

TEACHERS NOTES: MY FATHER THE GREAT PIRATE

Ian McLean

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1. About this book

It is the 1950s. A young boy, presumably from the Italian district of Friuli–Venezia Giulia, knows his father only from annual visits of two-week duration, when his father is on vacation from his exciting career as a pirate! Exotic souvenirs, dusty maps, a pirate flag, and tantalising stories of quirky, unique crew mates and their rollicking adventures, make these visits highly memorable.

But it is all a lie! A disastrous work-related accident almost kills his father, and suddenly reveals his secret other life as a coal miner, deep underground in Marcinelle, Belgium. Recovering from his injuries, the father returns to the family home, but the boy fears that their relationship is forever changed. How can the boy love a man in whom trust has been lost. A few years later, the mine's coal seam has been exhausted and the father takes his family back to Belgium for a bittersweet reunion at the closing ceremonies. Here, the boy realises that the camaraderie of his father's friends, and their distinctive personalities, are closer to the truth than he'd led himself to believe. The shared fantasy of a life on the seven seas is revitalised and celebrated when the boy "climbs the rigging" to raise his pirate flag over the closed mine.

The artwork is rendered in coloured pencil, with layers of texturing, evoking an *olde worlde* charm which complements the written text. Layout and font sizes are cleverly designed to build suspense for the reader, and to convey the dangers inherent in the work of a miner.

The book includes the following appendix:

HISTORICAL NOTE FOR PARENTS, TEACHERS AND OLDER READERS

This story is inspired by real events.

After the Second World War (1939–1945), there were few jobs in Italy (and many other European countries).

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People needed to work to survive, however, and hundreds of thousands of Italians left their own country for Germany, Belgium, France, Switzerland (where Davide Cali was born), and even the United States of America and Australia.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Italy signed agreements with Belgium to send Italian workers to dig for coal in Belgium's coal mines. In exchange, Italy would be able to buy coal from Belgium at cheaper prices.

None of the workers knew they'd be working a thousand metres underground. Like thousands of others, they just left their home country hoping for a better life. By the mid-1950s, around 40% of all coal miners in Belgium were Italian.

In 1956, a fire in a coal mine in Marcinelle, Belgium, killed 262 miners, 136 of them Italian migrants. Only 13 workers survived. It is still remembered as one of Italy's worst mining disasters.

Today, a museum sits on the site of the old mine at Bois du Cazier. It is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Several of Maurizio A. C. Quarello's illustrations for this book were inspired by photographs of the Marcinelle coal mine.

2. Discussion points, questions and Activities for Teachers and Parents

Teachers will need to take note of family experiences in discussing piracy because, for some students, pirates may hold traumatic connotations. Similarly, class discussion of examples of shared secrecy should be conducted with reference to policy advice in **Child Protection** documents, lest students disclose personal information in a public forum.

Aspects of mining

This picture book could be used as a springboard for class and individual student investigations into the mining industry, particularly as related to post-war coal mining, working conditions and disasters, such as the 1956 coal mine fire in Marcinelle, Belgium, which killed 262 miners (136 of whom were Italian migrants), leaving only 13 survivors.

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Studies might include the now-controversial use of children as mine workers in Victorian-era Britain, or the more recent Beaconsfield gold mining disaster and the prolonged rescue (and related media circus) involving its two Australian survivors.

Aspects of pirates, piracy and sailing

The sextant, as a tool to aid early navigation at sea, is featured in this book. An investigation into how sextants worked would be a useful activity to complement several science & technology and mathematics units.

Teachers may wish to use the pirate theme suggested in the book, as a springboard for exploring the specific symbols and technical language associated with sailing vessels and pirates, or through an investigation of historical figures. These might include explorer/pirate William Dampier, an important identity from the European exploration of Australia, or John "Calico Black" Rackham, whose shortlived career is remembered for the popularity of his "crossed cutlasses" version of the Jolly Roger flag, and for having two female pirates as full crew members.

Note: Teachers will need to take note of family experiences in discussing piracy because for some students pirates may hold traumatic connotations.

