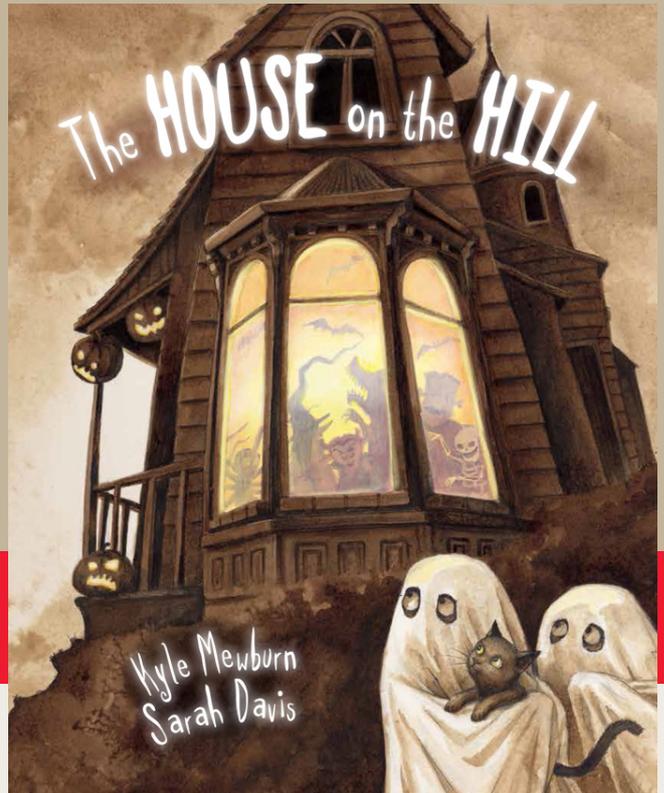


The House on the Hill

By Kyle Mewburn

Illustrated by Sarah Davis

- Reading • Writing • Poetry
- Visual Literacy



Synopsis

The House on the Hill is Kyle Mewburn's homage to Edgar Allan Poe – a hauntingly lyrical text with a nod to Poe's *The Raven*. It provides just the right amount of spine-tingling spookiness for children who like the anticipation of feeling a tiny bit scared, and all comes right with the delightful reveal at the end. It is a sophisticated picture book, beautifully illustrated in a fittingly monochromatic style by Sarah Davis.

On the first double-page spread, readers learn that two ghosts are being drawn to the spooky house on the hill by the tolling of a bell. They see the beady yellow eyes of two owls watching on. The ghoulish scene is set by both the chilling, poetic text and the sepia illustrations. Then, while the text uses old-fashioned and somewhat frightening language to describe a sign on the gate (a *portent hung, a dragon's claw, a serpent's tongue*), a closer look at the illustration reveals a cardboard image, most likely drawn by a child. This is the first hint that, while both the text and illustrations appear frightening, the reality may be less scary. As the book continues, the ghosts make their way towards the house and into it. Meanwhile, increasingly less subtle hints are given to what's actually going on: there are jack-o'-lanterns on the porch, and we see that the ghosts have eye-holes that look suspiciously like holes cut out of sheets.

When the two ghosts eventually enter the room at the top of the house, all kinds of creepy creatures leap out them. Among others, there is a Frankenstein, a mummy, a huge spider and a vampire. However, on the next page the creatures remove their masks to reveal the smiling faces of a group of happy children. It is clearly a Halloween party. On this spread, the illustrator has departed from her monochromatic style and included bright, cheerful colours. There is no text on this spread, and at no point does the text deviate from its spooky tone.

About the Book's Creators

Kyle Mewburn is one of New Zealand's finest, and most eclectic, children's book authors. His titles have been published in a dozen countries and won numerous awards including the NZ Post Book Awards Children's Book of the Year (*Old Hu-Hu*), Picture Book of the Year (*Kiss! Kiss! Yuck! Yuck!*), two Children's Choice awards (*Kiss! Kiss! Yuck! Yuck!* and *Melu*) and a Flicker Tale Children's Book Award in North Dakota (*Kiss! Kiss! Yuck! Yuck!*). Kyle is perhaps best known for the irreverent junior fiction series *Dinosaur Rescue*. He lives in Millers Flat, Central Otago.

Sarah Davis grew up in New Zealand and moved to Australia in 2004. There she began work as a freelance illustrator. Sarah is the illustrator of the much-loved *Marmaduke Duck* series and has been nominated for awards both in New Zealand and Australia.

Writing Style

The House on the Hill is written in a poetic style. On the last page of the book, Mewburn tells how it was inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's narrative poem *The Raven*, and there are, in fact, many structural similarities as well as a similar mysterious, ghostly and somewhat threatening tone. As in *The Raven*, the text is set out in stanzas and contains rhyme and assonance. This text, however, will be more readily understood by modern children and is more suitable for them. While the text tells a spooky tale of two ghosts approaching a haunted house, the pictures hint that in reality two children are approaching a Halloween party. This is never stated by the text. Instead, it must be inferred from the illustrations, which slowly reveal more and more hints.

