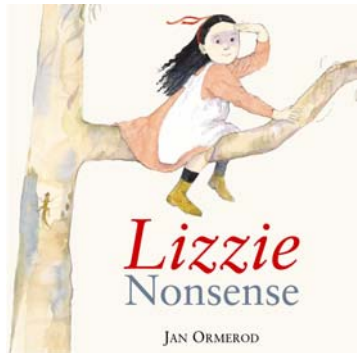


# Lizzie Nonsense

By Jan Ormerod



*Lizzie Nonsense* brings to life, through the story of one family, the experience of pioneering women and children left alone in the Australian bush while their husbands and fathers were away working. Seen through the eyes of Lizzie, a playful and imaginative little girl, the joy and exuberance of childhood shines through, despite the hard work and isolation.

*Lizzie Nonsense* is, first and foremost, a story about a mother and daughter—and this relationship is particularly interesting. A literal reading of the text, with its repetition of “Nonsense”, implies a hardness in Mama. But the pictures reveal a different story—her body language may express weariness, yet a tender smile can often be found. And as the story develops, so does an understanding of a softer side to Mama—the recurring motif of brides and roses shows that her relationship with Papa is a loving and romantic one. The scenes where Mama must chase a snake from the house, or a dingo howls in the night, bring alive the fear and vulnerability of a woman alone in the bush, and the reader begins to comprehend why emotions must be kept in check in order to survive both mentally and physically—there is little room for weakness or despair.

The natural joyfulness of Lizzie acts as a counterpoint to the character of Mama—demonstrating the universality of childhood; imagination and playfulness are innate, not the product of toys and games, the “material” expressions of childhood. As we see echoes of Lizzie in the character of Mama (who likes to imagine too), so do we see a bit of Mama in Lizzie. “Nonsense!” says Lizzie on the last page—and the warmth and humour of this moment takes the bite from all those times Mama said “Nonsense”.

## Jan Ormerod says:

“When I was a teenager, a Memorial to Pioneer Women was erected in Western Australia and the memoirs of those pioneer women were collected by the Battye Library. The following extract is from my grandmother’s memories of her life as a young wife and mother living in the bush, far from neighbours, family or friends:

*On the numerous occasions when my husband had to be away from home, carting the wood and bark or guiding other settlers, I was completely on my own, later with a young baby, sometimes up to a week at a time, and I lived in constant fear. My imagination played other tricks on me too, as I could hear the jingling of the horses’ harness and the sound of the teams for days before they returned. ... The sound of dingoes howling in the night was not imagination, though, and I think there is no more blood-curdling sound than that of a dingo right outside the house at night, especially when you are all alone with a tiny baby.*

My small, stern grandmother became a heroine in my eyes. *Lizzie Nonsense* is an homage to that courageous, hardworking and hopeful spirit which is still manifest in Australia today.”

## Learning Activities

- This story brings to life the experience of pioneering women and children. Discuss what it means to be a pioneer? What does a pioneer do?
- The setting of this book is the Australian bush. What clues can you find in the illustrations that show this? What Australian flora and fauna can you identify?
- In what period of Australian history do you think this story is set? Examine the household items and clothing for clues. Read Jan Ormerod's dedication on the imprint page.
- 'Lizzie is always playing and pretending. She is always dreaming. "Lizzie nonsense!" her mama calls it.' How important is it for Lizzie to dream and imagine things? How do you spend your playtime in comparison to Lizzie's playtime?
- Lizzie's mama likes to imagine too. Discuss the reasons why 'every Sunday they put on their best clothes and put baby in his pram' and walk along the track and back. How do you feel when you dress up to go somewhere special or meet up with friends?
- Lizzie and her mother do mending at night by the light of a kerosene lamp. Compare the lifestyle of today to Lizzie's lifestyle without electricity. List all the items used everyday that requires electricity, and explore the equivalent of these items as presented in *Lizzie Nonsense*. How does Lizzie's mother cook and clean? Discuss the hardships faced by pioneering families without the use of today's comforts such as electricity, plumbing and technology.
- The little house in the bush where Lizzie lives with her family is very distant from the church and neighbours. Discuss what it would be like to live in an isolated area, far from civilisation? Where do you think the family obtains their food supplies? What happens when a doctor is needed? Discuss the loneliness that is felt living so far from other people.
- Life for pioneer settlers in the Australian bush was tough. Jan Ormerod's illustrations depict Lizzie and her mother carrying water buckets from the creek. Besides watering the vegetable patch and giving the baby a bath, what other chores required the use of water? How easy is it to obtain water today for our own uses? What would happen to Lizzie's family if the creek dried up?
- Jan Ormerod's bush setting illustrations are warm and evocative. Examine the lack of specific detail of the bush that creates a soft touch to her illustrations. Research other artists who painted similar settings, such as Frederick McCubbin. Look at his famous painting *Lost 1886*. How is it similar to Ormerod's work? What techniques have these artists used to create a believable setting of the Australian bush?