

## Olive of Groves

By Katrina Nannestad

Illustrated by Lucia Masciullo

### SUMMARY

Olive has always dreamed of attending boarding school, but Mrs Groves' Boarding School for Naughty Boys, Talking Animals and Circus Performers is not what she expected. To tell the truth, dear reader, it is not what anyone expected!

The headmistress is completely bonkers and Pig McKenzie, school bully and all-round nasty swine, is determined to make Olive's life unbearable.

Olive, however, is clever, sweet and kind, and soon gains the loyalty and devotion of three rats, a short-sighted moose, a compulsive liar and a goose who faints at the sight of cherries.

But will friendship and wits be enough when Pig McKenzie puts his Truly Wicked Plan into gear? Or will Olive be cast out of Groves forever?

'Exciting, imaginative, charming and very, very funny' -- Judith Rossell, award-winning author of WITHERING-BY-SEA

### Curriculum Areas

- English – Language Literature and Literacy
- Ethics

### Themes

Bullying, Loyalty, Honesty and Lying

The importance of imagination in helping us overcome fears

**Appropriate Ages:** 8-12

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**(Adapted from McDonald, Lorraine A Literature Companion for Teachers PETTA,  
Newtown 2013, pp. 82-83)**

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## **INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY**

*Olive of Groves* is a fast-paced, hilarious and at times outrageous comic novel for readers aged 8 and older. *Olive of Groves* tells the story of ten year old Olive, who has been raised and home-schooled by her grandparents in a town too small to have a school. Keen for Olive to mix with other children her own age, Granny and Pop enrol Olive in Mrs Groves' Boarding School. Unfortunately, what neither Granny, Pop nor Olive realise, is that Mrs Groves' boarding school is for a very specific clientele—Naughty Boys, Talking Animals and Circus Performers—and Olive is none of those things. Nevertheless, determined not to make her grandparents' sacrifice in vain (they gave up their chook raffle money to pay for her education), Olive attempts to pass herself off as the only one of the three types of students she thinks she can successfully pretend to be—a circus performer. There are only 3 problems with her plan—she's clumsy, she's afraid of heights, and Mrs Groves has a pathological terror of who Olive actually is—a normal, everyday girl. Or is she?

So begins a series of over-the-top adventures as Olive tries to survive her probation week, convince Mrs Groves and her fellow students—and herself!—that she actually is an acrobat, all while dodging the dangerous activities of the Naughty Boys, making friends with the Talking Animals and dealing with her greatest adversary: Pig McKenzie, Head Boy and Pig of Evil Intent!

## **CURRICULUM AREAS AND KEY LEARNING OUTCOMES**

ACELT1594; ACELT1599; ACELT1600; ACELT1603; ACELT1605

ACELT1606

ACELA1476; ACELA1488; ACELA1492;

ACELY1694; ACELY1679; ACELY1688; ACELY1792

## **GENRE**

*Olive of Groves* crosses over many genres. It is primarily a comic or humorous story, with elements of adventure, boarding school and circus stories. It includes features of fantasy, with its cast of talking animals.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katrina Nannestad grew up in country NSW in a neighbourhood stuffed full of happy children. Her adult years have been spent teaching, raising boys, perfecting her recipe for chocolate-chip bickies and pursuing her love of stories. Katrina celebrates family, friendship and belonging in her books. She also loves writing stories that make children laugh. What can be better than contagious belly giggles, hen-like cackles or wild guffaws that end in a snort? Katrina now lives near Bendigo with her family and an exuberant black whippet called Olive. She dreams of one day owning a spotted pig called Harold.

Katrina's first book, *Bungaloo Creek*, was published by ABC Books in 2001 and was a CBCA Notable Book the following year. In 2014, her novel *The Girl Who Brought Mischief* won the Patricia Wrightson Prize for Children's Literature in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and was a CBCA Notable Book in the same year. Her highly successful *Red Dirt Diaries* series has also been recognised with several awards: *Red Dirt Diary* was shortlisted for the West Australian Young Readers' Book Award in 2012 and for the Speech Pathology Australia Book of the Year Awards 2011. *Red Dirt Diary 2: Blue About Love* was recognised with a CBCA Notable listing in 2013. Visit Katrina's website at: [katrinanannestad.com](http://katrinanannestad.com)

## AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'How about a funny series set in a boarding school?' A simple suggestion by Tegan at Harper Collins and my brain was buzzing.

