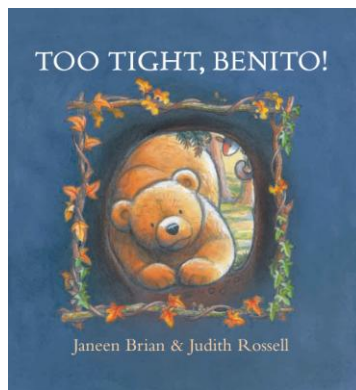


TEACHER'S NOTES FOR
TOO TIGHT, BENITO!
PUBLISHED BY LITTLE HARE BOOKS
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SYNOPSIS

It's time for Benito Bear to go to sleep for the winter. But he has grown and can't fit into his cubby-hole, so begins a search for a bigger one. He finds lots of holes that other animals sleep in, but none of them suit. When he finally finds a big hole it is too dark and scary. He runs back to his cubby-hole and dives in, only to become stuck. Wriggling and digging, he makes his cubby-hole just right for his new, bigger body.

THEMES

This book is about being brave enough to explore the world and finding solutions to life's challenges. Through Benito's story, Janeen Brian wanted to show that a child stepping out of his or her known

environment, experiencing something for the first time, takes a lot of courage - 'because there's a lot of fear attached to the unknown.' She says that 'Benito hasn't failed by scampering out of the woods, but in fact ends up solving his problem in another, more active and possibly more satisfying way.'

WRITING *TOO TIGHT, BENITO!*

Many years ago while watching children at a kindergarten playing in the sandpit, Janeen Brian noticed how special 'holes' were to them. 'They were digging them, filling them, jumping in them, comparing their sizes, and so on.' She, too, remembered digging holes on the beach as a child. Janeen knew there was a story about holes just waiting to be written, she just wasn't sure what it was.

The story that ended up being *Too Tight, Benito!* took Janeen about twenty full drafts and hundreds of minor changes. Even though the story went through many versions, a bear and his cubby-hole were always at its centre. Janeen says that 'this hole was always special to the bear, the same as it is for children when they curl up and play in such childlike spaces, often of their own making.'

Janeen doesn't begrudge the work she put into *Too Tight, Benito!* For her, writing is always 'hard fun'. She says, 'I love, love, love playing with language' and believes that there is 'nothing so wonderful as hearing a story or poetry read aloud. The earlier children come to love the sounds and word pictures of the written word, the richer and broader their lives will be.'

This sense of playfulness and love of words comes through strongly in *Too Tight, Benito!* As Benito runs through the dark forest full of 'sky-high trees' he treads on 'snappity twigs'. And he doesn't live in a den, but in a snug 'cubby-hole'. Janeen also uses repetition to

great effect. When Benito sits in the big hole, the repetition of the phrase ‘Darkness where things might...’ emphasises his growing worry and fear. Similarly, his determination to make his cubby-hole bigger is underlined by the repetition of the word ‘dug’.

It took Janeen a while to find a title for the book. She wanted a name for her main character that was warm and friendly, and that also used alliteration to connect with ‘bear’. After a while, she found ‘Benito’, and says ‘I loved the way it rolled off the tongue and was a little unusual. I structured the title to take the ‘t’ sounds in the name into account and came up with *Too Tight, Benito!* which says it all!’

For Janeen, Judith’s illustrations ‘were a heart-stopping surprise!’ She hopes young children and adults reading to them will ‘love the story first and foremost’ and ‘take the essence of play and courage and problem-solving into their own lives.’

ILLUSTRATING *TOO TIGHT, BENITO!*

Judith Rossell loves illustrating for children, especially ‘telling a story and developing a character’. When she read the manuscript for *Too Tight, Benito!* the classic storyline appealed to her, along with the fact that it gave her the chance to draw animals. She could instantly imagine the little bear in the forest.

Because Judith was working on another project, she couldn’t begin work on *Too Tight, Benito!* for about a year. In the meantime, she thought about the story and how she would illustrate it. To understand how bears move and look, she watched a DVD about bears in slow motion, drawing them running, swimming and fighting, and also observed and drew them at the zoo. During this time, Judith also visited the United Kingdom in the autumn. She took photos of deciduous and pine forests to use as visual references. Visiting

Singapore, she saw many squirrels and thought a squirrel would be an ideal little friend to accompany Benito on his adventure.

