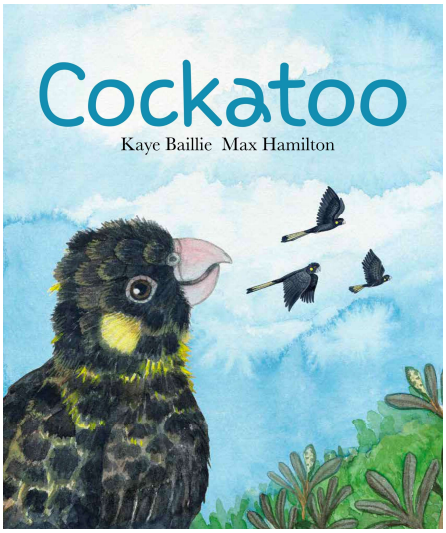
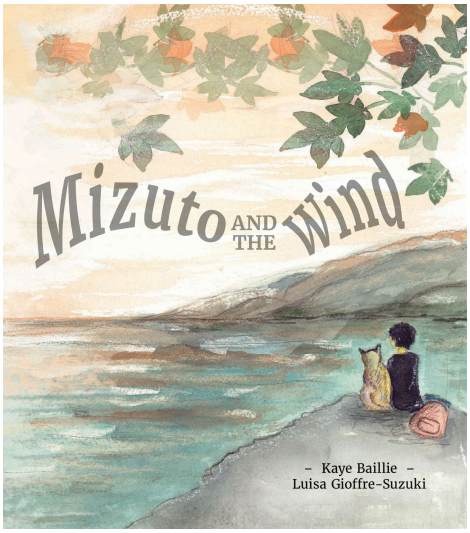
Remarkable Researchers for Fiction and Non-fiction - Picture Books
Following the Spark! Kaye Baillie





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When looking for a story topic whether it be for fiction or non-fiction, I encourage students to pay attention to moments or experiences that spark their emotions and arouse their curiosity. This energy will hopefully guide them as they research, and translate into creating an engaging and unique story. Students' carefully chosen words will illuminate their passion for the subject and provide the illustrator with the opportunity to create powerful imagery, and as we all know, a picture book is nothing without pictures.

From various research methods available to students, such as personal observations, studying library content, doing internet searches, watching documentaries, or perhaps interviewing someone, the method which I find the most stimulating and which allows me to write in the most authentic way, is through my own observations.

Today, I'm going to share examples from one of my most recent books, **Cockatoo**, and speak very briefly about **Mizuto and the Wind**. While both books are fiction, the same research can be applied to non-fiction as well.

Cockatoo is informational fiction. So, while the bird family in the story is fictional, the narrative is inspired by my actual research of yellow tailed black cockatoos with a primary focus on the first months of a chick's life.

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Research photos used by Max Hamilton, Illustrator

Water colour illustrations for 'Cockatoo' by Max Hamilton.

Yellow tailed black cockatoos feeding on pinecones.
Credit: Rob Grenfell my cousin, bird enthusiast

Sammy – Research Assistant

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Observation Sparks - 'Cockatoo'.

So, what was the initial spark that led me to write about yellow tailed black cockatoos?
Well, when I moved to the Surf Coast, our neighbours had a tall banksia tree. One day I was outside and noticed activity in that tree. I was delighted and surprised to see a flock of black cockatoos feeding on the banksias. Having never seen a black cockatoo in real life I was instantly fascinated and keen to find out what type of black cockatoos inhabited this area.

I soon learned they were the yellow tailed species. I started an exercise book to keep my notes in - knowing that at some point, I would use the research to write a book. I also tried to capture images on my phone for reference. I looked forward to seeing the cockatoos again and over the following months I observed that they were prevalent in the hotter months. They flew northwards in the mornings, and southwards in the evenings. I wasn't sure where they were going or what they were doing.

One day I was walking our dog not far from home along a quiet road, which was lined with massive pine trees. A pinecone dropped from a tree, so I stopped. I heard gentle chitter chatter sounds and when I looked up, there amongst the branches was a flock of yellow tailed black cockatoos, quietly going about their business, feeding on pinecones. Now I knew where they flew to and had learned another of their food sources – pine nuts found within the pinecone scales.