I've been playing with talking animals in my writing for ages and was keen to give them a burl in a book. What if I sent the animals to a boarding school, together with some naughty boys and circus performers? There'd certainly be plenty of scope for adventure, catastrophe and comedy ... especially if they were supervised (or *not* supervised) by a befuddled headmistress like Mrs Groves.

I'm not sure whether I dreamed up Olive before or after the other students, but it was love at first imagining. She is clever, courageous and loyal, but also clumsy and *definitely not cool*. She would not belong to the 'in' crowd at a regular school. Olive is the kind of strong girl I have always sought as a friend, the kind of person I strive to be.

Pig McKenzie, on the other hand, is a Wicked Swine and the type of character one should Avoid at Any Cost. He has been trying to squeeze his fat, slimy snout into my writing ever since I created him fourteen years ago. It's just bad

luck for him that he finally made it to a book with such a worthy opponent as Olive.

The rest of the story's development is as much a mystery to me, the writer, as it is to you, the reader. Once my imagination kicked into gear, the fantasy world of Groves took on a life of its own. I just went along for the ride, sticking my narrator's nose in from time to time. That's the magic and joy of writing!

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Lucia is an award winning children's book illustrator born and bred in Livorno, Italy. She moved to Australia in 2007 and she now lives and works on the beautiful Gold Coast.

Lucia has collaborated with several top Australian and English Publishers and illustrated fifteen books, among which the CBCA Honour Book and Prime Minister Award shortlisted *Come Down, Cat!*, written by award winning author Sonya Hartnett, CBCA shortlisted *Family Forest* and the best selling series *Our Australian Girl*.

## THEMES

Katrina Nannestad's books all deal with family, friendship and community, and *Olive of Groves* is no different. In addition, the novel addresses the following themes:

- Bullying
- Loyalty
- Honesty and lying
- The importance of imagination in helping us overcome fears

**Note:** Some of the discussion points raised in these teacher's notes are covered in the Primary Ethics curriculum.

<http://www.primaryethics.com.au/k-6curriculum.html>

**Discussion: For, Against, Don't Know!**

The Narrator frequently makes statements about particular lessons learned from an experience, or an observation about human nature. These can provide great discussion topics, which may encourage the students to consider some of the books' themes before and during reading. Ask them to decide whether they agree with the following statements—**For!**—or disagree—**Against!**—or if they are undecided—**Don't Know!** The examples below are just a few from the novel; you will find others throughout.

(See also the activities related to analysing the 'character' of the Narrator.)

*It is funny how, once the worst has happened, all fear is removed from a situation.* p.175

*Everyone has at least one thing with which they struggle.* p.181

*It is amazing how, at a point of crisis, one can suddenly discover unknown depths of inner strength.* p.203

*Sometimes, when we are in a pickle, our minds race so fast that the simplest solution eludes us.* p.209

**Discussion: What makes a person a good person?**

Olive's Pop calls her 'brave and clever and precious', something she reminds herself of at different times throughout the course of the novel, when she is not feeling particularly brave or clever or precious. At the end of the novel, Mrs Groves says to Olive, *You are just the type of student we need here—kind, brave, determined and a true friend through thick and thin.*

Lead a discussion with the students about the kinds of qualities they value in a person, and which qualities they admire most in their friends and family members. Encouraging a positive atmosphere or support and kindness, ask them to identify the best qualities in their classmates. This might include personality traits such as generosity, or it might be that they are good at a particular thing.

Make a wall chart listing all the best qualities of students in the class.

Then discuss what kinds of students your school needs and make a separate wall chart of the list of qualities your school values and encourages. Your class may like to make a presentation to a school assembly on their findings.

**Discussion: Lying**

Olive tells a lie to be able to attend Mrs Groves' Boarding School for Naughty Boys, Talking Animals and Circus Performers. She is none of those things, but tells Mrs Groves she is an acrobat. She is given a week to prove herself to Mrs Groves and to be allowed to stay at the school.

Later, Olive writes to her grandparents and neglects to tell them anything at all about the school or her experiences: *No, she had not given one jot of information about Mrs Groves' Boarding School for Naughty Boys, Talking Animals and Circus Performers. But neither had she told a lie. That would have to do for now.* p.90

Pig McKenzie also lies outrageously to Mrs Groves, and one of the Naughty Boys, Frank, is a compulsive liar.

On page 235, when Olive lists the things she has learned during her first week at the school, she includes *Lying is not always a bad thing.*

Why does Olive lie? Is it ever acceptable to tell a lie? Is leaving out information the same thing as telling a lie? Are Olive's lies different from Pig McKenzie's or Franks? If the answer is yes, how and why are they different?

