

## **TEACHER'S NOTES FOR *MBOBO TREE***

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**GLENDA MILLARD** grew up in central Victoria, where she still lives. When she was little she loved snuggling up in bed with her mum to listen to her read stories while her dad was working the nightshift. Some of the stories were scary, but Glenda loved them.

When Glenda was in high school she won prizes for her writing. Although she left school when she was fifteen she has always continued to read and tell stories. She didn't begin to write her own stories until her four children were in high school. At that time she took a creative writing course at TAFE and her first picture book was the result.

Besides writing, Glenda loves spending time with her family, cooking (especially pizzas and sour dough bread in the wood-fired oven in the backyard), music, gardening (water permitting), her pets and reading books that make her laugh or cry. Writers whose work she admires include David Almond, Kate DiCamillo, Margo Lanagan, Guus Kuijer, Ursula Dubosarsky, Sophie Laguna, Gerald Durrell and Virginia Hamilton. 'I don't know that any writers have a direct influence on the way I write, but their work gives me the courage to write in my own style.'

Glenda has published short stories, novels for young adults, chapter books for younger readers and picture books, including *Heart of the Tiger*, *Kaito's Cloth*, *Angel Breath*, *The Naming of Tishkin Silk* (Honour book in the Children's Book Council of Australia Awards 2004), *Layla*, *Queen of Hearts* (shortlisted for the CBCA Awards and winner of Queensland Premier's Children's Literary Award 2007), *Perry Angel's Suitcase* (Shortlisted for NSW Premier's Literary Award and CBCA Awards 2009) and *A Small Free Kiss in the Dark*.

**ANNIE WHITE** grew up in Geelong, Victoria. Her childhood was spent jumping waves on the beaches along the Great Ocean Road, climbing trees, delighting in the worlds of *The Magic Faraway Tree* and *Alice in Wonderland*, and drawing endlessly at the kitchen table. She wanted to be an artist, a princess or an archaeologist when she grew up.

Annie studied Art and Design at college, then worked in advertising. She now works fulltime as an illustrator. Her artwork has appeared on posters, cards, web sites,

magazines and murals. She has also illustrated more than fifty books for children, including *Mummies are Amazing*, *Mr Fix-it Not*, *Harry and Gran* and *Charlie's Damper*.

She now lives in Melbourne with her husband and three children, who, together with the dog, provide her with inspiration for many drawings. 'Birthday parties, supermarket tantrums, lost toys, best friends and trying to wash the dog can all end up as illustrations.' She works in her home studio and loves illustrating for children 'because they have such unlimited imaginations.' She also loves spending time with her family, reading books 'that make pictures in my head', music and walking on the beach.

## **SYNOPSIS**

Near a village grows a tree that belongs to no-one and to everyone. It supplies the people and animals with nectar and fruit. One day a baby girl is found hanging in a bundle from its branches. The people care for her as if she were their own. They name her Tiranamba Adesimbo Mbobo. She lives happily among them, but never speaks. This doesn't trouble the villagers. They believe she will speak when she has something important to say.

One day a stranger appears beneath the tree with an axe in his hand. Tiranamba speaks – she tells the man to leave the tree that belongs to everyone and to no-one. He ignores her, and, vowing that she will never let go, Tiranamba wraps her arms around the tree's trunk to protect it. She saves the tree, and now the legendary tree has two trunks.

## **WRITING *MBOBO TREE***

The idea that sparked *Mbobo Tree* came to Glenda Millard one evening as she was listening to a talk-back radio program on the ABC. It was autumn and listeners were calling in with ideas about what to do with excess fruit or vegetables they had grown. Glenda recalls that 'one caller, from a rural area, told of a fig tree that grew near his house. The tree was laden with fruit and in the evenings foxes would climb the tree and eat the fruit. I liked the idea that the man didn't mind sharing the fruit with the foxes. But it was the powerful image of the foxes in the tree at night that stuck in my mind.' Many years later, it was this image that provided a starting point for *Mbobo Tree*.

Glenda also feels that she may have unconsciously been influenced by a verse from the Bible in writing *Mbobo Tree*. 'There is a lovely verse that encourages us to be kind to

strangers and suggests that some people who have done this have entertained angels without realising it.' Tiranamba is symbolic of any person who is a stranger to us. 'She could have been a refugee, an alien or any other homeless person, or, who knows, perhaps even an angel.' Tiranamba's purpose in the story is twofold. Firstly her role is closely aligned to the biblical reference: she is the stranger whom the villagers care for out of compassion. They are poor people themselves, but share everything they own with the baby, and are duly rewarded when Tiranamba saves the tree around which their lives revolve. Tiranamba's other role is to demonstrate that every one has worth in society regardless of their background, abilities or lack of them. Up until the time when the foreboding stranger (who represents greed) threatens the tree, Tiranamba has never spoken. She bravely faces him, warning him of the repercussions of destroying the tree of life. She ultimately risks her own life to save it for the villagers who have done so much for her.

Just as in life, there are many mysteries in *Mbobo Tree*: Who planted the tree? How did it survive? Where did the baby come from? Why wouldn't she speak? Who was the man with the axe who came to chop down the tree? In *Mbobo Tree*, the wise women's patient approach to life's mysteries and expectation that in time the truth would be revealed, seem to reflect the notion that the universe is ordered and that there is a purpose for our lives. They seem to sense that Tiranamba is born with a purpose. No-one knows what it is but they trust that all will become clear with time.