This walking route provided me with many opportunities to observe the cockatoos feeding, and to hear their unique calls as they took to the skies. Their creaky cries evoked a sense of mystery and whenever I heard them, I stopped to watch. Our dog, Sammy, who I called a reluctant research assistant, was often turned around to go back the way we had just come so I could observe the birds.

If I heard black cockatoos from inside our house, I would race outside to catch a glimpse. Once I was lucky enough to see the complete undersides of a flock - - yellow tail feathers stood out amongst the black tips, as they gracefully flew over our house. When I saw the endpapers for our book, it was as if illustrator Max Hamilton had captured that exact moment.

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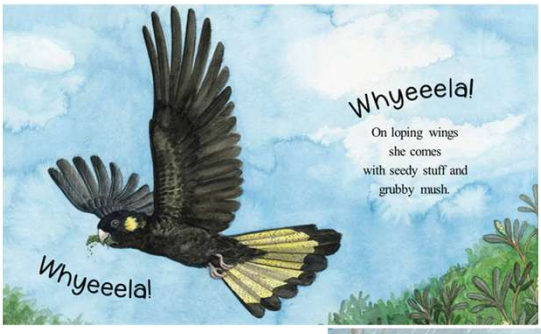

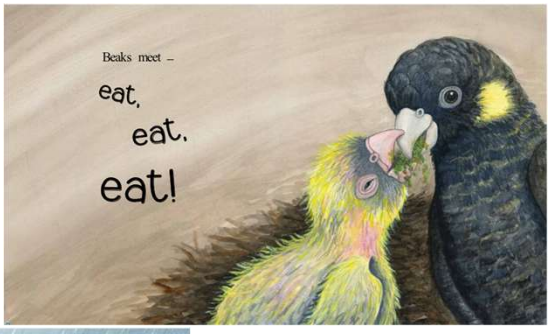

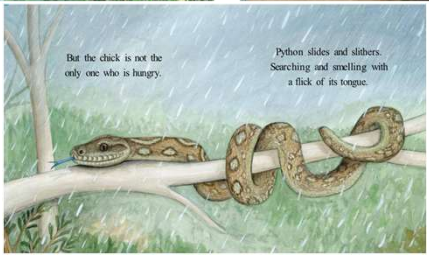

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I love the creaky cries of the cockatoos so of course I *had* to include their sounds in my text. I often recorded the birds' cries using my iPhone. Then I tried to figure out how to write my interpretation of their unique sound. It took me quite a bit of experimentation, then finally I decided on -- ***Whyeeela! Whyeeela!*** I included three 'e's in the word to stretch out the sound. If students find an opportunity to make up their own sound-words, this will not only make their text unique, they'll feel a sense of ownership and control over their word choices. Plus, it's loads of fun playing around with sounds.

I also had fun playing around with words which would best describe the flight style of the cockatoos. I had observed the birds in flight many times and with a few words in mind, I turned, as I often do, to the free site 'Rhymezone' to explore synonyms. I chose the word 'loping' to best describe the majestic, mesmerising movement made by these birds.
'On loping wings she comes…'
To complete that sentence, I included what type of food this mother bird might carry to her chick. After researching the foods, I chose 'seeds' and 'grubs.' I played around with these, a lot, until I had made a rhythmic sentence using alliteration and assonance.
'On loping wings
she comes
with seedy stuff and
grubby mush.'

I used alliteration to emphasize the 's' sound in the snake scene. I decided to have a threat for the chick, so I chose a python. As it happened, the kindergarten where I was working had a visit from a wildlife handler one day who had several snakes and a python with her. I was fortunate to handle the python and ask her questions as part of my research which became: 'Python slides and slithers. Searching and smelling with a flick of its tongue.'