Is there any such thing as a 'good lie'? Under what circumstances have you, or would you lie? If the lie is to help someone else—for example, an animal or friend in need—is that better than a lie to help yourself? Is it ever OK to lie? Who in our lives helps us make decisions about these kinds of questions—our family? Teachers? Friends? People from church or community organisations we belong to? Who else contributes to our beliefs about what is right and wrong?

**Discussion: Bullying**

Pig McKenzie: 'head boy and Mrs Groves' pet student'. (Note the pun!) Pig McKenzie is both a Talking Animal and a Naughty Boy, who attends Mrs Groves' Boarding School. He is a liar, thief and bully, and is rightly described in the Cast of Characters at the beginning of the book as 'our villain, a pig of evil intent'.

Mrs Groves' School is also home to several extremely Naughty Boys, who variously lie, graffiti, blow things up and smell the place out with their putrid

socks. While the text makes it very clear that Pig McKenzie is a villain, it is rather more ambivalent about how naughty the Naughty Boys actually are.

For example, on page 59 we are told that none of the Naughty Boys are mean or nasty, *It was just that they were so dreadfully engrossed in their own particular brand of naughtiness, and if anyone—or anything—happened to get in the way, well, that was just a matter of bad luck.* A couple of pages later, we are told that Carlos, who has a passion for explosives, blows things up 'because they were there', but he also blows things up he considers to be 'intrinsically evil'.

### ACTIVITY

Organise the class into pairs, and assign one of the Naughty Boys to each pair. (There are 11 Naughty Boys listed in the Cast of Characters, but some have more narrative space than others. You will need to assist the students by providing them with page references for the Naughty Boys.) Ask the students to read about their Naughty Boy and compare his behaviour and motives to Pig McKenzie.

Bring the class back together and discuss whether or not the Naughty Boys are bullies and villains, and what, if anything, makes their behaviour different from Pig McKenzie's.

### HUMOUR

#### **Bottoms are highly amusing. *Olive of Groves*, page 182**

*In our society, issues-based texts are valued more highly than humorous texts, yet humorous texts often have much greater complexity and variety and require more critical engagement... Humour requires us to be flexible in our thinking so that our minds are open to change. We must think about many different points of view. We must compare facts with other alternatives, observe and interpret, use logic and reason to imply, value and judge (or not judge). We must also cope with contradictions, predict what may happen and develop options... humorous texts are fun to study and therefore promote student enjoyment.*

Jeni Mawter, *Critical Thinking: Humour and Text*, Macmillan Teacher Resources 2007, p. 7

Olive of Groves is a highly successful comic novel. Its humour works so well because it is closely connected to character (eg Pig McKenzie's frequent and deliberate mis-naming of Olive, Blimp the rat's ridiculous expressions) and story. The scenes of high farce and exaggerated action are not only extremely entertaining, but they move the story along, for example, Olive's rescue of Tiny Tim provides her with the skills to genuinely become one of the circus performers.

Nannestad employs many different types and techniques of humour, including:

- Exaggeration, including over-the-top characterisation and unlikely scenes that are nevertheless believable within the world created by the writer
- The unexpected, eg a school principal frightened of girls
- The absurd or surreal, eg a wombat making origami
- Slapstick, eg slipping on banana skins
- Screwball, characterised by farcical humour, exaggerated characterisations and fast-paced action
- Gross-out or scatological, eg the pickled internal organs in the school's science lab

A good resource on types of comedy:

<http://www.dailywritingtips.com/20-types-and-forms-of-humor/>

### Drama activities

**Literary Sculptures:** In groups, assign students a comic action scene from the novel. Ask them to create a tableaux or *literary sculpture* of the scene. In this activity, the students have to pose in place as one of the characters, depicting the action of the scene. Some props may be used. They then hold the pose and the rest of the class need to identify which scene is being represented.

**Reader's Theatre:** In their groups, students create a Reader's Theatre script for a scene from the novel. They can use the dialogue in the novel, or, depending on the scene, they may need to add their own.

Reader's Theatre resources:

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/readers-theatre-172.html>

<http://www.readingrockets.org/article/readers-theater-giving-students-reason-read-aloud>

### **Cartoons, comics and graphic novels**

We often associate humour with cartoons and comic books. Some of your more artistically inclined students might enjoy turning jokes and scenes from *Olive of Groves* into single frame cartoons or comic strips or even short animations.