Aspects of camaraderie and secrecy

A strength of the tale being related in this picture book is the ongoing subtext that conveys, through brief mentions in the narrative and clever artwork, the importance of camaraderie that usually develops between groups of humans who spend time together in a shared situation, such as a workplace. These shared experiences often involve humor, even in the face of adversity, and can be a stress reliever.

Students will already have their own experiences as part of their school classes, after-school activities and clubs, friend networks, and family relationships (eg. shared jokes, family rituals and traditions, running gags, fantasies, etc), and will probably have noticed the ongoing subplots and witty banter between main characters in television shows (police dramas, medical dramas, soap operas), *Big Brother* and other reality shows), movie and book series (*Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*) and comic books (Marvel's *The Avengers*, *Fantastic Four*, *X-Men*, etc).

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Residents of the Michigan city of Ann Arbor, in USA, have a shared “secret” with their tradition of fairy doors (since 1993), with the venture being extended to the public in 2005. Tiny three-dimensional doors, such as usually found in dolls' houses began appearing at the base of shops, houses and trees around the town, with many local residents and visitors following maps, searching them out to leave coins or other offerings, or to take photographs.

Many books and motion pictures have a shared fantasy as an aspect of the plot (eg. *Jumanji*, *Bridge to Teribithia*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, etc.).

Well-documented historical examples of "workplace" camaraderie would include the "ANZAC spirit" that was cemented at Gallipoli for Australian and New Zealand soldiers, various volunteer bushfire fighting associations, and the impact of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the USA for emergency service workers. See **Further Resources** for suggested web links.

Note: Class discussion of examples of shared secrecy within families should be conducted with reference to policy advice in **Child Protection** documents, lest students disclose personal information in a public forum.

The literacy demands of visual texts

Throughout the book, the illustrator leads the reader/viewer to highlight aspects of the written text. A variety of “camera angles” and other “film techniques”, such as lighting, are used. The double-page spreads feature “bird’s eye views”, “high angles” (eg. see the depiction of Shorty on Page 7), “eye-level angles”, and so on. Investigate storyboards for motion pictures or animated cartoons (the “bonus scenes” of DVDs will sometimes feature them). A useful summary of film techniques can be found at:

Camera shots, angles and movement, lighting, cinematography and mise en scene [Skwirk Interactive Schooling, 2014]:

http://www.skwirk.com/p-c_s-54_u-251_t-647_c-2411/camera-shots-angles-and-movement-lighting-cinematography-and-mise-en-scene/nsw/camera-shots-angles-and-movement-lighting-cinematography-and-mise-en-scene/skills-by-text-type-film/film-overview

Page-by-page analyses:

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Endpapers: For readers and viewers, the endpapers of picture books can be an insightful introduction to the themes and tone of the resource. The book creators' choices are limited only by their own imaginations. eg. Do they intend to tantalise, foreshadow events or just set a mood? For this particular book, the two sets of endpapers are *identical* drawings of ocean waves, and seemingly set the mood for the story. Encourage students to make predictions about the story. Are they expecting a happy/sad/hopeful ending? Are the endpapers of picture books always illustrated? Identical? Note that, for this book, the endpapers' illustrations continue onto a third page.

Page 1: The title page features the *Jolly Roger* pirate flag's skull motif. As in the rendition depicted on the front cover, the "crossed bones" are actually crossed cutlasses. Student readers and viewers may notice that the skull is winking here. In re-readings of the book, the significance of this wink is more obvious. Friends and family members sometimes exchange a wink when a secret is being acknowledged, or a joke or trick is being instigated.

Pages 2/3: The use of varying font sizes in the text of this picture book helps to convey suspense and/or surprise. On the facing page, the large illustration of the boy's pirate father resembles a navy recruitment poster. Research other such posters by undertaking an image search using the terms "recruit poster sun", for example. Discuss similarities and differences.

http://www.google.com.au/search?q=recruit+poster+sun&hl=en-AU&gbv=2&tbn=isch&oq=recruit+poster+sun&gs_l=img.12...23504.23833.0.26094.2.1.0.1.0.0.233.233.2-1.1.0...0...1ac.1.34.img..2.0.0.sLw6_10q6M0

Pages 4/5: What standard elements are recognised in this pirate map (eg. compass points, distance scale).

A series of romanticised portraits of the father's workmates commence here. Note the textures created by the illustrator's pencil work, which have the effect of ageing the drawings.

