

# Animal Farm

Ruth Starke

Tania Cox, illus. Greg Holfeld  
WOLF'S SUNDAY DINNER

Working Title Press, \$24.95hb, [32]pp, 1 876288 39 6

Jackie French, illus. Bruce Whatley  
TOO MANY PEARS!

Koala Books, \$24.95hb, [32]pp, 0 86461 460 9

Leigh Hobbs  
FIONA THE PIG

Penguin, \$24.95hb, [32]pp, 0 670 04097 5

Carolyn Polizzotto and Sarah Spinks, illus. Marion Duke  
TRUMPET'S KITTENS

FACP, \$24.95hb, [32]pp, 1 86368 331 3

Margaret Wild, illus. David Legge  
BABY BOOMSTICKS

ABC Books, \$25.95hb, [40]pp, 0 7333 0740 X

WHERE WOULD THE picture book industry be without animals? Talking or non-speaking, cute or obnoxious, mischievously alive or poignantly dying, animal characters can be utilised to teach life lessons and to make complex issues accessible and less confronting for young children. Add humour, passion and strong original writing, and you have a winner.

Leigh Hobbs combines all three in *Fiona the Pig*, and the appeal starts with the cover. Who could resist that beaming piggy face, all blonde curls, pink ribbons and stage-struck ambition, framed by red velvet curtains and a large heart? Like Horrible Harriet and Old Tom before her, Fiona is a misfit. 'Why can't Fiona be more like us?' wail her puzzled and disappointed parents. Fiona is fastidious: she takes bubble baths instead of wallowing in mud; she hosts dainty tea parties for her dolls instead of living in filth; she wants to be a ballet dancer. Her parents consult the wise Dr Pinkysnout, who reassures them that Fiona's behaviour is not abnormal: 'Most pigs are very clean and very neat, you know.' Mr and Mrs Pig decide that it is they who must change, which is easier said than done. But blood is thicker than water and, in a warm and funny resolution, the parents learn to accept their 'different' child.

Hobbs is able to convey a wide range of porcine expressions, often by just the curve of a mouth or the (mis)placement of an eyeball, and he's equally brilliant at portraying exuberant activity. Fiona's solo performance in her ballet 'Pigs Can Fly', and her attempts to teach herself to tap dance are only two of the pictorial gems in a book that will captivate readers of all ages. But I couldn't help wishing Fiona had been a Floyd or a Freddie: now *that* would have tested Mr and Mrs Pig.

The team that delighted readers last year with the best-selling *Diary of a Wombat* are back, this time with the salutary story of Pamela, a cow who simply doesn't know when she's eaten Too Many Pears! It's a big worry for the farm family as their orchard is raided and Pamela evades all attempts to limit her consumption of her favourite fruit. But clever Amy comes up with a solution — one that will be familiar to any chocoholic who has ever worked in a chocolate factory.

This is a great book for beginning readers. There's a generous use of white space, and the text is large and clear. Most importantly, Jackie French tells the story in simple sentences, utilising a vocabulary of little more than eighty words and with a fine use of repetition and rhythm ('Pamela liked pears. Pamela liked fresh pears. She liked pears even more than Amy did!'). Bruce Whatley's illustrations are amusing, often hilarious, and always reinforce the text. Pamela's hugeness, so important in the light of her eventual pear consumption, is wonderfully conveyed across double-page spreads, as is her progression from greedy enjoyment to bloated gluttony. And the wombat makes a guest appearance.

*Wolf's Sunday Dinner* is a potentially scary tale about a big bad wolf trying to fatten up a skinny little goose — 'a teeny, tiny excuse for a goose' — as his next meal. It's possible that some younger readers will find images of open jaws and slobbery fangs in close proximity to baby innocence upsetting. However, Greg Holfeld's energetic cartoon-like illustrations, and the fact that this is a particularly dim-witted wolf, serve to undercut the fright. Most readers, safe in the knowledge that the naive little victim must eventually triumph, will enjoy being frightened (although some might wonder how any responsible mother could displace her baby for so long). The typography mimics the action as Tania Cox's words 'slip, slide, slam', 'clink, clunk, clonk' and 'trip, tumble, thud' across the pages, and there's a satisfying use of repetition. The story ends with a clever twist, made even more effective by the page turns.

Why is Sarah's adopted cat Trumpet getting bigger and bigger? When the vet gives his diagnosis, no reader will be as

surprised as Sarah: the title *Trumpet's Kittens* and the blurb have already given the game away. But she might well be surprised. Sarah has long wanted a cat of her own, and takes in Trumpet when her owners move. Perhaps they didn't know that their cat was pregnant, but they must have been aware that it hadn't been desexed. Poor Sarah! Wanting only one cat and now burdened with five. Nobody in the story seems to mind, but I'd have liked an alternative last page: 'And as soon as possible, Sarah took Trumpet back to the vet and had her neutered.'

Still, *Trumpet's Kittens* is a gorgeous-looking book and a credit to FACP's in-house designer and illustrator, Marion Duke. From its slip-cover and musical score endpapers to the rich earthy colours that echo Trumpet's own shadings and evoke the warmth of home and family life, this is a book to read again and again. (It's a pity the print is so small.)

*Baby Boomsticks* isn't an animal character, but perhaps he should have been. It's hard to believe the award-winning Margaret Wild is responsible for this tale of a 'teeny-tiny' baby who outgrows his teeny-tiny parents to become a big, jolly baby. When he's rejected on safety grounds as a playmate for the teeny-tiny village children — understandable, surely? — BB stops chuckling. Even if you're not familiar with the old playground taunt of 'Fatty Fatty Boomsticks!', the photo-realism of Legge's illustrations makes it clear that this is a fat baby. Presumably, the aim was to deliver a gentle lesson in dealing positively with difference, but the writing is twee and the premise shaky. The villagers only accept BB when he becomes useful to them, first by carrying them to safety from a flood (which he has inadvertently caused) and thereafter acting as a sort of extra playground fixture (all safety considerations now disregarded). 'Baby Boomsticks was jolly once more ... he laughed as merrily as the babbling brook ... and as jubilantly as the church bells!' Oh dear.