

# **THE AFGHANISTAN PUP**

**BY MARK WILSON**

**TEACHERS NOTES by Robyn Sheahan-Bright**

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## Introduction

‘Their thoughts were of family and friends, of places far away, and the love of a soldier for a little pup.’

Soon after a pup is born, his mother disappears, and he and the rest of the litter have to seek food and shelter elsewhere. Kinah is a child living in Afghanistan, a war zone, who is struggling to attain an education in a country where many still believe that women should not be educated. One day she finds the starving pup and takes him in. But then her school is bombed and Kinah disappears. The pup is in a bad way until an Australian soldier sent to rebuild the school adopts the pup and looks after him. The two become inseparable until the soldier is killed. Kinah returns to find her pup safe and well, and vows that she will never forget the soldier’s sacrifice.

This book is a tribute to the friendships forged by war, and to the comfort which animals can give to human beings during stressful times.

The birth of a pup brings together a young Afghan girl and an Australian soldier. They never meet, but the dog they both loved provides a bridge between them which will always be strong. The story ends on a note of hope, and with a sense that Kinah’s resilient spirit may well prevail over the many challenges she will no doubt still encounter.

## Themes

Several themes are covered in this book which might be related to other curriculum areas. These include:

- **The Afghanistan War**

The war in Afghanistan has two distinct phases:

1. The intervention of NATO and allied forces in 2001  
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War\\_in\\_Afghanistan\\_\(2001%E2%80%93present\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_in_Afghanistan_(2001%E2%80%93present))>
2. Soviet invasion in 1979  
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet\\_war\\_in\\_Afghanistan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_war_in_Afghanistan)>

**Activity:** Draw up a chart listing the influences which led to the Afghan conflict.

**Discussion Point:** Western powers invaded Afghanistan as the ‘Coalition Against Terror’. The Taliban are portrayed as the ‘enemies’ in this conflict with western powers. Investigate their beliefs and the origin of the conflict. Do the Taliban have any legitimate argument with western powers, or a claim to engage in combat? Conduct research into the background of the conflict.

**Activity:** Research the role played by Australian troops in the war in Afghanistan. [See websites listed in **Bibliography**.]

**Discussion Point:** Conduct a debate about the pros and cons of Australia’s involvement in the war in Afghanistan. (This is officially known as ‘Operation

Slipper’.) The ‘official’ account states that the ‘International Coalition Against Terrorism’ launched a ‘War on Terror’ in response to the destruction of the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001. But is this too simplistic an explanation?

**Activity:** Tarin Kowt in the province of Uruzgan is the site of the Australian army base which will close by the end of 2013. Find out more about this area and the people who live there. How has it changed since the current conflict began in 2001?

**Activity:** Civilians in war often suffer terrible injuries and endure the death of loved ones. Research the statistics on civilian deaths in Afghanistan. [See **Bibliography**.]

**Activity:** Research some of the weaponry used in modern warfare such as landmines, roadside bombs, grenades and chemical weapons. [See **Bibliography**.]

**Discussion Point:** How much media coverage have we seen of the events taking place in Afghanistan? Has there been censorship of the coverage? [See McKelvey, Ben, ‘Saying goodbye to a war we never really saw’, *The Drum/ABC*, 2 April 2013 <<http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/4604642.html>>]. Australian journalists spent a lot of time reporting from there [see coverage by Karen Middleton and Sally Sara in **Bibliography**], but did we see the whole story, or only our side of it?

**Activity:** Read Kathy McLeish’s ‘Afghan assignment: life with Australian troops’, <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-06-11/afghan-assignment-embedded-with-the-troops/4063890>>, which gives an insight into how soldiers live in Afghanistan. Try to uncover diaries or letters actually written by veterans.

**Activity:** Mark Wilson, in his series about children at war, has suggested that generations in Australia have been affected by various wars. Discuss this topic. You may wish to examine your own family history in relation to this question. For example, you may have parents, grandparents or great aunts or uncles who fought in wars and even died in them.

**Activity:** Read Mark Wilson’s poem at the end of the book. Find another poem about the conflict. For example, ‘Afghanistan War Poetry’, <[http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/Afghanistan\\_War\\_Poetry.html](http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/Afghanistan_War_Poetry.html)> [See also **Language and Literacy** below.]