Pages 6/7: On this double page, the series of romanticised portraits of the father's workmates continues. What pirate elements are present (eg. tattoos, earrings, bandanas)? Some character names are printed in coloured fonts in the text.

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Note the high angle from which Shorty is viewed. What effect does this have for the reader/viewer?

When re-reading, the imagery of all the portraits can be viewed in a new light. For example, students may recognise that the creature seen later is actually previewed here, looming over Shorty. (Shorty's story is seemingly inspired by the legend of *Faust*; the devilish figure suggests Mephistopheles.)

Pages 8/9: The series of romanticised portraits of the father's workmates continues. Figaro is said to be a former barber. Students can research the name and backstory (ie. *Figaro's Aria* from the opera/play, *The Barber of Seville*; and the play, *The Marriage of Figaro*).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkMuv0Le3ko>

Do the other names also suggest the characters' backgrounds and attributes? (eg. Sou'wester is a clever pun, seemingly well suited for a flatulent pirate; "lunatics" are said to react to a full moon, etc.).

Pages 10/11: Identify and discuss the gifts brought home by the father.

The flag design differs to the standard *Jolly Roger* of a skull and crossbones. The website at <http://latinamericanhistory.about.com/od/Pirates/tp/Famous-Pirates-And-Their-Flags.htm> identifies this variation, with its crossed cutlasses, as the flag of John "Calico Black" Rackham, whose career lasted only two years (1718-1720). His infamy is due to having two female pirates as full crew members. When re-reading, consider the irony of choosing the flag of a pirate whose career was cut short.

Note the differences in the artwork of the boy and his father when compared to the book's front cover (eg. For the cover, the boy's face has turned to the viewer. How does this change make the book more inviting?)

Pages 12/13 and 14/15: Here the boy mentions tantalising details of his father's recounts about the exploits of his co-workers. Teachers could ask students to select a character and flesh out their individual pirate story in a piece of narrative writing. Students could explore the concept of workplace camaraderie (see **Further Resources** section for online links).

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For an extensive selection of resources for teaching descriptive writing techniques, try the *Fiction Extracts Booklet* in **Teaching Ideas** at *Fiction with a Twist* (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2010):

<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/raps/twist/index.htm>

While the book rap accompanying this resource has ended, the resources remain online to support teachers and students when exploring narrative writing through specific tasks that explore *voice, action, symbols, power* and *visual codes*.

Pages 16/17: Note how choices made in the font size and placement of the text on this double spread builds suspense. Similarly, the shadow, character's pose and fallen letter, all contribute to building drama, and feelings of anticipation in the reader/viewer.

Pages 18/19: Students could investigate the similarities and differences of sailing ships and steam trains as early travel and freight transport alternatives.

Use a paper or online map to investigate the distances, and plot the journey, from Friuli–Venezia Giulia in Italy to Marcinelle in Belgium. Consider the differences in such a train journey today when compared to the 1950s.

Pages 20/21: The dream sequence depicted uses several story elements already introduced, and these are especially noticeable during re-readings. How does the artist help viewers to focus upon these details?

Pages 22/23: The arrival in Belgium is a very effective piece of artwork. Note how the illustrator conveys the idea that the pavements are wet, and also that the mother and child are strangers in a strange land. How does the artist convey the characters' thoughts about the events that are unfolding?

Pages 24/25: Again, the illustrator draws our attention to various aspects of the narrative through his deliberate choices.

Pages 26/27: On this double page, colour, text placement and font size combine to reinforce the revelations in the text about the harsh realities of the coal mine (on the left hand page), with white space again used to create suspense on the opposing page. Reality and fantasy have clashed. Pages 34/35 create a similar dynamic.

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Use the websites listed in **Further Resources** to research early coal mines, how they operated, how the workers were treated, and how abandoned mine buildings can be used for future generations.

Pages 28/29: Building upon previous pages that broke up illustrations into smaller panels to direct the viewer's attention, this four-part illustration brings home to the viewer that life for the boy and his father, and the nature of their relationship has, perhaps, forever changed. The closeup of the father's eyes is particularly effective in conveying the emotions the father may be feeling.