To help her think about how the story would develop, Judith created a storyboard – a plan of the book with small versions of the pictures. The next step was to make a dummy book, in which she sketched what the illustrations would look like.

Judith created her final illustrations using grey lead and coloured pencils, and acrylic inks, which she describes as ‘like acrylic paints, only they come in little dropper bottles, are transparent and are used like watercolours.’ Getting the colours right took some experimentation until she was satisfied that the shadows and highlights gave enough depth to the illustrations.

Judith’s main aim was to create a contrast between the places where Benito feels safe and where he is afraid. The deciduous forest is full of warm golden browns and yellows and has a blue sky behind it. The pine forest, in contrast, has cooler colours – purples, greys, and deeper greens – that give it a gloomier air. Benito and his squirrel friend, with their warm colouring, appear out of place in this scary world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JANEEN BRIAN was born in South Australia and has lived all her life by the sea. She describes herself as a child as adventurous, never bored and always ‘creating things’. She didn’t have much access to books when she was young, but treasured the few books she had and listened to

stories and plays on the radio. Janeen attributes her love of word play and humorous stories to her father, who often recited funny poems.

After she finished school, Janeen became an infant and primary school teacher. She also acted in a professional children's theatre company and in television and radio commercials.

Janeen began writing poems for her daughters when they were little. After attending seminars on writing, her interest became more serious. Her first published book was *My Sister Learns Ballet* (1984). Since then she has written more than seventy books, as well as poems, plays and articles for magazines. Her books have received much critical acclaim, with her picture book *Where does Thursday go?* (2001, illustrated by Stephen Michael King) and her information books *Pilawuk – When I Was Young* (1997) and *Hoosh! Camels in Australia* (2005) named as Honour Books in the Children's Book Council of Australia awards.

Find out more about Janeen and her books at www.janeenbrian.com

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

JUDITH ROSSELL grew up in Melbourne, the second of four children. At school she loved drawing and painting. She drew naughty pictures of her teachers, as well as greeting cards that she sold to local shops and a comic strip for the local paper. However, she didn't do very well in art class, and so studied science at university.



Judith has had a varied working life, first working for the CSIRO as a scientist. After studying textile design in Scotland, she worked in product development for a textile company. Judith always did a bit of illustrating on the side and eventually turned to it full-time. She has been an illustrator for over ten years.

As an illustrator, Judith has produced artwork for greeting cards, packaging, and government publications, as well as numerous children's books. She illustrated Jackie French's *How to Guzzle Your Garden*, which was shortlisted for the Children's Book Council of Australia awards in 1999. She has written and illustrated a number of maze and puzzle books, including *The Lost Treasure of the Green Iguana* and *I Spy with Inspector Stilton*, which have been translated into ten languages. In 2006, Judith released her first novel, *Jack Jones and the Pirate Curse*.

STUDY NOTES

1. Before reading *Too Tight, Benito!* discuss how some animals in cold places go into a long sleep over winter when there isn't much food around. Which animals hibernate? Why do they do it? Where do they sleep? How do they get ready to hibernate? What do animals that don't hibernate do in winter?
2. Looking at the cover, what can the children see? What might the bear and the squirrel be doing?
3. As you read, give the children plenty of time to look at the pictures and take them in. Point to the different animals and their holes.
4. After reading, talk about why Benito has a problem at the beginning of the story. Talk about how he explores his world to try and work things out.

5. Discuss the different animals that Benito meets and why their burrows suit them, but not him.
6. Why does Benito go back to his own cubby-hole? How does he change it? Do things always change as animals and people grow up?
7. At the end of the story, how does Benito feel? Talk about how it is fun to be away, but how good it feels to be in your own home.
8. Make up a story from the point of view of one of the other animals. What happens when Benito comes calling? Draw pictures of the story.
9. Make cubby-holes by putting blankets over desks, baskets and boxes. Pretend to be different animals settling down for winter.
10. In the story, Benito's den is called a cubby-hole. Brainstorm lots of names we can use for animals' homes – den, burrow, warren... (Teachers can use a thesaurus for ideas beforehand!) Paint, draw or make models of animal homes.