

These notes are for:

- Grade: Preschool and up
- Age 3 and up

Key Learning Areas:

- English
- Art

Example of:

- Picture book
- Third person narrative

Experience of:

- Visual literacy
- Cultural diversity

Values addressed:

- Care & compassion
- Doing your best
- Fair go
- Respect
- Understanding, tolerance & inclusion

Themes:

- Empathy & compassion
- Community
- Diversity
- Hope
- Renewal
- Belonging & acceptance

*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

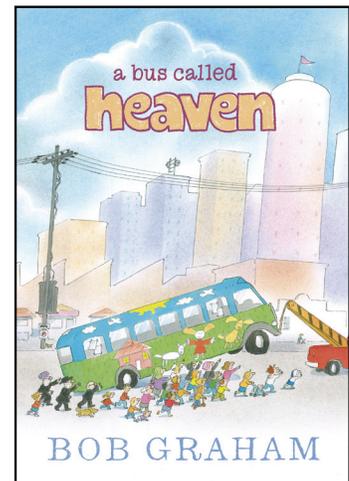
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A Bus Called Heaven

A Bus Called Heaven

By: Bob Graham
ISBN: 978-0-7636-5893-9
\$16.99 (\$19.00 CAN)
No. of Pages: 40
Hardback



Outline:

The abandoned bus appeared one morning from a sea of traffic – right outside Stella’s house, where no bus should be. Tired, old and sick, it had a hand-painted sign on it, held down with packing tape. The sign said, “Heaven.”

For Stella, this decrepit old vehicle is special – this bus is “ours” – a place for everyone to be together: hold meetings, play games and share stories. But one day, the bus is towed away and Stella must fight to save not just the bus, but everything the community has worked so hard to create.

This moving picture book offers readers a powerful message about hope, acceptance and belonging.

Author/Illustrator Information:

Author and illustrator **Bob Graham** goes to the heart of children’s experiences, creating gentle dramas from familiar situations. He creates an instantly recognisable world within which children immediately feel secure. Bob Graham has written and illustrated many children’s picture books including, *Oscar’s Half Birthday*, *Rose Meets Mr Wintergarten*, *Let’s Get a Pup!* and “*The Trouble with Dogs!*” He won the 2000 Smarties Gold Medal for *Max*, the 2003 Kate Greenaway Medal for *Jethro Byrde*, *Fairy Child* and has been awarded the Australian Children’s Book of the Year Award five times. His most recent title, *April Underhill*, *Tooth Fairy*, received the 2011 Zolotow Award and was short-listed for the 2011 Prime Minister’s Literary Awards in the Children’s Fiction category.

How to use these notes:

This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Please select accordingly.

Bob Graham on writing *A Bus Called Heaven*

"Each Thursday I pick up my grandchildren from school. Some time back I noticed an old bus on the roadside as I drove past. In the weeks that followed I became increasingly interested in the bus with its hand-written sign, and asked my granddaughter Rosie about it. Yes, it was opposite her best friend Olive's house, and yes, she had looked inside. (She had seen candles burning in there.) The image of a young girl on her tiptoes trying to look through the window of that bus was strong and persistent enough for me to pick up a pen and start drawing. I had to see what that little scene looked like.

For me, that's what it takes. I often start with a strong image and then I ask myself, "What happened NEXT?" And sometimes after I have looked far out over the clouds outside my window, I can find the answer hovering in the thought bubble right over my head.

Bringing these people together in an old bus on an inner urban street for me was a challenge – sometimes worrying, always difficult and occasionally fulfilling when I got just a little section of it as I wanted.

I left those people on page 40 knowing that there is still rust under that new paintwork, but if the developers stay away from the vacant allotment that bus has surely reached a happy destination. There is a kettle inside never far away from boiling, a row of mugs on cup hooks, and quite often there is cake from Mrs Stavros. Hopefully, for years to come it will be a happy refuge for people, baby birds and snails.

When I made the first draft of this book I showed it to my wife Carolyn. If I can't get Carol's blessings it just doesn't go ahead. She carefully read it over coffee on the kitchen table then brushed the cake crumbs away and said, "I love it and I love the people. It's a beautiful atmosphere." I won't get a better review than that, and that has sustained the making of this book."