Shared Learning and Discussion Points

ASK YOUR STUDENTS:

- Look at the cover. What sort of book do you think this is? How can you tell? (cover)
- Look at the front end-paper and the title page. What time of day is it? How do you know? (front end-paper and title page)
- How do these pictures make you feel? What is spooky or scary about them? (front end-paper and title page)
- What rhyming words can you find on this page (tomb, gloom, doom)? Why do you think the author chose these words? (p.2)
- Look at the illustration. Where has the illustrator made space for the text? (pp.2-3)
- What colours has the illustrator used? Where else do you see sepia colours? What other colours are on the page? Why do you think the illustrator used yellow? (pp.2-3)
- What is a portent? Where is the portent in the picture? What does it look like to you? (pp.4-5)
- About how tall are the ghosts? What clues does the illustrator give us? (pp.4-5)
- Look at the gate. Can you see anything scary about it? Can you see twists of iron that look like eyes? (pp.4-5)
- The author says that the gate 'gave a weary groan, an ancient sigh of creaking bones'. How can a gate groan? What are its bones really? What do we call it when an object is described as if it were a person (personification)? How does this make the story spookier? (p.6)
- Are the ghosts really 'all alone' or is someone going with them to the house on the hill? Who is it? (pp.6-7)
- Why does the author say that the ghosts' shadows go eagerly ahead and then turn and flee? Do they really 'flee', or does something else happen? Where is the light coming from? (pp.6-7)
- What is an eerie light? Where is it coming from? What is a bit creepy, or sinister, about moths being called to a light? (They might be burned by the candles inside.) (pp.8-9)
- What time of year is it? What special night might it be? What are the clues? (pp.8-9)
- What angle did the illustrator draw this picture from? Why do you think she chose this angle? (pp.8-9)
- The illustrator has used a different angle this time. Why might that be? What feeling do you get looking at the door from this angle? (pp.10-11)
- Who or what is sweeping the leaves into the air? (pp.10-11)
- Why do you think the ghosts creep slowly to the door rather than march quickly? (pp.10-11)
- What are cobweb curtains? Why might they be thick with dust? What else can you see in the room? What does this tell you about the house on the hill? (pp.12-13)
- How still is graveyard still? Why did the author say this rather than 'very still' or 'lazy summer-day still'? (pp.14-15)
- Who might be speaking on this page? Why might the text be written in this type and be set inside this dripping shape? (pp.14-15)
- How do the ghosts and the cat react to the voice? Look at the ghosts' eyes. What else do you notice? (pp.14-15)
- What is a sentry? Why might the candle be described as a sentry candle? (pp.16-17)
- What does 'perish' mean? Why do you think the author uses old-fashioned terms like "venture forth", 'perforce beware' and 'perish', rather than 'explore', 'you must take care' and 'die'? (pp.16-17)
- What shape is the staircase? What does it tell you about the size of the house? (pp.16-17)
- What is a trembling heart? When have you ever felt that way? (pp.18-19)
- Why do you think there are skulls and shrunken heads in the hallway? What might be going on behind the door? (pp.20-21)
- Why doesn't the illustrator let us see clearly what is in the room? What do the shapes hint at? (pp.22-23)
- How many heads does the walking corpse have? Look carefully. What clue does this give us to what's going on? (pp.24-25)
- What sort of creatures are they? What do you think they will do to the ghosts? (pp.26-27)
- What's really happening? Had you guessed already? (pp.28-29)
- Why does the illustrator use colour here? Why do you think the author did not write any text for these pages? (pp.28-29)
- What sort of memories do you think the ghosts will have of that night on the hill? (pp.30-31)



teacher toolkit

 SCHOLASTIC

Activities

ACTIVITY 1: LOOKING AT POETIC DEVICES

The House on the Hill can be a fun way to introduce some of the features of poetry. You can:

- Explore the use of rhyme in the book. Create class lists of rhyming words for use in the students' own writing. Students could then sort the words into rhymes that have the same spelling patterns (e.g. gloom and doom) and those that have different spelling patterns (e.g. hung and tongue). Also, investigate the use of assonance, where the same vowel sound is repeated (e.g. swept and step).
- Assist the students to notice that the third line of many stanzas includes the repetition of a word. Discuss the author's choice of words to repeat. Ask what effect this has on the poem.
- Encourage your students to notice that each stanza ends with the same five words. Ask what effect this repetition has?
- Investigate the author's choice of evocative adjectives. Create a class list of spooky adjectives, nouns and verbs. The students could then use the lists as inspiration for creating their own short poems in the same style as Kyle Mewburn.

ACTIVITY 2: VISUAL LITERACY

Discuss with your students how the illustrations affect our understanding of the story. If it is appropriate for your students, you could read them the story first without showing them the pictures, and discuss what images the words evoke and what they think might be going on. Then repeat the story with the pictures. Talk about how the pictures both create a spooky atmosphere and give hints at a more innocent reality. You could also pick out the questions from the previous section that relate to the illustrations and investigate them more deeply.

ACTIVITY 3: THE RAVEN

The House on the Hill can also be used to engage students before moving on to discuss classic poetry with upper primary students. Read the author's poetic verse on the last page to your students. Discuss what they think it means. Find out what knowledge, if any, they already have of Edgar Allan Poe and his famous poem *The Raven*.

Discuss how authors, poets and other creative people often take inspiration from one another. Talk about the difference between this and plagiarism, where ideas and texts are stolen without reference to the original.

Read students the first verse of Poe's chilling narrative poem *The Raven*. (It is available online, and illustrated versions can be purchased.) Compare its structural similarities with Kyle Mewburn's comment, and also the text of *The House on the Hill* (e.g. the repetition of a word). If your students are old enough, you could then explore the whole poem in greater detail.

ACTIVITY 3: FACING FEAR

The House on the Hill appears very spooky and frightening at first. However, the more one reads, the more one realises that something much more fun and innocent is going on: a children's Halloween party.

Discuss this with your students. Ask what would have happened if the ghosts had let their fears take over and they had run home. (They would have missed out on a fun party.) Help them realise that often the things we fear turn out to be fun, or at least not as scary as we had thought (e.g. joining a new club; starting in a new class). Help your students realise that fear is a natural emotion designed to protect us from things that really are dangerous, but that if we can face some of our more harmless fears, there can be much to gain.

Assist your students in writing a poem or story about facing a fear and reaping positive results. It could either be a recount of something that happened to them or a narrative they invent.

Written by Mary Atkinson