**Cartoon, animation and comic strip resources:**

<https://blog.udemy.com/how-to-draw-comics/>

<http://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Comic>

<http://www.paltoons.com/>

<http://www.powtoon.com/>

Halftone 2 on iTunes

<http://goanimate.com/>

### **CHARACTERISATION**

*In building an image of a consistent character, readers can pay attention to several sources of information in the text: what characters say or imply about themselves, what other characters say about them, what the narrator says about characters, and what characters do. Sometimes the information derived from one of these sources contradicts information from another source, so that readers must hold a number of possibilities in mind until they can decide which information is reliable.*

Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer *The Pleasures of Children's Literature, Third Edition*, Allyn and Bacon, 2003, p.60

Nannestad both draws on and subverts a range of recognisable character types and stereotypes in *Olive of Groves*. Make sure the students understand the difference between character *types* or *stock characters* (eg hero/protagonist, villain/antagonist, side-kick, love interest, helper etc) and *stereotypes*, where characters act according to certain expectations we have of them from other stories, from real life and so on. For example, we are used to representations of school principals as stern, scary or mean (think of Miss Trunchbull from Roald Dahl's *Matilda*)—how does Mrs Groves compare to the stereotypical school principal?

### Discussion

Discuss which of the characters in *Olive of Groves* are stereotypes and which go against our assumptions about a type of character. Encourage the students to think about the usefulness of stereotypes (instant recognition from the reader), but also the drawbacks (clichés, lazy writing, offensive ideas about particular types of people based on job, sex, culture etc). Remind them of this discussion when they are undertaking a narrative writing activity.

Andy Griffiths writing book *Once Upon a Slime: 45 Fun Ways to Get Writing Fast* has an excellent chapter on creating characters, where Andy discusses how he draws on and exaggerates character traits of people he actually knows. He argues that this makes his characters more believable. Comedian and writer Tim Ferguson, in his book *The Cheeky Monkey: On Writing Narrative Comedy*, notes that 'No matter how outlandish comic stories become, they must nonetheless be "believable"', and he provides two criteria for this:

1. Once a reality is established, no matter how tenuous or far-fetched it may be, that reality must not change.
2. Characters must always act and react according to their natures.

These points are very relevant in context of a book like *Olive of Groves*, where the reality includes talking animals, explosions, amazing circus feats and many other wildly inventive ideas and characters. They are important principles of writing narrative for children to understand as well.

Some useful resources on types of characters:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_stock\\_characters](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_stock_characters)

<https://quizlet.com/21998611/types-of-character-in-literature-flash-cards/>

<http://examples.yourdictionary.com/character-trait-examples.html>

<http://www.slideshare.net/kimberlyn7/types-of-characters-11342419>

<http://www.veronicasicoe.com/blog/2013/02/how-to-use-stereotypes-in-writing-fiction/>

### Discussion

Using your understanding of what Nodelman and Reimer state about how authors create characters, and the above resources, have a grand conversation with your students about what makes for a good character in fiction. Consider the ideas of consistency—characters behaving in believable ways—and acceptable inconsistency—characters doing something unexpected, but that we can still believe they *might* do, even if we don't yet understand *why*.

### Before reading

Read the Cast of Characters listed at the front of the novel. Discuss the language used; the use of adjectives and adverbs (*'astonishingly unfortunate'*) and nouns (*mutt* for *dog*). Discuss any words that are unfamiliar to the students—what do they think the word might mean? Use a dictionary and thesaurus to explore the meanings of the words in the character descriptions and to find new words that mean the same thing, or similar. What do they expect the book might be about, based on this list of characters? Which character description interests them the most, and who do they most want to find out more about?

### Activity:

Allocate a character from the *Olive of Groves* Cast of Characters to students—this can be done individually, in pairs or in small groups, depending on what will work best for your students' ability with language and drawing. Based on the information about the characters in the cast list, ask them to draw a picture of their character, and to write a short biography of them, including the following detail:

- Age
- Place of birth
- Family members
- What languages might they speak?
- Hobbies
- Who is their best friend? (Does not have to be a character in the book.)
- Favourite book or story

- Favourite movie and TV show
- Favourite colour
- Favourite food
- When they are not at boarding school, where do they live? (Place and building type.)
- An object or possession you would associate with them, eg Wordsworth the rat's dictionary
- A short description of their personality.

In drawing the character, they should consider the following:

- Appropriate clothing
- Hair style and colour
- Jewellery
- Body ornaments, eg tattoos, piercings
- Posture—how will they be 'posed'?

