated to the sunnier climes of Perth in 2003, where he changed careers to become a primary school teacher. Aside from writing rhymes, Chris cites walking, snorkelling and eating homemade apple pie and custard, as his principal passions in life.

Chris suggests that his writing has been influenced by a range of different authors;

“I remember buying Roald Dahl’s *Revolting Rhymes* when I was about 10 years old. I enjoyed the incredible rhyming that he produced. His ability to rhyme within a sentence, as opposed to simply rhyming between sentences, is something I strive to emulate. I also loved reading Asterix books. In fact, I still enjoy them today for their humour and clever wordplay. Latterly, I’ve rediscovered AA Milne (Winnie-the-Pooh), and have been struck by his ability to create such interesting rhythmic effects by playing with the structure of his rhymes. Lynley Dodd (Hairy Maclary) is another of my favourites - anyone who can get the word ‘shemozzle’ into a rhyme, gets my vote!”

About the Illustrator

Moira Court grew up in the West Country, England. She emigrated to Australia in 2001 and now lives in the Perth Hills. She has been a practising painter for several years and, as well as illustrating books, she exhibits pieces in art shows and local galleries. Moira is passionate about animals and enjoys painting them in her artwork. When Moira is not painting she tries to grow vegetables and enjoys walks in the bush with her husband and dogs. She is also the illustrator of *Miss Llewellyn-Jones goes to town* 2010, *Miss Llewellyn-Jones* 2008 (both Fremantle Press) and *Sleep Tight* (Sunbear Publishing)

Study Notes

My Superhero provides the stimulus for doing a variety of activities across different learning areas and for different year levels. Here are just a few ideas for you to use or adapt. Have fun!

Literacy

Listening, Speaking and Visual Literacy

Play ‘Guess the Animal’. Read each page aloud to the students and ask them to listen carefully to the descriptions of the ‘superheroes’. Before revealing the picture, encourage them to guess which animal might be featured in each illustration and have them explain their choice. Discuss why the illustrator might have chosen the animals that are featured. Students could also predict who the child’s superhero will be.

Discuss the style of the illustrations emphasising the left to right orientation of the animals and reasons for this. Note the ‘flat’ nature of the pictures and how this might appeal to a younger audience. Identify the colour-scheme and materials used in the illustrations and the reasons why they were used. Provide the opportunity for students to create their own ‘animal’ pictures for their own version of the book.

The illustrator, Moira Court, has illustrated other children’s books too. Ask students to research these other titles and compare the illustrations in those books with *My Superhero*.

Vocabulary

Read the book aloud to students a number of times. Encourage them to develop a list of the words from the text that rhyme. Support students in identifying the various ways of spelling the same sounds e.g. ‘means’ and ‘smithereens’ – the ‘ee’ sound is made with ‘ea’ and ‘ee’.

Poetry devices

My Superhero uses some familiar poetic devices.

Discuss the use of rhyme, repetition, onomatopoeia and alliteration. Ask students to search the text for examples of these devices and discuss why they might be used. Students will have a lot of fun inventing their own onomatopoeic and alliterative words and phrases. Support students in identifying the role that syllables play in establishing the structure and rhythm of the text, using this as the basis for exploring other rhymes and creating their own.

Persuasive writing and debating

My Superhero shares some features of an exposition text and therefore forms a nice way to introduce the notion of writing to persuade, particularly for younger students.

After listening to the story being read aloud, challenge students to find as many arguments **FOR** the child’s dad being regarded as a superhero. This could lead to a discussion about why the dad’s qualities and skills might be considered so important. For a further challenge, students could expand some of the narrator’s arguments by creating their own supporting reasons.

After participating in activities like those described above, students might be ready to write their own exposition – **My dad is my superhero**. Encourage students to list their own dad’s ‘super qualities’. From their list, they can take their strongest arguments and expand them with supporting reasons to create a complete text. Remind them to start with an interesting introduction and a knockout conclusion that summarises the main points again. Don’t limit it to dads either - think of other super family members too.

My Superhero features illustrations of some incredible creatures. Each one possesses amazing adaptations that help them survive in different environments. Believe me, it was a tough choosing which animals to include. But what other animals could have been picked instead?

Challenge students to select alternative animals to feature in their own version. Ask them to do some research about other animals whose abilities and skills might fit the descriptions from the story. Afterwards, ask them to compose a short persuasive text arguing for these other animals to be featured in the book, and focusing on the use of supporting reasons, emotive language and high modality words, to help convince their audience in a noisy class debate!

Perth Zoo’s website has some great information for this task and is appropriate for young readers.

Father’s Day

My Superhero lends itself perfectly to Father’s Day activities.

Every superhero needs a mask! Challenge students to design and create a superhero mask for their dad or other family member. They could think about their superhero’s favourite things; hobbies, food, sport team etc and use this to stimulate ideas for their mask. Imaginations are sure to run wild!

Ask students to compose a letter or poem to their ‘superhero’ that explains why they are so great.

Hold a *My Superhero* Day in your class. Invite the children’s heroes along to share the poems, letters and paintings. And don’t forget to give out those fantastic masks for them to wear!

Science

Adaptations and Biodiversity

My Superhero provides a fun way to introduce some important science concepts about animals and biodiversity.