Pages 30/31: Spend some time investigating the art pinned to the wall beside the father's bed at his mine accommodation. Here we see a familiar picture, and personal drawings the son has created for his father over the years.

Pages 32/33: See above note for Pages 26/27.

Pages 34/35: The text again creates suspense, anticipation and drama. In the art, we see the sailor's sextant mentioned in the text. The website at <http://blogs.howstuffworks.com/brainstuff/how-a-sextant-works/> has several useful video clips and links.

Pages 36/37: The art conveys the idea that 1950s Belgium was an austere place.

Pages 38/39 and 44/45: Photographs of the coal mine at Marcinelle, Belgium, were used by the artist to depict the coal mine buildings in this book. Some of these images are also suggestive of ancient sailing vessels. When the boy clambers up to plant his pirate flag, it is suggestive of "climbing the rigging".

According to a webpage on the symbolic use of colour in flags, "black often represents determination, ethnic heritage, and/or defeating one's enemies". See <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/geography/flags/colors.shtml>

Pages 38/39 and 40/41: Again, we meet the father's co-workers, but we now see them as former coal miners, not the fanciful pirates of the father's and the son's imaginations.

Teachers could revisit the writing tasks suggested for Pages 12/13 and 14/15, and ask students to build upon those previous stories in light of what we know about them at

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the conclusion of the story in the picture book. Can their pirate stories be rewritten to incorporate adventures the characters may have actually had during their mining days? Teachers may again refer to the resources for teaching descriptive writing techniques in **Teaching Ideas** at *Fiction with a Twist* (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2010):

<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/raps/twist/index.htm>

Alternatively, students could create a new character. This additional pirate crewmate/ coal miner would need both real and imagined backgrounds, attributes and anecdotes. Students could again explore the concept of workplace camaraderie (see resources section for online links). Portraits in both pirate and miner guises could be created as an art activity.

“Draw a map” activity. Many online activities suggest ways teachers can use maps to enhance learning. For example, **Let’s Draw a Map** at http://www.aktsunami.com/exercises/k-4_letsdrawamap.pdf, **Map Reading Activities** at <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/geography/mapreading/> or **Pirate’s Treasure Map** at <http://www.dltk-kids.com/crafts/pirates/mmap.html>

Creating a digital slideshow

Use **MovieMaker**, **PowerPoint**, or one of the many suggested Web 2.0 creative tools at:

Raps and book raps - Technology tips and Cybersafety,
<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/raps/fearless10/technopage.htm>

PhotoPeach, for example, is a free Web 2.0 tool that enables the joint-construction of digital slideshows, complete with easy uploading of images, and a selection of public domain music tracks. ie. **PhotoPeach: Fresh Slideshows to Go!** [Nota Inc., 2014]:
<http://photopeach.com/>

After reading and viewing the book, **My father the great pirate**, and sharing some humorous family anecdotes (which were scribed by the teacher), classes of Stage 2 (Years 3/4) and Stage 3 (Years 5/6) students at Penrith Public School, NSW, contributed ideas and texts to create and share this online digital slideshow:

Nudge, Nudge, Wink, Wink:
<http://photopeach.com/album/q4slo3>

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Transcription of the final script:

*A wink between family members can mean...
someone's about to get tricked!
That mysterious treasure box...
might contain a Jack-in-the-box!
Or pirate treasure!
That mysterious, giant egg...
might contain...
a fire-breathing dragon!
How come banana peels are always extra slippery in cartoons?
A wink might mean... there's a ghost in the closet!
Or a gorilla...
or a whoopee cushion on the chair!
Nah, it was just my brother in a monkey mask.
My father hides rubber snakes in the garden, to stop the birds from sitting on the
outdoor furniture.
In the city of Ann Arbor, Michigan...
secret fairy doors entertain the locals and the tourists.
If you know where to look...
you will see them!
They are everywhere!
Even at the cinema...
in the main foyer...
a tiny fairy door for a fairy-sized cinema!
Jack's "ponto" is an onion grafted onto a potato.
Somehow it keeps growing. Is it a miracle, or a trick being played by our teacher-
librarian?
When a clown runs through a circus with a bucket...
will it be full of water? Or confetti?
April Fool!
Nudge nudge, wink wink...
Say no more!*