Note that in her book *Writing for Children* (How To Books, 2010), Pamela Cleaver provides an excellent and inclusive list of possible character traits, which you may find useful for this activity.

Share the various character drawings and biography, and make an *Olive of Groves* Character Gallery of the students work in your classroom. After you have read the book, you can go back to the students' character 'predictions' and see how closely they match the text.

(See also the Cast of Characters activity in **Narrative Style and Structure**.)

### After Reading

*...readers might pay attention to the four principles (of characterisation). The first two are repetition—the recurrent mention of relevant traits, probably from a variety of sources—and accumulation—the piling up of characteristics that complement one another or together explain unusual behaviour... Third... readers might also ask what the character's relations to other characters are... The fourth principle is transformation, the extent to which characters change in the course of the story.*

Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer *The Pleasures of Children's Literature, Third Edition*, Allyn and Bacon, 2003, p.60-61

Again, allocate a character from the book to students in pairs or small groups. This should be a different character from the one they did in the 'before reading' activity above.

Using the 'Blimp' table provided as a model (Appendix 1), have the students analyse the techniques Nannestad has used in creating the character. This activity asks students to explicitly identify grammatical features (use of verbs, adverbs and adjectives), vocabulary choices, including speech markers, physical characteristics, including how they move, objects associated with them, including food, their actions and relationships to other characters.

Have the groups report back to the class on their findings. Compare the different techniques and language Nannestad uses to create each distinct character. Then post the character analysis tables with the drawings and character biographies from the previous exercise.

### Writing activity: Humour and Character

Using the character checklist, students create their own original comic character, then write a story using many of the humour techniques and styles identified in these notes (see page X above). Students should do the following in their stories:

1. Choose an appropriate, funny name.
2. Write a brief biography of the character to help you get to know them.
3. Decide what the character wants, and what's stopping them from getting it. This can be the all-important source of conflict in the character's story.
4. Give them a unique world view— a particular way of thinking about things that is different to the 'usual', eg somebody who thinks the whole world should be organised to make life easier for cats, or someone who is frightened of doors.
5. Put your character in a situation of conflict—being caught out doing something naughty, trying to stop a bully, missing the last bus home from school.
6. Use exaggeration and the absurd—see how far you can stretch normal reality and still keep things believable.
7. Characters can have flaws but we should also find something to care about them—even if it's making sure they get their just desserts!
8. Think carefully about the language your character would use. Play with techniques like Tom Swifties when writing dialogue. ("I do love dogs," Buster barked.)
9. Make sure the story has a satisfactory resolution.

You may like to do this as a class exercise, or in small groups and pairs, depending on your students confidence in narrative writing.

### Related stories and poems

Consider the structure of the Cast of Characters descriptions, which suggest that we are in a slightly old-fashioned or classic style of storytelling: *muddled of intellect, clown of good cheer, skilful of limb and daring of heart*. These descriptions bring to mind stories and language from a different era, with their somewhat dramatic and formal construction and elevated vocabulary choices. Do these descriptions remind them of other stories they have heard or read? Eg fairy tales, Mother Goose, myths and legends, heroic or epic poems and ballads. The following resources may help you prepare for this discussion:

Heroic poetry:

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/263592/heroic-poetry>

Monday's Child:

Monday's child is fair of face,  
Tuesday's child is full of grace,  
Wednesday's child is full of woe,  
Thursday's child has far to go,  
Friday's child works hard for a living,  
Saturday's child is loving and giving,  
But the child who is born on the Sabbath day  
Is bonnie and blithe and good and gay.

(NB: There are a number of variations on this rhyme.)

You might also like to share some nonsense poetry with the students; Ogden Nash, Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, Dr Seuss.

Find as many examples of related texts such as the ones suggested above and make a text-rich classroom as you read and discuss the various features of *Olive of Groves*. Use these related texts as models for the students own writing. You can also take this opportunity to introduce the concept of meta-texts and intertextuality.

## NARRATIVE STYLE AND STRUCTURE

### The Narrator

Writers use different techniques in narrating a novel, depending on the type of story they wish to tell. Every story has its own *narrative voice*. Sometimes, when the narrator is a character in the story—when the story is told in 1<sup>st</sup> person, usually, but not always, from the protagonist's point of view—the narrative voice is that of the character. In 3<sup>rd</sup> person narration, the narrative voice can be harder to identify, as it's not attached to a particular character. Often, the author doesn't want to draw attention to the narrator, but sometimes it serves the story to have an intrusive narrator, one who 'breaks the fourth wall' between the reader and the text, often speaking directly to the reader. This kind of narrator, while still technically a third person narration, can become a character in their own right, even if we do not know their name or anything about them.