- **Refugees**

**Activity:** How has the war in Afghanistan impacted on the traffic of refugees to Australia and other countries? Research the stories of these refugees. [See **Bibliography**.]

**Discussion Point:** The 1951 UN Refugee Convention <<http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49da0e466.html>> insists that refugees have certain rights when they arrive in a foreign country. Is Australia meeting its obligations under this convention? [See also **Bibliography**.]

**Discussion Point:** Australia has an ongoing issue with the arrival of refugees or ‘boat people’. Each side of the political debate has issued strongly worded policies designed

to 'stop the boats'. And yet, given our involvement in several overseas conflicts, it could be argued that we have contributed to the situation which has led to many refugees fleeing their countries in search of asylum, and so we have even more of an obligation to take them in. Discuss.

- **Pets and Trauma**

**Discussion Point:** In this story the love of a dog offers comfort to both an Afghani girl and an Australian soldier. In the note at the end, the author refers to the role which animals have played in the recovery of soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Have you ever experienced this sort of bond with an animal? Has your pet ever helped you get through a difficult time?

**Activity:** Research some of the groups helping veterans by providing a dog to assist them. Eg US organisation 'Soldier's Best Friend' <<http://soldiersbestfriend.org/>> or the Australian organisation 'Young Diggers' which has a dog squad <<http://www.youngdiggers.com.au/>>.

## Curriculum Topics

This picture book touches on the themes above and might be used in conjunction with curriculum topics (for primary or secondary school students) in the following areas:

- **Study of History, Society and Environment**

This book can be used in studies of history, society or environmental issues:

**Activity:** Research Afghan culture and history.

**Activity:** Research the meaning of Nowruz Day or New Year's Day, and other cultural or religious Afghani customs.

**Activity:** What sort of food do Afghani people eat? Have an Afghani banquet at your school.

**Discussion Point:** The book says that Kinah had to be careful because many older people didn't believe that girls and women should be taught to read or write. Is this a prevalent belief in Afghanistan, or only amongst members of the Taliban?

**Discussion Point:** What has been the effect of war on the lifestyle, social conditions and economy of Afghanistan?

**Discussion Point:** With coalition troops pulling out of the country, what has been achieved?

**Discussion Point:** Discuss the **values** conveyed in this text.

**Discussion Point:** Bravery is an ambiguous concept. The young soldier is fighting and also rebuilding parts of Afghanistan. But the civilians like Kinah who survive this crisis need to be every bit as brave. How would you describe bravery? Is the soldier

brave to be in Afghanistan?

**Discussion Point:** Would you be happy/unhappy to go to war? Why?

- **English Language and Literacy**

The text of this book might be studied in relation to the following aspects:

**Question:** This story is told in **third person** as a **past tense account** of events.

**Narrative perspective** is therefore from an ‘omniscient’ point of view (POV). Choose an event in the book and write about it in first person. How does a different POV change the narrative?

**Discussion Point:** There are **various other sections of text in different narrative styles** which add to the telling of the story. E.g. Newspaper reports of the conflict, Defence Force briefing notes and children’s writing in exercise books. How does the use of different text mediums enhance the main narrative?

**Activity:** Test your students’ comprehension by asking them questions about the written text. [See also **Blackline Master 2.**]

**Discussion Point:** Students might be encouraged to use critical literacy skills to unearth meaning in this text. E.g. How might Kinah’s later life unfold?

**Discussion Point:** Read the line: ‘But springtime in Afghanistan is a dangerous time. It means the “fighting season” is about to begin.’ What does this sentence suggest?

**Activity:** Read some picture books or novels set in Afghanistan to gain further insights into the history, culture and storytelling tradition. [See **Bibliography.**]

- **Visual Literacy**

The visual text of a book combines with the written text to tell the story using the various parts of the book’s design and illustrations, as explored below:

**Activity:** The **cover** of a book is an important part of its message. Look at the front cover of *The Afghanistan Pup* which has an inserted framed image depicting the soldier hugging the pup. Then look at the back cover in which the framed insert shows an impressionistic image of soldiers struggling through the terrain. The contrast between these two images in terms of emotional distance from the reader’s perspective is telling. What is the author/illustrator suggesting in these two images?