Before reading the text

- What is your idea of heaven? Explore the idea of heaven not necessarily as a religious place, but as a place of perfection and happiness. What would your heaven look like? Who would be there? What would people be doing? Draw a picture to illustrate your ideas.
- From the title of the book, what do you think the story will be about? Make up a story with this title and tell it to a friend.
- Look at the front cover of the book. How does this immediately grab the reader's attention and make them want to read the story?
- Read the blurb on the back of the book. Do your expectations of what the story will be about change after reading it? How?

While reading

Introduction

- Discuss the word "abandoned". What feelings does it arouse in you? Write a story about something else that has been abandoned. For example, an old toy, a pet, a dream ...
- Read the description of the abandoned bus. What other words or phrases make you feel sympathetic towards it?
- Why is the sign on the bus unexpected? Why do you think the word "Heaven" is printed in a different font?

Title page

- Look closely at the title page. Where do you think the story is set? Is it a real place or a fictional place? What gives you this impression? Is there anything in the illustration that you recognise from your own life? Immerse yourself in the world of the story by discussing some of the sounds and smells that you might experience in this landscape. What do you think you would see if you were in one of the cars and drove further down the street?

Spread 1

- What would happen if an abandoned bus appeared in your street? What would you do? What would your family do? How do you think your neighbours would respond?
- Stella uses a simile when she describes the bus as being "sad as a whale on a beach". Discuss the definition of a simile as a class.
- Write your own similes for sadness ("As sad as") Brainstorm a list of other feelings and write similes to describe them.

Spread 2

- Stella is described as being "the colour of moonlight". Discuss the way this description helps create a picture in the reader's mind. If the author had simply said, "Stella was very pale", would we have learned as much about her character? What other ideas about Stella are suggested by "moonlight"?
- Write your own creative description of someone you know.

- What is your impression of the inside of the bus? How do the colours used in this picture help create this impression?
- Do you think the other people in the picture feel the same way about the bus as Stella does? How do the illustrations emphasise this? Look particularly at where the characters are positioned and the perspectives (points-of-view) the illustrator has used.

Spread 3

- What takes up the most space in this illustration? What sort of feeling does this create? For instance, a sense of freedom, excitement and possibility? Or does it make you feel small and insignificant?
- Why do you think the word "Ours" is in large print?

Spread 4

- Discuss the use of the overhead or birds' eye perspective. Why do you think Graham uses this? What does it allow you to notice? Try drawing this scene from a different point of view. How does this change the feeling of the picture?
- Why is Stella's response to her father humorous? What are some other funny things you've noticed in the book so far?
- Look at the colours surrounding Stella in the bottom image. What mood do they create? Discuss the symbolism of these colours (ie. the ideas or feelings they represent). What symbolism do other colours have?

Spread 5

- Green, the most prominent colour on these pages, is usually associated with nature. What else on the page links the bus to the natural world?
- Read the phrase "snails made silver trails" aloud. What sounds do you notice? What pictures does it call up in your mind? How does this help bring the picture to life?

Spread 6

- How is the mother's response to the Graffiti Ratz surprising? How do the Ratz react to her suggestion that they help paint the bus? What might this teach us about stereotyping or making assumptions about people?
- Imagine you were given the task of creating a design for the bus. Draw your design on the bus worksheet provided then colour it appropriately.

Spread 7

- What would you or your family have contributed to the bus if you lived in the street? How would this help? Draw a picture of yourself bringing this object.

Spread 8

- The text mentions some of the activities people did in the bus. What are some of the other things the characters are doing in the picture on the left? Are any of these activities unusual or unexpected?

- In small groups, write a radio play showing a typical night in the bus. Perform this to the class, using different voices for the different characters.

Spread 9

- What are some of the signs that the community is becoming stronger? Look particularly at the pairs of birds. What might they suggest?
- Why do you think the tow truck is painted with flames? (Hint: think about the name of the bus!)