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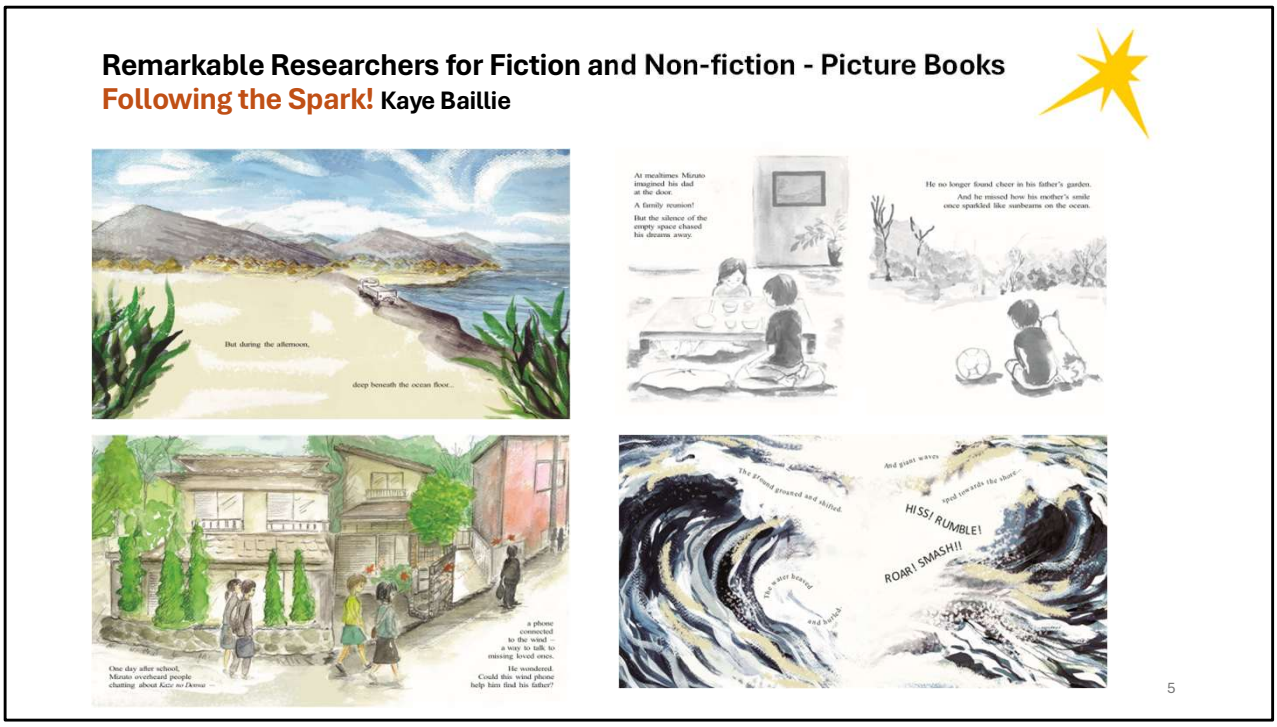
The scene of the three cockatoos flying is based on another observation and the resulting research. I often saw cockatoos flying in pairs. When choosing a nesting site, they rely on gum trees that are 100 or more years old with deep hollows. And when they have successfully raised their chick, the little family of three stay together for around six months or more. Now when I see a group of three, I know that one is the youngster.

Naturally tree hollows became a feature in our book (you can see the prop I made from cardboard and contact). Both Max (she lives in NSW) and I often observed cockatoos near our homes and occasionally we spotted tree hollows. While we didn't see black cockatoos in these hollows, (I saw galahs and Max saw rosellas), Max chose to illustrate the rosellas for the wordless final page of our book.

If students make observations which spark inspiration and arouse their curiosity, that's a great reason to begin researching a subject. And a great reason to write a nature inspired picture book. Just like I did with **Cockatoo**.



<u>Observation Sparks - Mizuto and the Wind</u>.
Mizuto and the Wind is historical fiction. So, while the family in the story is fictional, I was inspired to write the story after watching a Japanese documentary about an actual family affected by the 2011 tsunami in Japan. My Japanese experience is limited to having holidayed there, so I relied on online and visual sources for my research, but Luisa Gioffre Suzuki the illustrator for our book, is a fine artist and teacher who spent over a decade living and working in Japan and was there during the tsunami. Her personal art style is influenced by the vibrant Japanese culture. And her time spent in Japan noticeably influenced her insightful and powerful art for our book, such as in the scene with the little truck, the grey scene inside a Japanese home, the street scene where Luisa lovingly included the house she once lived in, and the tsunami scene where her art reflects a distinctive Japanese style. Luisa's Japanese husband, Hitoshi was a sensitivity reader for our book.

To finish off, students have unlimited potential to follow their sparks and their curiosity, conduct research that inspires vibrant language, and create powerful stories that are uniquely theirs.

Thank you for listening.