



MIKKI AND ME AND THE OUT-OF-TUNE TREE

MARION ROBERTS

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Recommended for: 9–13 years old

Themes: Environment, activism, family, filmmaking, trees, humour, forest bathing

Applicable to learning areas: English language, literacy and literature

Summary

Eleven-year-old Alberta Bracken is having a terrible summer. After a bike-riding accident, caused by the local bully, her arm is in a cast so she can't do her most favourite holiday activity: boogie boarding at the local beach. And her little sister Clementine is EXTREMELY ANNOYING.

To make matters worse, her mum (bestselling author of *Tammy Bracken's Guide to Modern Manners*) has sent her dad packing – after discovering his behaviour has been far from...well-mannered.

So when budding filmmaker Mikki Watanabe suggests they start a YouTube channel about the secret life of trees – Alberta is ALL IN. And when they discover their trees are earmarked for removal by the local council, it's suddenly a race against time to save them.

Funny, warm and a little offbeat, this highly entertaining novel hits all the right notes for middle-fiction readers.

A Word from the Author

'I have always loved trees and had a deep affection for pine needles. When the local council earmarked some neighbourhood pines for removal, I embarked on a campaign to save them. Despite being gracious, healthy trees, having survived nearly 80 years in harmony with the Banksia woodland in which they were grown, the trees were destroyed on the basis of their European heritage. This sparked my interest in how other cultures value and protect their trees.'

– **Marion Roberts**

About the author

Marion Roberts always wanted to be a fashion designer, but she studied science, alternative medicine and psychotherapy instead. She worked as a naturopath and also a chef, as well as teaching people to cook. Marion started writing because she wanted a job she could do in her pyjamas. Also, her friends kept saying her emails were too long, and she needed to find another place to put her stories. She was born in Melbourne, which has always been her hometown.

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Suggestions for Classroom Discussion and Application

Book Covers and Visual Literacy

- Before reading *Mikki and Me and the Out-of-Tune Tree*, look closely at the book's cover, paying special attention to the young people depicted and the central tree. What element or elements 'define' the two people and the tree? What tone do the fonts and colours in the title suggest this book will have? (Uplifting, funny, tragic or serious). Does the tagline, 'Good manners go a long way...but can they save a forest?' make you want to open the book and read it? Why?

Language: What's in a Word?

- Do you think starting her story with the word 'So' had an effect on how you related to Alberta's 'voice' from the start of the story? Would you have felt the same if she had begun, 'Not only is my mother the current...'? Why/Why not?

Building Characters in Chapter 1

- Chapter 1 tells us a lot about each of the Bracken family members, as well as how each relates to the others. For example, we are told that Clementine is annoying and 'a constant cause of chaos' around her mum. What other things did you discover about Tammy, Alberta, Clementine and Mr Bracken in the chapter? Divide a blank page into four columns, heading each with a character's name and make a list of traits that define each of them. When making your list try to point to the thing that each said or did in the chapter that helped you form your picture of them.

Literary Foils

- Define the term *literary foil* and explain how it might be used to describe Clementine (a) in relation to her mother and (b) in relation to Alberta. Do you think Seth could be described as a foil to Mikki Watanabe throughout the story? Extension question (c) How might *Tammy's Tips* be a foil to the theme of forest bathing?

Character Motivation

- Do you think Alberta's family and friendship problems make her more 'open' to the idea of forest bathing than, perhaps, her beach-loving friends Sylvie, Bella, Georgette, Harrison and Pip? Why/Why not?

Manners

- Mikki's mum is the author of *Tammy Bracken's Guide to Modern Manners*. What role do manners play in society? Are they relevant today? Should we bother about good manners?

Setting – Kingfisher Bay

Consider these extracts from the text and discuss your answers to the questions below:

*'Do you ever make films about the ocean?' I asked.
'Oh, no,' Mikki said. 'I prefer to make films about trees.'*

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I guess trees just hadn't seemed that special since we were surrounded by the Kingfisher National Park. Trees had just always ... been there ...

Page 74

- Do you think it is significant that this story is set in a seaside town that has recently suffered from sewage pollution? Why/Why not?
- Compare and contrast the benefits of spending a day at the beach boogie boarding with a day of forest bathing. Which do you think you would prefer, and why?

Forest Bathing

- Research the origins of forest bathing in Japan and answer the following questions:
 - When did it begin?
 - What was it about Japanese society at the time that made it attractive?
 - How might the answer to the previous question relate to our own world today, and in particular our relationship with technology?
- Try some forest bathing for yourself by following these simple steps:
 1. Find a quiet spot away from the hustle and bustle with plenty of trees – the more wooded the area the better.
 2. Minimise distractions and make sure you turn off all electronic devices.
 3. Walk very slowly to allow all your senses to notice things.
 4. Breathe deeply and try making your exhalation twice as long as your inhalation to maximise relaxation.
 5. Stop to appreciate everything that is around you and notice even the smallest details.

YouTube – Good versus Evil

- Modern technology can be useful. Mikki and Alberta create a YouTube channel for their videos and soon gather a large audience which is keen to find out more about the Memory Tree. What benefits does YouTube offer them in the story and what are the negative aspects?

Forests as Global Communities

Consider these extracts from the text and discuss your answers to the questions below:

'Once they're removed—'

'You're talking about an actual massacre,' Mikki whispered.

Page 161

- Do you agree with Mikki that cutting down the pine trees is a 'massacre'? Why/Why not? If you believe he is right, what might this mean for the way we practice bush care and fire protection?

No one species is better or worse than the other. They are equal to one another in a chain of connectivity. Each bee, each wolf has the right to dream or die, has the right to live a life, its own particular life, of wonder. And it has a right to that home until the end of time.

Page 287

- Alberta is quoting Irish botanist Diana Beresford-Kroeger, from her book *The Global Forest*, here. Do you agree with this view? How might our society need to change to accommodate it? Do you think such change is possible?

Video – The Sound of a Plant

- Watch this video: [Muir Woods](#) to see a device like the one Mikki and Alberta used on the Memory Tree to get a sense of the sort of music plants can produce. Further information on the Damanhur Foundation and their work with plant music can be found here: [Music of the Plants](#).