Spread 10

- What is the illustrator emphasising by grouping representatives of three different religions together? What do you think they're doing? Can you find any other illustrations where they are pictured together?
- What can be seen in the background on the left page as the bus is towed away? What might this suggest about the city with its rules and "regulations"? For instance, does it make it seem cold and uncaring? Or powerful, when compared with the bus and the little community defending it?

Spread 11

- Look at the author's use of framing in this spread. How does this help convey distance and the passage of time?
- What humorous details do you notice in the illustration? Why do you think Graham has included them?

Spread 12

- There is very little text on this page, drawing attention to the word "BONEYARD" in bold capitals. How do the illustrations similarly help to convey the vastness of the pile of abandoned cars? Consider angle, size and positioning.
- What point might Bob Graham be trying to make about society through the "Boneyard"? For instance, could he be commenting on its wastefulness, its lack of concern for the environment or its tendency to reject the old and worn-out?

Spread 13

- Look at the notice the Boneyard Boss shows the crowd: "Illegal vehicle. Thou shall not park on the footpath". What does this language remind you of? Discuss the meaning of the word "thou". Write a list of other rules for living in a city using this same style of language.
- How do the illustrations help make the Boneyard Boss seem mean and unsympathetic? Consider his body language and what he is wearing.
- Consider the sentence, "A little pink glow crept across Stella's cheek". Why is this detail important? How has Stella changed since the start of the book? What do you think has caused this change?
- Does Stella's proposal seem like a good one to you? Why does she give the Boneyard Boss the goalie? What do you think will happen?
- What other things might Stella, or other members of the crowd, have said to try and save the bus?

Spread 14

- Why do you think the boss decides to accept Stella's offer? Why does he introduce himself at the end of the game?
- What do you think would have happened if Stella hadn't won the football match?

Spread 15

- In what way is Stella similar to the parent sparrow?
- Make your own sparrow nest using twigs, leaves and other material found in the playground or around the school.

Spread 16

- Stella is portrayed as a hero for saving the day. How do the illustrations help emphasise this?
- Do you think Stella is a hero? Why or why not? Create a list of people or characters you consider heroic. What are some of the characteristics they share?
- Look up the meaning of the name "Stella". Why is this name appropriate for her?

Spread 17

- Where do you think they will take the bus? What home could you find for the bus in *your* neighbourhood?

Spread 18

- How do the illustrations leave the reader with the impression that the bus is safe at last? Some ideas to consider could be the birds looking down protectively, the light from the windows, the ring of people encircling the bus and the comforting mood created by the colour yellow.

Afterword

- Look at the sections written in italics at the start and end of the text. How do they relate to the rest of the story?
- Why is it important that the story ends on a note of hope? If the community had not succeeded in saving the bus, would the book still have had a positive message? Discuss your answers.

After Reading

Discussion

- Rather than abandoning the old bus, the crowd decides to fight for it and eventually succeeds in rescuing it. When have you had to show strength and persistence by sticking by a person or thing, instead of simply giving up? Some ideas could be a friend or family member going through a difficult time, a new skill or activity that you struggled with or a goal that you felt determined to achieve.
- What different communities can you identify in *A Bus Called Heaven*? Think about ethnic and cultural groups, subcultures etc. Are there any other groups you would have included if you were illustrating the book?
- Discuss the role that animals play in this book. Are they also part of the community? Do you think it is important for a community to consider the needs of animals and the natural world, as well as people? Why? In what ways are we mindful of other creatures in our society? What opportunities are there for us to be more aware of their needs?
- What does the bus represent or symbolise ultimately?
- In small groups, brainstorm some ideas about the sort of society you would design. What rules and laws would there be? How would your society be organised? Where would people live? How would they get food? What activities would they do? Test your design by imagining what it would be like to live in your society if you were poor. A refugee. In a wheelchair. Extremely rich ...
- Discuss the phrase "Heaven's here on earth". In small groups brainstorm things you could do to turn your school into a "heaven on earth". Try to focus on promoting positive values and emotions rather than on material things.
- Paint a "belonging mural" that represents your class on a wall in the school. (Alternately, you could paint your mural on large sheets of butchers' paper and use it to decorate the walls of your classroom.) Make sure each class member includes a portrait of themselves and something that represents a community or group they identify with. For instance, their family, a cultural or ethnic group, or a sporting team or club.

