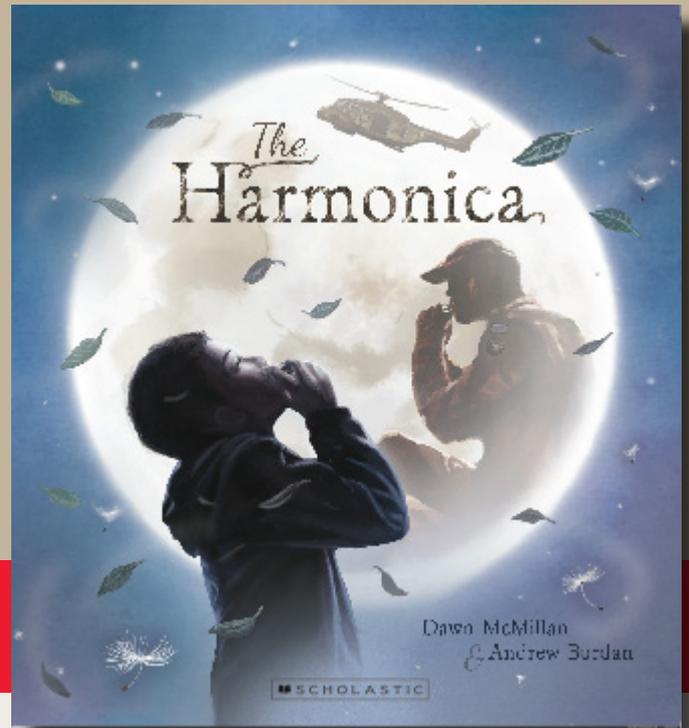


The Harmonica

By Dawn McMillan

Illustrated by Andrew Burdan

- Reading • Writing • Music
- Visual Literacy



Synopsis

The Harmonica is a story about loss and connection. The book's central character is a young boy named Carlos who lives with his mother in small villa in rural New Zealand. On the first spread, Carlos discovers an old box of treasures in the family's dusty attic. There are letters and a small collection of war memorabilia that once belonged to Carlos' Uncle Jack. Among the treasures is a shiny silver harmonica. Carlos remembers his mother telling him of evenings spent listening to Jack playing the harmonica 'to the hills and beyond'.

Carlos treats the harmonica with the reverence and respect it deserves. He also thinks that his mother might take it from him, and so he plays it very quietly and gently at first. He plays it at night, serenading the moon. One night, when there is a wild and noisy storm, Carlos plays the harmonica more loudly, in keeping with the weather, and still he is not discovered. He then plays to the sunrise and to the grasses, crickets and trees in a clearing. When walking home through a forest, he feels as if the spirit of his Uncle Jack is laying a hand momentarily on his shoulder. That evening he tells his mother about his discovery. She is pleased to see the harmonica, having thought it was lost. She gives it to Carlos, who then serenades her with music, just as Jack had done before he went to war and never returned. The book ends with these beautiful lines:

"It's yours now, Carlos," she said. "I wish you'd had the chance to get to know your Uncle Jack," she sighed.

"But I do know him, Mum," Carlos replied. "I met him in the music. Listen ..."

About the Book's Creators

Dawn McMillan is the author of multiple picture book texts, educational readers and poetry. She was the winner of the NZ Post Children's Choice Award in 2003 for *Why Do Dogs Sniff Bottoms?* Her last picture book for Scholastic NZ, *Colour the Stars*, was a 2012 Storylines Notable Picture Book, and the Maori version, *Taea Ngā Whetū*, was shortlisted for the LIANZA Children and Young Adult Book Awards. Dawn lives in a small coastal village on the Coromandel Peninsula, in New Zealand.

Andrew Burdan is a self-taught Wellington-based illustrator who has worked in film, television and print media. Andrew has been illustrating children's educational resources for more than 10 years, working on many books and magazines. He has been a regular contributor to the *NZ School Journal*, and he was the winner of the LIANZA Te Kura Pounamu award in 2011 for the graphic novel *Ngārimu, Te Tohu Toa*. His first picture book for Scholastic NZ, Joy Cowley's *Hush A Kiwi Lullaby*, was published in 2015.

Writing Style

The Harmonica is written in a deceptively simple poetic style. It is rich in figurative language such as personification, alliteration and onomatopoeia. Some of the lines are short and indented, giving a sense of movement such as when someone's lips move over a harmonica. Facts are implied rather than stated (e.g. Jack's death), and the illustrations tell much of the story, helping create a beautiful, heart-warming tale with a thread of spiritual magic running through it.

Shared Learning and Discussion Points

ASK YOUR STUDENTS:

- Look at the cover. What are the boy and man both doing? Do you think they are playing together? Why might the illustrator have placed the man in the moon? (cover)
 - What small objects can you see floating about in the cover illustration. What type of feeling do they add to the picture? What sort of book do you think this will be?
 - There is an old letter and a harmonica on this page. What connection do you think they have with one another? What else can you see on the page? (title page)
 - Why might there have been a harmonica in a box in Carlos' attic? What might its story be? (p.4)
 - Look at the illustration. Why do you think the illustrator chose to paint the picture from this angle? Does it make the harmonica look easy to reach? (pp.4–5)
 - Now look at the dust motes in the picture. Have you ever seen dust particles in the air like this? They tell us that the attic was dusty and not used very often, but they also have a magical feel to them. Why might the illustrator have wanted to add a little hint of magic to the story? (pp.4–5)
 - What can we tell about Uncle Jack from the photos and pictures? Why might they be in a box and not with Uncle Jack? (pp.6–7)
 - What might Carlos' mother mean when she says that Uncle Jack's playing was 'like the wind'? In the picture, what items are blowing in the wind? How does the illustrator show the past and present in one illustration? (pp.8–9)
 - Have you ever played a harmonica? What was it like? How easy is it to play? Why do you think Carlos doesn't just play it loudly and then run and show his mother? (pp.10–11)
 - Who got to hear Carlos playing the harmonica? What do you think Carlos might have been thinking about as he played? (pp.12–13)
 - Why do you think Carlos plays to the moon and imagines the moon's voice is coming through the harmonica? Is it easier or harder to imagine such magical things at night or in bright daylight? (pp.14–15)
 - What might the author mean when she says that Carlos 'played the howl of the wind and the rhythm of the rain'?
- How might the music have sounded? (pp.16–17)
 - How does the illustrator show us both the sunrise and Carlos' face as he looks towards the sun? What sort of sounds do you think Carlos was making now? (pp.18–19)
 - What sorts of sounds does Carlos imitate with his music? Who else played the harmonica to nature? What does this tell us about the connection between Jack and Carlos? (pp.20–21)
 - Why do you think the author wrote 'When the music was done', rather than 'When Carlos stopped playing'?' (pp.22–23)
 - Look at the forest scene. What sort of atmosphere does the forest have? How has the illustrator created a sense of magic and the presence of spirits? Whose spirit might be there with Carlos? Why does this not seem scary? (pp.22–23)
 - Pages 24 and 25 have no words. What do these pages tell us? Why do you think there are no words?
 - Why might Uncle Jack have played a harmonica while at war, rather than a piano or a guitar? (pp.24–25)
 - Why do you think the illustrator included dandelion seeds in the picture? Where is Uncle Jack? What has happened to him? (pp.24–25)
 - How do you think Carlos' mother felt when she saw the harmonica? Was she angry with Carlos? (pp.26–27)
 - What does Carlos mean when he says, 'I met him in the music'? (pp.28–29)
 - What page earlier in the book is most like this one? (pp.30–31) What is the same and what is different? What different feelings might Carlos' mother be experiencing as she listens to her son play the harmonica? How does the illustrator bring a sense of magic and spiritual connection into the picture?

Activities

ACTIVITY 1: LOOKING AT THE TEXT

Reread pages 14 to 21 of *The Harmonica* with your students. Discuss the poetic quality of the writing. Help them identify examples of figurative language, such as personification (e.g. the storm raged; the trees were calling), onomatopoeia (e.g. rustle, sway) and alliteration (e.g. soft shades of the sun; rhythm of the rain). Discuss the way the text is set out in short indented lines, and talk about the use of enlarged letters. Ask why some phrases were set in enlarged text but not others.

Now have the students imagine that Carlos left the clearing and walked onto a nearby beach, where he again played his harmonica. Help the students write an extra double-page spread for the book. This could be done individually, in groups, or as a class. Tell them to include figurative language and at least one phrase in enlarged text. Explain that their writing should tell readers what sounds and sights Carlos played while on the beach.



teacher toolkit

 SCHOLASTIC

ACTIVITY 2: PLAYING THE WEATHER

Provide your students with musical instruments. These could be a mix of school instruments and students' own instruments, or you could provide each student with an overturned plastic bucket to use as a drum. If any students have harmonicas, encourage them to bring them in for the other students to see and listen to.

Read the book with the students, and have them improvise music to match the mood of each scene in the book where Carlos plays the harmonica. Encourage them to think about pitch, volume and tempo. Discuss how music can reflect mood and atmosphere.

If appropriate, arrange for your students to listen to Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* and the sonnets that go alongside them. Some websites that might assist with this include: http://artsalive.ca/pdf/mus/tour2004/vivaldi2004_en.pdf and <http://www.pianolessons4children.com/composers/vivaldi.php> and <https://cityoflondonsinfonia.wordpress.com/2015/03/05/vivaldis-four-seasons-a-kids-guide/>

ACTIVITY 3: WAR AND LOSS

The Harmonica can also be used to engage students with the concept of war and loss. Read the book with your students and then discuss what happened to Uncle Jack. Help them to realise that this is a modern story and that soldiers still die in battles today. Talk about how Uncle Jack became more real to Carlos when he began playing Jack's harmonica. Discuss how the memories of those who have died can be kept alive through the things they have left behind and through others' memories and storytelling.

If appropriate, create an opportunity for the students to discuss any instances of loss from their own families. Allow the students to recount the ways their families remember those who have gone. Students could bring in photos or small belongings that have helped them connect with family members they never met, such as a grandparent who died before they were born.

This activity could be a prelude to writing a poem or short piece of prose in which the students address someone who has had an impact on their lives, but who they never knew.

ACTIVITY 4: WHAT CARLOS THOUGHT

The Harmonica is written in the third person: Carlos' actions are described through the voice of a narrator, not through his own words. Encourage the students to think about how Carlos might describe what happened. Help them imagine a scene where he is writing to a trusted friend or older relative – someone he feels totally safe opening up to and being honest with.

Collate a class list of things Carlos might want to tell this person, for example, how he found the harmonica, how he felt playing it for the first time, and why he was nervous to tell his mother about it. Explain that first-person writing allows a writer to discuss thoughts and feelings.

Next, model writing the first paragraph of a letter from Carlos to this trusted friend. Have him talk about his thoughts and feelings as he finds the harmonica and gently plays it for the first time.

Then instruct the students to write their own letters. Encourage them to use emotive language. Work with those students for whom this task is particularly challenging. At the end, allow time for the students to share their writing with the class.

Written by Mary Atkinson