A few important points to consider with **PhotoPeach**: Please use it as judiciously as you would a series of **Youtube** clips. Do not permit young students to do open browsing of public slideshows; **PhotoPeach** is a Web 2.0 facility that is open to

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anyone, and the slideshows are “unrated”. As this online tool may be blocked to students by a firewall, use your teacher username and password. Jointly-constructed group activities are preferable to encouraging individual student responses. The students will develop negotiation skills as they reach consensus over what responses should be included in the final product. Also, if you notice that new comments have been added to a slideshow you’ve made, please preview the slideshow again before using it with students so you can monitor (and moderate/remove) unwanted comments. (Or close off public comments altogether.) Consider an annual subscription to **PhotoPeach**, which enables you to add your own or Creative Commons music, a wider range of transitions, and the capacity to download slideshows to your hard drive, web space or a CD.

3. Further Resources

Aspects of mining

Non fiction

BARWICK, John & BARWICK, Jennifer. Coalmining [Australia’s Industries series] (Port Melbourne: Echidna Books, 2001)

BARWICK, John & BARWICK, Jennifer. Mining Disasters [Australia’s Worst Disasters series] (Port Melbourne: Heinemann Library, 1999)

Children in Coal Mines [Primary history: Victorian Britain series], BBC, 2014.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/victorian_britain/children_in_coal_mines/

Coal Mining [How do they do it? series], Science Channel [website], Discovery Communications, 2014
<http://www.sciencechannel.com/tv-shows/how-do-they-do-it/videos/how-do-they-do-it-coal-mining.htm>

DICKENS, Greg. Mining, The Companion to Tasmanian History [website], Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, 2006.
http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/M/Mining.htm

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Fire traps 262 miners [website] This day in history: August 8, 1956

<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/fire-traps-262-miners>

HIRST, Mike. Monster Machines [Twenty 4 series] (New York: Tangerine, 2005)

Kids of the Coal Mine [Youtube], DocsOnline, 2009.

<http://youtu.be/3Uc-A5cWfu0>

Les Musées (includes Le Musée de l'Industrie virtual tour and l'Espace disaster reconstruction) [website], Le Bois du Cazier, Marcinelle, 2010.

http://www.leboisducazier.be/lg_fr/musees.htm

LESTER, Mike. Beaconsfield (Gold mine collapse, 2006), [website], Tasmanian Lifestyle Magazine, Razor Brand Agency, 2011.

<http://tasmanianlife.com.au/beaconsfield/>

Let's Explore Coal, Kid's Corner: energy education is fun! [website], Apogee, 2009

<http://www.fplsafetyworld.com/?ver=kkblue&utilid=fplforkids&id=16181>

National Coal Mining Museum for England [website], NCM, 2014.

<http://www.ncm.org.uk/>

YOUNG, Karen. On this day: Beaconsfield miners rescued (9 May, 2006), Australian Geographic [website], ninemsn, 2013

<http://www.australiangeographic.com.au/blogs/on-this-day/2013/05/on-this-day-beaconsfield-miners-rescued>

Aspects of pirates, piracy and sailing

Picture books

ALLEN, Pamela. Where's the Gold? (Viking, 2005)

DO, Ahn, DO, Suzanne & WHATLEY, Bruce. The Little Refugee (Allen & Unwin, 2011)

McNAUGHTON, Colin. Captain Abdul [series] (Walker Books)

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SALMON, Michael. *The Pirate who Wouldn't Wash* (Lamont, 1986)

WATTS, Frances & LEGGE, David. *Captain Crabclaw's Crew* (ABC books, 2009)

Chapter books

BODSWORTH, Nan. *Peg Leg Meg* [Aussie Bites series] (Penguin, 1999)

FIENBERG, Anna. *Wiggly and Boa* (Puffin, 2008)

FRENCH, Jackie. *My Mum the Pirate* [Wacky Families series] (HarperCollins, 2003)

GRIFFITHS, Andy. *Treasure Fever!* [Schooling Around series] (Pan Macmillan, 2008)

RYAN, John. *Captain Pugwash* [series] (Penguin/Puffin)

SHANAHAN, Lisa & MILLARD, Kerry. *Sweetie May* (ABC Books, 1998)

SHANAHAN, Lisa & MILLARD, Kerry. *Sweetie May Overboard!* (ABC Books, 2001)

WAKEFIELD, S.A. *Captain Deadlight's Treasure* (Angus & Robertson, 1990)

Non fiction

BRAIN, Marshall. *How a Sextant Works: rediscovering ancient navigation with an incredibly cool device* [website], Howstuffworks, 2010.

