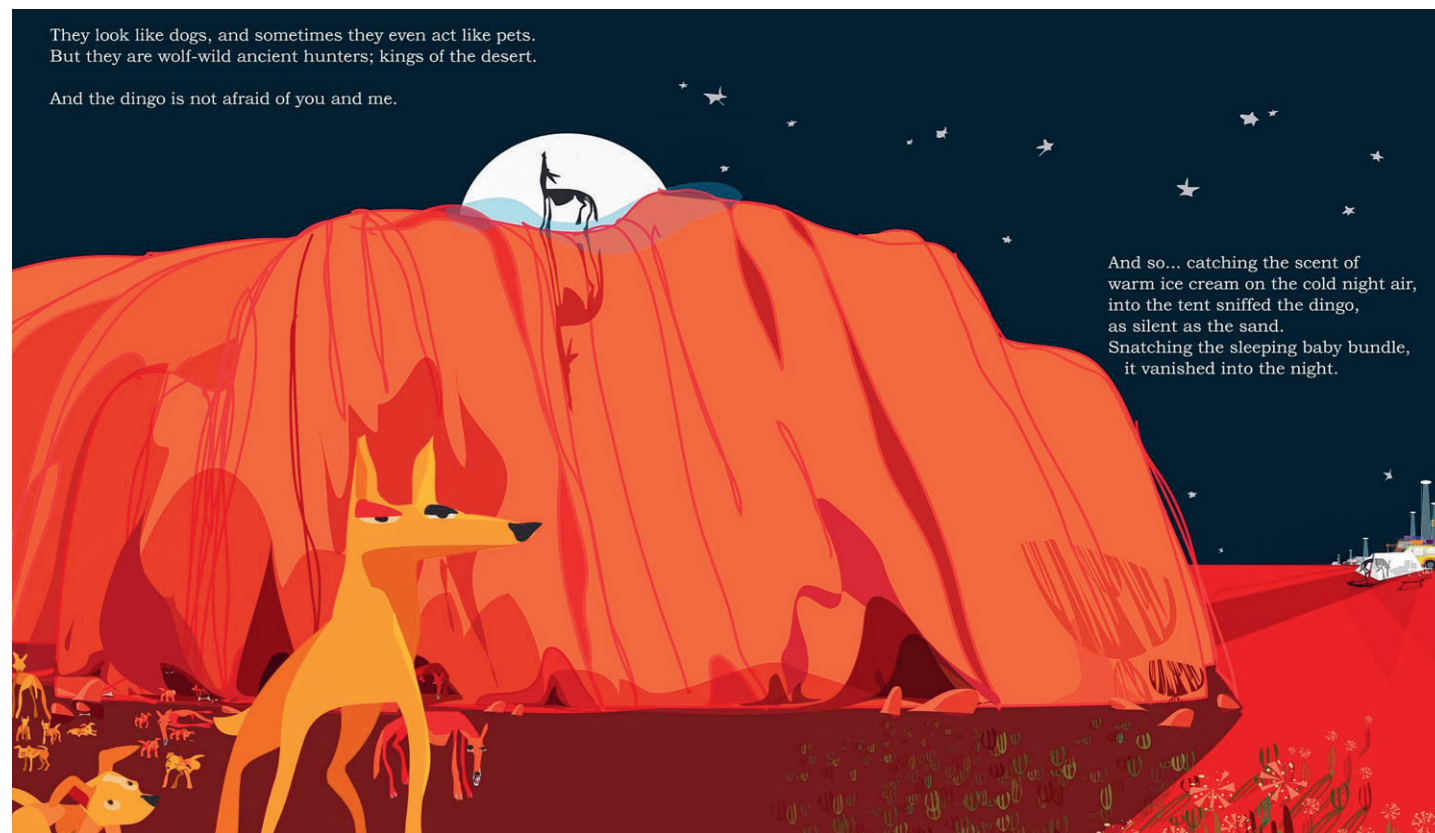


CHILDREN'S BOOK



Melbourne-based author and illustrator Maree Coote, above, and some pages from her new book, *Azaria, A True History*



Lessons from Azaria

A new children's book tackles the Azaria Chamberlain case as a cautionary and redemptive tale that helps explain who we are as a nation. Penelope DeBelle spoke to the book's author and illustrator, Maree Coote

PENELOPE DEBELLE: Why is the Azaria story a topic for children?