Younger students can be challenged to identify the similarities or differences between the animals featured in the book e.g. Some live on land and some live in water; some eat meat and others eat plants; some have four legs while others have six legs. This provides a good opportunity to introduce the concept of food-chains and food-webs, as well as some great science vocabulary - 'mammal', 'reptile', 'habitat', 'diet', 'carnivore', 'herbivore' etc.

The animals featured in the book all possess physical features that help them survive in their particular habitat. A good example is the camouflage capability of the panther chameleon that helps it to hide from predators and prey in the rainforest. Students will enjoy the challenge of identifying the adaptations of the animals in the book and suggesting how they help each creature to survive. For older students, this might be extended to explore the concept of animal classification.

Numeracy

Measurement

Many of the animals in the book have incredible speed or strength. This provides an engaging way to explore the use of different units of measurement.

Read the 'Super Animals' section with the students and identify the units of measurement that are mentioned. Pose questions: What things do we measure with these units? What other animals could be measured with these units? Would you use metres to measure an ant? What would be an appropriate unit to use when measuring the mass of a hippo?

For older students, the animal profiles in the 'Super Animals' section offer a platform for posing some interesting maths problems. Challenge students to find solutions to questions such as; How many of your class mates would it take to balance the elephant? How long would it take the cheetah to run the 100m race in your sports carnival? How many of your classmates could you lift if you had the strength of the Hercules beetle? How far would you jump if you were a cricket? Give students the opportunity to develop their own maths problems for their classmates to solve.

Other Activities

This book lends itself to being shared as a whole-class or small-group reading task, or for keeping in the library so that children can discover it for themselves. Here are some fun ways of incorporating *My Superhero* into a wider classroom program of activities at the early to middle primary levels.

- 1. Tell a funny superhero story:** Telling a story aloud is a great early reading skill, and it is also a useful way of building speaking and listening skills in a safe, supportive environment. Children might like to make up their own superhero character and then tell a short story about why their character is heroic. You may need to offer some guidance and structure for this task, such as providing a story scaffold or giving some examples of superhero stories. Children may prefer to draw a cartoon of their superhero or make a puppet that they can use as a prop during their oral storytelling activity.
- 2. Animal actions:** After talking about the various animals discovered in the book, why not spend some time encouraging children to act out their amazing deeds? While it may not be possible to really jump as high as a cricket or swim backwards like a sperm whale, children can have loads of fun exploring the various ways that these creatures might move. This could be a good activity to try outdoors or in a large indoor space where children can move around freely without bumping into obstacles (or each other). Encourage children to explore movement patterns such as crawling, rolling, hopping, jumping and creeping. Pair children up and see if they can work together to create a movement which reflects a single animal, such as a bear, by working together. One partner could be one 'end' (such as the head and upper limbs) while the other partner is the back end. Children are likely to have seen images of clowns or actors working together inside costumes with predictably hilarious results, and are bound to enjoy this activity.

3. **Build a class library:** The book gives us a quick glimpse into the fabulous world of animals, but there is so much more to learn! Take a trip to the library and borrow some non-fiction books about animals. Display these in the classroom as part of your classroom library so that children can explore them in their own time. There are many well-illustrated non-fiction books that can be readily explored by children who do not yet have the reading skills to manage the text on their own. Lots of children find it very satisfying to sit in a beanbag and simply discover the joy of beautiful illustrations and photography.
4. **Calendar cut-outs:** Old calendars are a great source of quality photos of animals. Visit your local newsagent and see if they have any old calendars that they are happy to sell you for low cost. Cut out the pictures and use them as a display of animal superheroes in your room. Children can talk about the letters that form each animal's name, or can make up some 'hero' words to add to your display on coloured cardboard or paper. You could also try rearranging the pictures into your own hero calendar, with a special place each month (or week) for the 'hero of the month' – someone who has done something especially challenging in their learning or playground activities.
5. **Explore your local area:** Australia has many unique animals, and it makes sense to encourage an awareness of the wonderful diversity which exists across the country in the animal kingdom. Spend some time exploring your local region and learning together about the animals that make your own part of the country special. Children could visit a local national or state park, look at images online, visit a zoo or conservation park or listen to a speaker from a local animal organisation to help build their knowledge of the animals that are particular to their local environment.
6. **Superhero costumes:** Get those imaginations into overdrive and get to work designing some costumes fit for the finest superhero! Children in the early to middle primary years love dressing up and will take any chance they are given to abandon the school uniform in favour of silks, velvets, silly hats and hero capes. Set them the task of designing their own superhero costumes and ask parents to donate any brightly coloured material strips and other suitable items to your costume-making toolkit. You might even find the odd handy sewer in their parent ranks with some time on their hands who is willing to come in and help rustle up some snazzy superhero costumes.
7. **Superhero coat of arms:** Any superhero worth their salt needs a coat of arms to show what they really stand for in life. Have kids learn about the Australian coat of arms with its kangaroo and emu standing either side of the shield bearing the emblems of the states (as seen on the fifty-cent coin). Provide each child with a copy of a blank coat of arms and have them think about the words and phrases which they could use to describe themselves. Ask them to write the words and phrases onto the coat of arms and then decorate it so it can be displayed in a class big-book or on the wall. An alternative to this activity is to send the coat of arms home and ask families to work on it together to create a design which reflects why they, as a family unit, are heroic. This is an enjoyable activity with a thoughtful undertone that may get families talking about all those wonderful characteristics that make them special.