**Discussion Point:** The **endpapers** depict an evocative and very beautiful atmospheric painting signed ‘Miribad Valley, Afghanistan, Spring’. Invite students to examine the painting and describe what it suggests to them.

**Discussion Point:** The **title page** depicts the pup. Discuss the impressions each painting in the book gives you.

**Discussion Point:** The **format** of the book is square in shape, and the **layout of the storyboard** contains some double-page spreads and some single spreads. Sketches, framed portraits and pieces of text are inset throughout. How does the format and design of the book influence your reading of it?

**Activity:** The **medium or style** employed is: **acrylic paint on canvas in landscape paintings. Scenes of war** are generally depicted in a realistic fashion. **Black and white drawings** are also incorporated in images, and sometimes Mark Wilson employs **photo or super realism** to achieve the effect of veracity. Try to create your own painting in these mediums, depicting some scene suggested by this text. [See also Mark Wilson's note on **Illustration Technique** in his **Author's Notes**.]

**Question:** The **colours** generally used in this book comprise alternately subdued and vibrant tones. How does colour affect your interpretation of this work?

**Activity:** Study the image on the final author's note page. What does this image say to you? Create your own painting in this style, drawing on images suggested by this text.

**Activity:** Mark on a map where these key events take place. [See also **Blackline Master 3**.]

**Activity:** Create a graphic novel/comic version of a scene in this book. Read other such books as a guide to style and approach. [See **Bibliography**.] [See also **Blackline Master 4**.]

- **Creative Arts**

There are many creative activities suggested by this text:

1. Students might **paint their own image of the war in an impressionistic way**. After the works are completed, students can then display them as an exhibition created in response to this text.
2. **Watch some excerpts from Afghani cultural ceremonies** on *YouTube*. Have the students study some aspect of their culture and deliver an address about it.
3. **Create a play scene** depicting the conflicting views of those who are for and against the 'War on Terror'. Your play might be performed on a stage set created by members of the class. They might paint a backdrop or use digital images of actual war scenes projected onto the wall behind the actors. Choose relevant **music** to accompany your script.
4. Secondary students might **study the film** *The Kite Runner* directed by Marc Forster, written by David Benioff and based on a novel by Khaled Hosseini. Paramount Vantage, 2007 (it is rated PG-13 so it's only suitable for older students).
5. The Australian War Memorial has many records which you might research. Create your own display featuring information you've gleaned about the war. [See **Bibliography**.]

- **Learning Technologies**

The topic of the Afghanistan War can be widely researched, not only in libraries, but on the internet where there is a wealth of information:

**Activity:** Research the Afghanistan War on the internet. Find maps, a timeline and background information. [See **Bibliography**.]

- **Mathematics**

Statistics relating to war might lend themselves to mathematics activities:

**Activity:** An analysis of the various casualty figures of the Australian troops involved in the conflicts, in comparison to the total number of troops involved, could offer students an insight into the effect of the war. Visit the Australian War Memorial website as a starting point for your research. *Operation Enduring Freedom* lists coalition forces casualties <<http://icasualties.org/oef/>>. [See also Susan Chesser's report listed in the **Bibliography**.]

**Activity:** Compare these statistics to the figures of foreign troops and civilians.

## **Further Topics for Discussion and Research**

- Follow the links on the Australian War Memorial's website to 'Afghanistan: The Australian Story', <<http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/afghanistan-australian-story/interviews/>>, and watch some of the video interviews with Australian soldiers. Some of your relatives may have stories of serving in or visiting Afghanistan as well.
- Research the work of Mark Wilson. Compare his other books about war to this one.
- If you are working with secondary students you might research this work by reading non-fiction books such as those listed in the **Bibliography**.
- Investigate the experiences of Australian soldiers who have returned from Afghanistan. What sorts of experiences have they had? Discuss.

## **Conclusion**

The bond forged between an Afghan girl, a lost pup, and an Australian soldier is symbolic of the universal power of love and friendship.

Recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have reminded Australians again of how fragile international peace is, and how complex the origins of a war are. This book should, like Wilson's other books about the wars in which Australia has been engaged, encourage students to read more widely about these various conflicts.

'Lest we forget' not only our soldiers, but the many thousands of civilians caught in the crossfire of these deadly conflicts.

## Author's Notes

*Mark Wilson*

### Illustration Technique

All my artwork in this series starts with line drawings sketched in as much detail as I can manage. I then use permanent markers, ink, pastel, watercolour and acrylic paint – and just about anything else lying around; each picture dictates the technique.

I use a lot of photos, but for reference as opposed to directly, so although some paintings look like photos, they are not. They are 'super realism', used to emphasise important moments in the story, like the portrait of Jason in his uniform, which is contrasted against the flat, poster-style illustration of the protesters on the opposite page.

As you can see, the full-colour illustrations throughout are acrylic paint on canvas, but I often overlay parts of these with simple black and white drawings. I use whatever is best for the page, but also what appeals most to me. I love sketching, painting in acrylics, doing washes in inks and oils, and generally working with new and different materials to add contrast and variety to the illustrations where needed.

### About the Author/Illustrator

**Mark Wilson** was born in Brunswick, Victoria. He took to drawing from a very early age, and also loved comics. He went on to spend most of his teenage years performing as a singer and drummer in a rock band. He studied mural design and painting at the Canberra Institute of Technology (now Monash, Caulfield Campus). He also did national service with Training Command, followed by a Diploma of Education. In the early seventies, he became a designer and illustrator for *The Education Magazine* and *Pursuit Magazine*, and also started illustrating for various publishers including Penguin, Rigby, Brooks Waterloo and Houghton and Mifflin in the USA. In 1981 he held his first solo exhibition of paintings and drawings. Recently, he has focused on writing and illustrating children's books, and also picture book presentations in schools and at literature festivals.

His books include *The Last Tree* (2007 Whitley Award for Children's Literature) which deals with the effect deforestation has on the creatures that inhabit our forests, and *Journey of the Sea Turtle* (2011 Whitley Award) which highlights the fragile existence of sea turtles. Other award-winning books include *My Mother's Eyes* about World War One, published by Hachette Australia in 2009; *Angel of Kokoda* published in 2010; the *Ben and Gracie's Art Adventure* series, *Inside the world of Tom Roberts* (shortlisted in the 2013 Aurealis Awards), and *A Day to Remember: The Story of the Anzacs* with Jackie French (shortlisted in the 2013 CBCA Awards).

For more information about Mark visit: <<http://www.markwilson.com.au/>>



## **BLACKLINE MASTERS**

### **BM 1 IMAGE OF AFGHAN WITH PANTHER**

Create a collage by drawing a scene around this image and then applying materials such as fabric, cardboard, fur, etc. to create a vibrant image.



## **BM 2 THE AFGHANISTAN PUP QUIZ**

These questions can all be answered by reading or interpreting the text of this picture book.

1. Where did Kinah live?
2. What does her name mean?
3. On what day was the pup born ?
4. On what date was the school destroyed?
5. In what province is Tarin Kowt situated?
6. Which country had their base in Tarin Kowt?
7. What weapon hit the vehicle in which the young soldier died?
8. What emotional illness do some soldiers return with?
9. Which organisation helped some Australian soldiers to bring their dogs home with them?
10. How many Australians have lost their lives in Afghanistan?

**Answers:** 1. The village of Hafir. 2. Strong-willed. 3. Nowruz or New Year's Day. 4. 7 April 2008. 5. Uruzgan. 6. Australia. 7. An improvised explosive device (IED). 8. Post-traumatic stress. 9. Nowzad, an animal shelter in Kabul. 10. Forty.