MAREE COOTE: While it may seem unusual at first, this picture book format is a great way to get to the simple essence of a complex story like this. The book is not macabre at all, not judgmental, or exploitative, or sensationalist. It is careful, cautionary, and redemptive. In classic folk tales, there is a "matter-of-fact" style to the telling of a series of events: "This happened, then that happened, then this happened...". I believe that young readers can easily follow the sequence of events and notice where things go off the rails, and why.

PD: What was the real message for children that you wanted to get across?

MC: I wanted to plant the idea that an open mind is an essential accessory in life, that we should think for ourselves and not rush to judgment of others. I wanted to raise the subject of the importance of standing up for yourself as Lindy did, in the face of such an unimaginable attack. And also, the idea of standing up for other people, or at least offering them the benefit of doubt. After all, this could have happened to any one of us.

Also, when tragedies like this happen, we doubly bruise the victims if we simply for-

get the story. I wanted to honour the loss of Azaria, by not forgetting. And honour Lindy too, and her relentless quest for truth.

Finally, of course, I hoped to remind people that this kind of event continues to occur in the wilderness with shocking regularity, even as recently as last year. We simply need to confront this, in the interests of a safer, wiser, fairer Australia.

PD: How confident are you that children know how to process and respond to something like this?

MC: Kids know when things are not fair, and it resonates deeply with them. It's one of the first protestations we all make as children: "That's not fair!". Truth and fairness are fundamental to humans as social animals. What better theme than social justice in a story book? I have great faith in children. They are smart, and quick, and know when they are being told the truth – or not – by adults.

I worked closely with a child psycho-therapist and with educators during the story development phase. Kids don't recoil so much from the storybook concept of "threat", largely because such threat is a remote concept in the bliss of youthful self-

obsession. It is we adults who get more fearful as we age, while the young are often blithely unfazed.

PD: You said you would have acted as Lindy did – explain why you say that?

MC: I can easily see how a grieving mother, heartbroken and in shock, would have little patience for such brutal treatment from the press. Lindy is very intelligent, and instead of falling to pieces, she was resourceful and helpful at the scene, she offered photographs and information to the media, and they wilfully misrepresented all of this as heartlessness. She was drawing on all her resilience, in honour of her lost baby, to get to the truth for everyone.

Anyone who has experienced the ancient, overwhelming beauty of Uluru will be aware that the landscape and animals require our respect and awe. And it's blatantly obvious to anyone who has experienced a scavenging dingo that they are supreme in their wilderness, and utterly unafraid.

PD: What makes this an archetypal story, a Greek tragedy? The death of a baby, the loss of truth?

MC: Yes, all those things. At its heart is the iconic mother and child. Then there's the

wolf (dingo), forest (desert), king (courts), angry townsfolk (media and public). There are enough archetypal characters to sink a Greek tragedy. But it's also the story of a Great Mistake. It's a perfect storm of ignorances: the blithe ignorance of the threat in the environment; the wilful ignorance of indigenous knowledge; and the bigoted ignorance toward the "other".

Human beings are naturally curious about each other. We wonder: What kind of person are you? Are you friend? Foe? Are you my kind of person? It's natural.

But we are not very good at summing each other up, and we rush to judgment far too quickly, even when it's nothing to do with us at all.

PD: You talked about European and Asian folk tales – how is this similar? In what ways do you categorise it as folklore?

MC: I've been looking at Russian, Japanese, European, South Korean children's folktales which exhibit a deep connection to a cultural history and place-based truths. The story may be a simple tale, but the ideas, imagery, settings, and voice have real texture and substance. They are not trivial. They can seem highly conceptual and moral. They echo the truths and lessons of