Nannestad employs this last type of narrative voice in *Olive of Groves*. The narrator—who is listed in the Cast of Characters as 'our talented wordsmith, witty and wise'—frequently speaks directly to the reader, and at times even appears to interact with the characters:

*'Enough!' cried Olive, although to be honest, I am not sure whether she was addressing the pig or myself. I do get a little carried away at times. Words are such delightful things to play with. It is quite fascinating how a selective string of words can create an emotional cloud so vivid that the reader—*

*'Enough!' cried Olive again. p.70*

Collect examples of other books where the narrator speaks directly to the reader, but is not the main character/protagonist of the story. Some examples include *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket, *The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo and *Claire-de-Lune* by Cassandra Golds. Some fairy tales also use this technique, and it was quite common in older children's books, such as *Seven Little Australians*, *Five Children and It*, *The Hobbit* and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and in fairy tales. In older children's books, this narrative technique often reflected the didactic origins of

the children's story, with the narrator pointing out moral lessons or ensuring the reader understands a particular point she wished to make. In contemporary fiction, writers tend to choose it either to evoke an earlier time or a particular genre, or to be playful and satirise the authorial voice of past times.

Choose extracts to share with the students. Ask them to identify what kind of story they think it is (genre), and what the mood evoked by the narration is. Can they identify particular words and phrases to support their opinions?

#### Discussion:

Can the students think of other stories where the narrator speaks directly to the reader? Why do they think the author might have chosen to do this? Do they like it, or do they find it interrupts the story?

#### Activity:

In small groups, have the students flesh out the character of the Narrator of *Olive of Groves*. Using the same instructions for the Cast of Characters activity, ask them to draw the narrator and write a biography. They will have to decide some details we do not know, such as the narrator's sex and age, and they should be able to explain why they came to their decisions about their character based on the text.

**Note:** This is a challenging activity but one that will particularly appeal to gifted students and those who enjoy writing their own stories. As such, it might be best used as an extension activity for selected students.

#### ORIENTATION

*...in literary texts orientation is more than an 'introduction' as it is meant to familiarise readers with the setting, at least one or two of the characters, initiate the mood of the story and include an opening event. The reader can often recognise the literary genre or type of story from the orientation — though sometimes fantasy stories begin in a realistic world before moving into a fantasy world. There is usually one orientation, but where there is more than one plot line there may be more than one orientation. In some stories, an initial attention-grabbing event starts the novel. This can be followed by an orientation where readers start to learn some important information about the characters.*

Lorraine McDonald *A Literature Companion for Teachers* PETAA, Newtown 2013, p. 72

The first two chapters of *Olive of Groves* are excellent examples to use to discuss the concept of orientation in narrative fiction. Chapter One introduces Mrs Groves and her Boarding School for Naughty Boys, Talking Animals and Circus Performers. As Mrs Groves 'blusters' around the school, we learn information about her, about the school setting and about some of the other secondary characters.

Chapter 2 introduces us to Olive and provides the 'opening event' McDonald refers to, also known as the 'inciting incident'. Often, the story's themes are also foreshadowed in the orientation, and there may be some suggestion of the protagonist's main desire—what does the protagonist want? And what is stopping her from getting it?

### Activities

**Literary Strikes:** Read the first chapter of *Olive of Groves* aloud to the class. Ask the students to write down up to 5 things that 'strike' them about what they hear. This might be to do with unusual or unexpected characters or ideas, eg Mrs Groves' behaviour, the idea of a school for naughty boys (why not naughty girls?). It might be unusual or unfamiliar names or words, or anything at all that they notice.

After reading the chapter, discuss their 'strikes'. Create a list, without doubling up. Then ask the students which of the list of strikes they think are the most interesting, and what do they think they mean about what might happen in the rest of the novel (prediction). Record their ideas and check them after the students have finished reading the whole book.

When the students have read Chapters 1 and 2, have them complete the table provided in Appendix 2, identifying the elements that are introduced in the first two chapters of the book, and finding textual references to support their ideas where appropriate.

