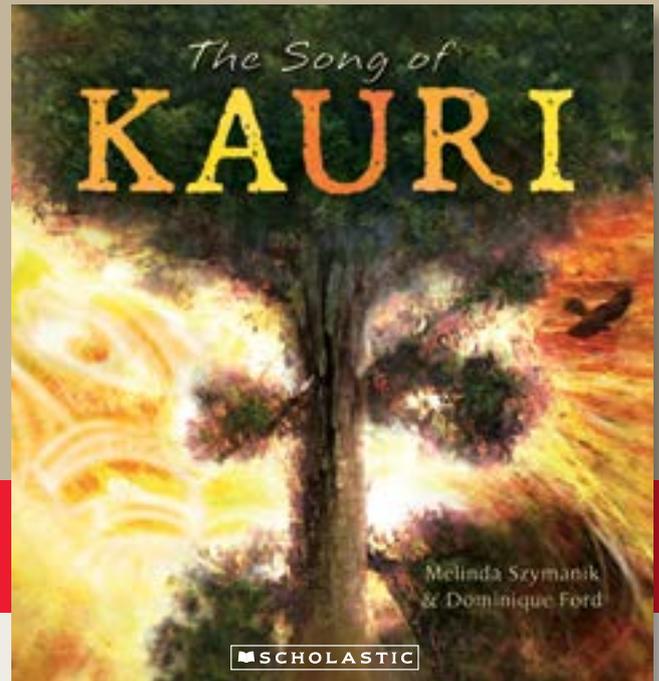


The Song of Kauri

By Melinda Szymanik

Illustrated by Dominique Ford

- Reading • Writing • Social Studies
- Science • Art



Synopsis

The Song of Kauri takes readers on a journey through the life of a mighty Kauri tree. They accompany the seedling as his first leaves unfurl above the bare ground of new volcanic soil, and then they follow him as he grows and witnesses many changes.

As the young Kauri matures, he becomes aware that he is alone in his environment. He attempts to befriend the different elements of his world, asking the Earth, Sun, Rain and Moon for friendship, but none is able to devote time to him.

Eventually, vibrant native bush grows up around Kauri, and many birds come to live in his branches. For many years, Kauri grows in the midst of a pristine paradise and is content.

With the coming of humans, however, Kauri's environment begins to change. First come the Maori, who respect the ancient tree's majesty, but bring with them hints of war and discord. When the Pakeha arrive, Kauri's world changes even more dramatically: cities are carved into the land, and the bush is treated with little respect.

Kauri is a noble witness to the changes of time and history. When, eventually, it is time for Kauri to pass on, he sings his song "of endings and of beginnings", and then, as his roots give way, the birds of the bush set him free, carrying him away into the sky.

About the Author

Melinda Szymanik's background more than qualifies her to take on such an impressive endeavour as *The Song of Kauri*. It includes a melding of both creative and scientific interests. Her qualifications include a Master of Science in Zoology and a Bachelor of Arts in English. She was in the New Zealand Society of Author's mentoring programme during 2005 and 2006, and was the 2014 University of Otago College of Education Creative New Zealand Children's Writer in Residence.

Melinda has had stories published in the School Journal, the Australian School Magazine and in several short-story anthologies. Among other titles, she is the author of the picture books *Clever Moo* and *The Were-Nana* and also of the junior novel *Jack the Viking*. *The Were-Nana* won the Children's Choice Award in the 2009 New Zealand Post Book Awards for Children and Young Adults, and she has twice been shortlisted for the Joy Cowley Award (2003 and 2006).

Melinda lives in Auckland, where she runs a marketing business with her husband and takes care of her three children.

Writing Style

The Song of Kauri is a beautiful tale, rich in poetic language. The kauri, the living creatures and the elements are all personified in a sophisticated, gentle way, allowing the reader to empathize with the kauri tree, first as it struggles with loneliness before the forest grows, and later as it witnesses the neglect and abuse of its world brought about by human beings.

Historical and scientific information are woven into this mythical tale, making it an ideal accompaniment to many science and social studies classes.

Shared Learning and Discussion Points

ASK YOUR STUDENTS:

- Why does the author call the tiny seedling on the first page a giant?
- How does Kauri's shape change through the book?
- What does the author mean by "a cloak of mist"? What is a real cloak? Why do you think she chose this word?
- How does the artist draw the spirits, or personalities, of the mist, sun, earth, rain and wind?
- Where else have you seen Maori designs like these ones?
- Why do both the Earth and the Sun think they are so important?
- What does the Earth mean when it says: "I was here before you were born. And I will still be here long after you are gone"?
- What is an embrace? How does the rain embrace Kauri?
- Why does the author say that the Moon is changeable and distant? How does this relate to the Moon's personality? How does this relate to science?
- What does the author mean when she says that Kauri danced with the wind? Why did she describe it this way?
- Which native birds and insects can you see in the illustrations? Where have you seen these creatures?
- Who were the first people to arrive in Kauri's world? How do they treat Kauri? What changes do they bring?
- Who are the next people to arrive in Kauri's world? What sort of "forests" did they build?
- What does the author mean when she says: "Monsters made of dark night, belching smoke, carved scars across the land."
- Why do you think this book is called *The Song of Kauri*?
- If appropriate ask: Where did the birds take Kauri?

Activities and Blackline Masters

ACTIVITY 1: WRITE MY STORY

Discuss personification with your students. Then reread the book, locating and discussing different examples. Talk about how personification helps us identify with animals, plants and non-human objects.

Choose a local landmark (such as a mountain) or a well-known tree (not a kauri), and ask students about what it might have seen during its "lifetime". Together, write a sentence about one of these things from the landmark or tree's perspective.

Assist your students to continue writing the landmark or tree's life story, including examples of personification as in *The Song of Kauri*. Students can illustrate an event in their story and display the finished piece on the wall.

ACTIVITY 2: TIME CHANGES EVERYTHING

Pages 26 and 27 provide a graphic illustration of the history of Kauri's life. From left to right, readers see the land forming (a volcano) and a kauri tree growing to maturity. On the right side, there is a modern city.

In groups, or as a class, create a poster showing the changes your local landmark or tree has witnessed. Each student can draw and cut out elements to paste onto the final artwork.

The earliest events should appear on the far left and the most recent on the far right. A mountain, for example, could have houses and roads on its right side only. A tree could grow as the kauri does on pages 26 and 27.

ACTIVITY 3: SHORT LIVES, LONG LIVES

Kauri trees can potentially live at least 2000 years. Old kauri trees surviving today may well have witnessed the coming of humans to New Zealand just as Kauri does in this book.

Reread pages 4 and 5 with your students and discuss the Earth's comment about living much longer than Kauri. Talk about how non-living things often last longer than living things, and how some trees can live longer than humans and animals.

Ask the students to work in pairs to complete the cloze activity on the blackline master. Then discuss the answers together as a class.

BLM *Short Lives, Long Lives*

This title is also available in te reo.