The words that are used in the story are highly lyrical, with phrases such as 'rainbow-coloured rag' and 'wept with them at wakes', and vivid images, such as the memories of the old men rattling around in their heads 'like dried seeds in a gourd'. As an avid reader and as a writer, Glenda knows what a wonderfully powerful tool imagery is in story telling. She says, 'I think it would be madness not to use it!' The descriptions of people and things are also extremely compact. On page 1 the nature of the tree is captured in one sentence: 'On the cleft of a rock, on the crest of a hill, grew a tree that belonged to no-one and to everyone.' And on page 9 the important things about Tiranamba are similarly captured in a sentence: 'She danced with the villagers at births and at weddings and wept with them at wakes, but she never spoke a word.' For Glenda, writing the text for picture books like poetry in that the story needs to be distilled 'down to its purest essence.'

As Glenda wrote the story, she realised some of the elements that were emerging suggested that it be set in Africa. She wanted to write about a small community that had a culture of passing stories on orally. The tree at the centre of the story provided the villagers with sustenance – from honey that the bees make from its blooms to the fruit the villagers and their goats eat. She felt that the story had a musicality as she wrote it, and the African name of the girl added to this.

Glenda thinks Annie White's illustrations are perfect – 'just the way I had imagined they should look. The colours are rich and glowing and Annie has captured movement and the vastness of the landscape.' She hopes that after reading *Mbobo Tree*, people think 'about what a wonderful thing kindness is; not just to the people they know and love, but to others. And also, it would be great if the story generated discussion about sharing and taking care of our precious resources, including children, trees and animals.'

### **ILLUSTRATING *MBOBO TREE***

When Annie White first read Glenda Millard's manuscript for *Mbobo Tree* it inspired wonderful images in her head. She was attracted to the lyrical quality of the words and she loved the way they could be interpreted in more than one way. To her, the story had a powerful legendary, symbolic feel.

Before she began to illustrate the book, Annie spent time in the library simply looking at beautiful images of Africa, soaking them up. Once she had done this and began to work on the book, she 'created the images directly from the pictures that I saw in my mind while reading the words of the story.' For her, the story had a timeless feel, without referring to any particular region in Africa. For this reason, she wanted to keep the imagery general and not refer to any particular landscape, costume, physical features of the people, or anything else specific. Working from impressions in her own mind, rather than from particular visual references, helped her do that.

In developing the illustrations, she began with a character sketch of Tiranamba. Once the editor had approved the sketch, she made lots of other sketches. These were developed into a storyboard and a series of roughs. Once the whole story was outlined in this way, Annie began the final illustrations. Even though this process involves analysing what goes onto the page, Annie says that the initial images that sprang into her mind

when she was reading the story were never lost and became part of the final work. She feels this is most strongly the case with the image of the man who came to chop down the tree. When she first read this scene, Annie says, the words that described him ‘sent a shiver down my spine and the image that I saw was literally what has ended up on that page. I didn’t deliberately set out to portray a European, it was more that I was trying to show a person who was as different from the villagers as possible: dark, monochrome, contained, unfeeling and rigid. I may have unconsciously drawn the axe man as a representation of the ‘developed’ world, where progress and the future can sometimes intrude on harmony and balance.’

Annie made the final illustrations using oil paints on canvas because ‘There is a depth and richness to oil paints that I felt would help capture the atmosphere of the story. Bold, rich colour was needed to reflect the harshness of the landscape and the warm, vibrant quality of village life.’

## **DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES**

1. After the story has been read to the class, hold a discussion about what happens in the story.
  - Pages 1–3 What do the villagers know about the tree?
  - Page 5 What do the villagers know about the baby?
  - Page 7 What do the villagers do with the baby?
  - Page 9–10 What do the villagers think when Tiranamba doesn’t talk?
  - Page 11–19 Find all the things that Tiranamba sees the tree give the village and the animals.
  - Page 20 How does seeing the tree giving make Tiranamba feel?
  - Page 21 Who is the stranger who comes to the tree with an axe? What might he do?
  - Page 23 What does Tiranamba do for the first time? Does she have something important to say? Why might the stranger’s ears be closed?
  - Page 25 What does Tiranamba do to save her tree? What happens?
2. *Mbobo Tree* is about kindness and caring. Talk about how the characters care for each other and the world around them. What makes the tall stranger different?

3. What does the story show us happens when you give out love and kindness? How are you repaid?
4. The tree is very special to the villagers. Talk about what it gives them. Ask whether students have a favourite tree. It could be one in their garden, or in a park, one where they have a cubby, or one they think is very beautiful. Talk about what their favourite tree gives them. Students can paint their favourite tree, with themselves in the picture if they like.
5. Students could work on making a 3D model of the world of *Mbobo Tree*. Using either clay on a board or in a sand tray, they could build the huts, with twigs or straw for the roofs, and a twig for the trees, adding whatever other elements they like. They might like to make figurines of Tiranamba, the villagers, and the stranger from pipe-cleaners, beads (large for heads, small for hands) with scraps of bright cloth wound around them for clothes.