## LANGUAGE STUDY

### “Words can be so confusing to simple minds.” p. 90

*And all the while the reader's language is being fed and enriched. Not just with the inventive vocabulary of Dahl's 'snozzcumpers' and 'whiz poppers' or White's contextual 'salutations', or the tongue-tapping phrases of Ogden Nash's Custard the Dragon who has 'realio, trulio daggers on his toes', but with continual exposure to the carefully-chosen word, the crafted sentence and the lyric prose of competent storytellers and novelists.*

Maurice Saxby, *The Gift of Wings: The Value of Literature to Children in Saxby and Winch, Give Them Wings: The Experience of Children's Literature* (1991)

Nannestad takes enormous pleasure in playing with language in *Olive of Groves*. The book is rich with puns, twists on common phrases and gloriously inventive (and funny) figurative language. One of Olive's three rat friends, Wordsworth, owns a treasured dictionary, and loves words. The narrator—who frequently addresses the reader—will often explain the meaning of words, to humorous effect. Nannestad also has great fun with names of characters and food, book titles, collective nouns, euphemisms, and descriptive language generally. The novel also makes use of particular language features, usually for comic effect. Some of these include euphemisms, malapropisms, onomatopoeia and Tom Swifties. As such, it is not only a highly pleasurable book to read for those who love language, but it also provides rich opportunities for exploring how the writer uses language to create mood, tone, humour, characters and to support children in learning about the function of language in narrative fiction.

### Exploring mood and vocabulary

McDonald defines the mood of a story as ‘the atmosphere the author creates and the feelings that impact on readers.’ (McDonald, 2013, p.81) The writer carefully chooses words and phrases to evoke the mood of a scene, to portray the characters' emotions and even to establish setting.

#### Activity

Select several key scenes from the novel. Some suggestions include the various confrontations Olive has with Pig McKenzie (eg Chapters 6 & 9), one of the scenes involving an act by a Naughty Boy (eg the blowing up of the broccoli, Chapter 8), Olive's attempts at becoming an acrobat (Chapters 7, 14, 18) and the rescue of Fumble the short-sighted moose (Chapter 30). Many

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others are also suitable for this activity. In pairs or small groups, ask the students to identify which words and phrases help create the mood of the scene. The table in **Appendix 3** can be used for this activity; it also allows for the students to identify new or unusual words, so extending their word banks.

### What's in a Name?

Nannestad is frequently very playful with the naming of things in the novel. From the title—itself a kind of pun—through to the appropriately named Naughty Boys, Talking Animals and Acrobats, names are, as in all fiction, very meaningful.

Begin by discussing the names from the Cast of Characters. Some of the reasons why characters have a particular name will be more obvious than others—eg Blimp the fat rat, Splash Gordon the diver (also a pun on Flash Gordon) and Doug who likes to dig, might be reasonably obvious, but your students may need some guidance with others, eg Frank the liar and Fumble the short-sighted moose. Other names have cultural references—eg Tiny Tim and Wordsworth—that the students might need help with as well. Point out that writers often make reference to other books, movies, characters and so on, and that there are many such references in *Olive of Groves*.

#### Activity: Narrative Writing

Create the class's own cast of Naughty Boys (and Girls!) and Talking Animals and create appropriate names to go with them. Extending on the character analysis activity, each student may then choose one of the characters and write an extended biography of them, and then write a story for that character.

### Poetry

Read *The Naming of Cats* by T.S. Eliot

<http://allpoetry.com/The-Naming-Of-Cats>

Discussion: What names do your students' pets have? How did they get named? Are there stories behind any of the students' own names? eg were they named after a parent or other relative, the place they were born, their date of birth (eg Holly or Noel at Christmas).

#### Activity

Create a Wordle of the class's pets' names. <http://www.wordle.net/>

## Sundaes and Parfaits

Like all good boarding school stories, there are lots of scenes involving food in the novel. A great comparison activity would be to read a scene from Diana Wynne Jones's boarding school fantasy *Witch Week*, in which one of the children, Nan, unwittingly casts spells over the food at the school dinner and reveals herself to be a witch. (Chapter 2.) As in many scenes in *Olive of Groves*, the scene uses exaggeration and gross-out humour to great comic effect, while also revealing character and plot.

On page 139-140 of *Olive of Groves*, Frank the Liar makes up stories about the naming of various foods, including Sundaes—which he claims used to be called Thursdays.

(In fact, there is a very interesting story behind the naming of Sundaes see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sundae> or see *I Scream, You Scream, We All Scream for...* by Karen Jameyson in Blast Off, The NSW School Magazine).

### Activities

Using Frank's lies about the names of food on page 140, create an alternative list of names for students' favourite foods. Try and avoid branded product names, and focus on generic names, eg lamb roast, sticky date pudding, mud cake, salad sandwich etc.