Groupwork

- Try to imagine what it would be like, if before you were born into the world, you were able to design the surrounding society. However, you would have no idea about what gender, nationality race, or religion you might be. You wouldn't know whether you'd be the child of a homeless person or a billionaire, how you'd look, whether you'd born with special abilities and talents, or with disabilities and disadvantages. All you *would* know, is that you would want to maximise your chances of having a happy and secure life.

Artwork

- Bob Graham uses images and text to tell his story. How does the story change if you read only the text? Or if you only view the illustrations? How does the text and the pictures help to tell the story together?
- On some pages Bob Graham uses “frames” and “gutters” around his pictures. (“Frames” are borders, while “gutters” refers to the white space outside the frames.) Why do you think he does this? What other types of text use this technique?
- Write a short description of a recent event and illustrate it using a similar layout. Exchange your work with a classmate. Can they understand your story just from the pictures?
- Examine the way the illustrations combine both the natural world and the built environment. Some things to look at could include birds and animals, the sky, airplanes, telegraph wires, factories and cars and vehicles. Do these two landscapes clash or intrude on each other, or do they coexist happily? What role does colour play in creating these two landscapes?
- In pairs, study the book carefully looking for images that show a sense of community (belonging, acceptance, friendliness etc). Then, reread the book looking for images which show a lack of community (that is, suggest loneliness, rejection, abandonment or unfriendliness). Present your findings in a two-column table like the one shown below.

Signs of community	Signs of a lack of community
- Man hugging puppy (spread 1)	- Abandoned cars in the front yard (spread 4)
-	-
-	-
-	-

Which column had more examples in it? What might this suggest about Bob Graham’s view of people and society? Does he see people as fundamentally good and kind, or as hostile and unfriendly?

- Draw a picture of the community you live in. Try to focus on the little details and the background, as Bob Graham does in his illustrations.

Writing Activities

- Retell the story from a different character’s perspective. You may like to try using a non-human narrator such as Lucy’s dog “Bear”, a sparrow nesting in the bus’s engine, one of the snails Stella carries in her pocket or the bus itself.
- Write a letter to Bob Graham giving your thoughts on the book. What did you like about it? What did it teach you? Edit your letter then send it to Walker Books Australia to pass on to Bob!

Connections Between Texts

- Compare the bus in *A Bus called Heaven* with the pigeon in *How to Heal A Broken Wing*. In what ways do they represent similar ideas? Are there any other common themes, characters or settings between the stories? What might these similarities reveal about Bob Graham’s interests as a writer/illustrator?
- Create a Venn diagram showing the similarities and differences between the texts.

Research

- *A Bus Called Heaven* features religious leaders from the Christian, Sikh and Jewish communities. Research the way these religions, and other religions from around the world, conceive of Heaven. Create a poster to present your findings.
- The title page of the book says that it was “endorsed by Amnesty International”. Discuss the meaning of the word “endorsed” then read the information about Amnesty at the bottom of the page. Why do you think they might have chosen to “endorse” *A Bus Called Heaven*?
- Research more about Amnesty International at www.amnesty.org.au Some questions could include:
 - how did Amnesty start?
 - what are human rights?
 - what are some issues that Amnesty is concerned with in Australia?
 - what human rights issues is it involved with overseas?
 - How can schools and students support Amnesty’s work?
 - Why does Amnesty have a candle in barbed wire as its logo? (Note: As well as being on the title page, this logo is hidden in one of the pictures in the story. See if you can find it!)

10 things you didn't know about Bob Graham

1. I like surfing and Irish music.
2. I like the sound of dogs’ ears flapping.
3. I like chillies, coffee, chocolate and reading in bed.
4. I like Bob Dylan, babies, breakfast and beer.
5. I like looking out of the window, sitting in the sun and drawing.
6. I like skateboarders, rock and roll, and interesting parcels.
7. I like family photo albums, train journeys and reunions at airports.
8. I dislike dog catchers (of dogs just having fun).
9. I dislike progressive barn dances.
10. And I dislike bullies.

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