<http://blogs.howstuffworks.com/brainstuff/how-a-sextant-works/>

DO, Ahn. *The Happiest Refugee: a Memoir* (Allen & Unwin, 2010)

Education Programmes [website], The Maritime Centre, Newcastle, 2012

<http://maritimecentrenewcastle.org.au/education-programs/>

(includes **Pirate School** for Early Stage 1; **Transportation and Shipping** for Stage 1; **Navigation, Machines and Shipwrecks** for Stage 2; **Commerce and Communication** for Stage 3)

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JONES, Rob Lloyd & MÜHLE, Jöрге. See Inside Pirate Ships (Usborne Flip Books series) (Usborne, 2007)

KARG, Barb & SPAITE, Arjean. The Everything Pirates book: a Swashbuckling History of Adventure on the High Seas (Adams Media, 2007)

Let's Draw a Map [website], Alaska Tsunami Education Program, Geophysical Institute, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2011

http://www.aktsunami.com/exercises/k-4_letsdrawamap.pdf,

Map Reading Activities [website], Enchanted Learning, 2002

<http://www.enchantedlearning.com/geography/mapreading/>

MINSTER, Christopher. Famous Pirates and their Flags [website], About Education, 2014

<http://latinamericanhistory.about.com/od/Pirates/tp/Famous-Pirates-And-Their-Flags.htm>

Pirate's Treasure Map [website], DLTk's Crafts for Kids, 2014

<http://www.dltk-kids.com/crafts/pirates/mmmap.html>

Symbolic Use of Colors in Flags [website], Enchanted Learning, 2001

<http://www.enchantedlearning.com/geography/flags/colors.shtml>

William Dampier: Pirate and Travel Writer [website], Western Australian Museum, 2011

<http://museum.wa.gov.au/about/latest-news/william-dampier-pirate-and-travel-writer>

Aspects of camaraderie

BJELOSEVIC, Filip. Why is Gallipoli Important to Australians?: Blog Post, Year 8E English Blog [website], 2014.

<http://year8english.global2.vic.edu.au/2014/06/24/filip-bjelosevic-why-is-gallipoli-important-to-australians-blog-post/>

Courage, Camaraderie & Community (exhibition) at National Coal Mining Museum for England, Experience Wakefield [website], 2014.

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[http://www.experiencewakefield.co.uk/thedms.aspx?
dms=3&feature=1060&venue=1581613](http://www.experiencewakefield.co.uk/thedms.aspx?dms=3&feature=1060&venue=1581613)

MASCAR, Stephen. Camaraderie in the Firehouse: the element of camaraderie & how it can turn a fire station into a firehouse [website], Firefighter Nation, 2013.

<http://www.firefighternation.com/article/professional-development/camaraderie-firehouse>

Meet a Baxter Fire Brigade Volunteer [website], Baxter Volunteer Fire Brigade, Country Fire Authority (CFA), Victoria, Australia

<http://www.baxterfirebrigade.com.au/meet-some-baxter-volunteers.html>

MONTANO, Jason. Camaraderie after 9/11, Army Strong Stories [website], 2011.

<http://armystrongstories.com/army-stories/camaraderie-after-911>

A Solemn Dawn in Gallipoli, Daily Sabah [website], Turkuvaz Media Group, Istanbul, 2014.

<http://www.dailysabah.com/nation/2014/04/26/a-solemn-dawn-in-gallipoli>

U.F.O.: Urban Fairies Operations: Fairy Doors of Ann Arbor [website], Urban Fairies Operations, 2005.

<http://www.urban-fairies.com/>

WRIGHT, Jonathan B. Who's Behind the Fairy Doors?, Urban Fairies Operations, 2007 (or Rev ed. 2012).

Ian McLean is a teacher-librarian at Penrith Public School in Sydney, NSW. He is a former editor of **Scan** professional journal (NSW Department of Education and Communities).