Create a week's menu for meals at a School for Naughty Boys and Girls. Be as inventive with naming the meals as possible.

### A Catch of Collective Nouns\*

Collective nouns are great fun. They appear in *Olive of Groves* on page 165 when Pig McKenzie refers to a herd of sharks, and Olive corrects him—'It's a *shiver* of sharks!'

Create a list of collective nouns that appeal to the students. There are many lists available on the web, with some recommended sites listed below. You might like to choose a selection that you think will appeal to your students, particularly those that relate to characters from *Olive of Groves*. (Many collective nouns are of animals.)

Once students have the concept, ask them to create their own collective nouns. Choose nouns from *Olive of Groves* to begin with (see suggestions below) but let the students add their own. Encourage them to be inventive, but

to also really think about how the collective noun reflects something about the nature of the noun itself.

Acrobats

Birthday Cakes

Booby Traps

Buttons

Bullies

Choc-Chip Biscuits

Dictionaries

Explosives

Friends

Garden Gnomes

Grandparents

Headmistresses

Laundry Shoots

Medals

Parfaits

Teachers

Tightropes

Smelly Socks

Sundaes

Zoos

**Websites:** <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/grammar/partsofspeech/nouns/collective/>

<http://collectivenouns.facts.co/>

\*According to various websites, the collective noun for collective nouns is a 'catch'.

### And when I say... I really mean...

A euphemism is the name given to the ways we find to say things that people don't really want to hear or that makes them feel uncomfortable. The word euphemism comes from the ancient Greek words eu, meaning 'good', and pHEME, meaning 'something spoken'.

Ursula Dubosarsky, *The Word Spy* Penguin 2008

One of the first language devices we meet in *Olive of Groves* is euphemism. The Narrator describes Mrs Groves as 'an interesting woman', and then goes on to explain, 'when I say *interesting*, it is really a polite way of saying...', not once but twice. The Narrator uses this device often throughout the novel, also using exaggeration in the euphemisms for comic effect.

Ask the students what euphemisms they might be familiar with, eg 'passed on' for dying, 'the bathroom' for toilet, 'fell off the back of a truck' for stolen, and many others. Sometimes euphemisms can be deliberately funny, eg 'A few sandwiches short of a picnic' to describe a stupid person.

### Discussion

Why do people use euphemisms? Sometimes parents use them to speak to other adults without children fully understanding what they are saying; sometimes teachers use them to describe difficult students in polite ways. Can they think of any times they have used one? Have they ever heard someone use a euphemism, but thought they meant it literally? This may have happened when they were much younger, and it's also important to note that euphemisms can be especially confusing for people learning English as an additional language.

Some more mature students might enjoy Monty Python's Parrot Sketch, although note that it includes smoking.

<https://youtu.be/npjOSLCR2hE>

### A Novel of Poetic Licence

While we want to encourage students to use correct grammar and punctuation in their work, it's important for them to understand that in fiction, writers have more freedom to play with the rules. An example in *Olive of Groves* is the way Nannestad uses capital letters for emphasis, particularly in relationship to statements about Pig McKenzie. Choose some examples and discuss why Nannestad has used non-standard capitalisation and what effect it has on the reader.

## NARRATIVE WRITING

Chester the rat collects buttons, and he makes up fantastic stories to explain their origins. On page 153, Olive comforts Chester after the loss of his beloved button collection by telling him the stories behind the buttons she has found to replace the lost collection.

### Activities

Ask the students to choose one of the button stories told by Olive or Chester and write the actual story of that button. They may need to do some research to find out more about, for example, the story of Noah or Neil Armstrong.

Bring in a collection of interesting and unusual objects. Have the students choose an object and write its 'origin story'.

## PERSONAL WRITING AND POETRY

### ***Quote from page 91 beginning Wordsworth crept up onto the bed... entire paragraph***

Choose a close friend or a family member and write a poem or a list of wishes for what you would like their life to be like. Use beautiful language, as Wordsworth wishes to do. You might like to include metaphors and similes to describe what you would like their life to be like. Publish the finished piece with your own illustrations to decorate it, and give it to the person as a gift.

Support the students in this activity by discussing some of the many metaphors and similes used throughout the novel. eg 'like a freight train', p.94, 'as beautiful as a fully ripe dandelion', p.99. Encourage them to think of metaphors that suit the person they are writing about—for example, if their friend loves cats, they might create a metaphor to compare them to the appropriate qualities of a cat (warm, snuggly, independent).

You might also like to discuss with your students whether or not they agree with Wordsworth's definition of poetry.

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