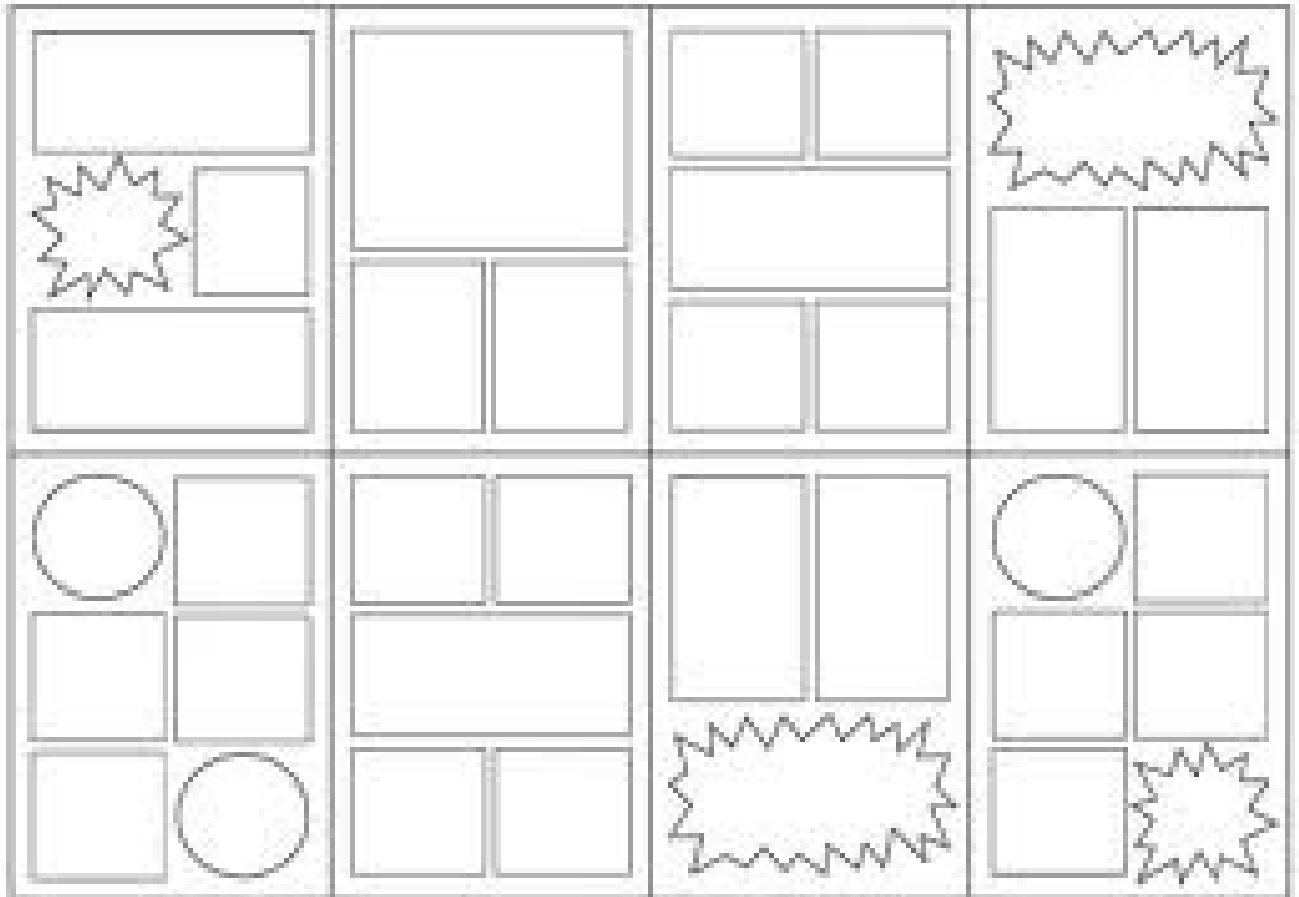
## BM 3 MAP OF AFGHANISTAN

Invite students to locate Tarin Kowt on this map. Then colour-in the map using different colours for each country.



## BM 4 GRAPHIC STORYTELLING

Create a graphic novel/comic interpretation of one of the scenes in this book. Use any of the layouts below as the storyboard for your comic. Enlarge on a photocopier to give you more space.



Layouts taken from Comic Book Guide  
<<http://comicbookguide.wordpress.com/tag/drawings/page/2/>>

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## About the Author of the Notes

**Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright** operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. In 2011 she was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, and in 2012 the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Australia.