

Readers' Notes
My Mum Tarzan
Lisa Shanahan & Bettina Guthridge

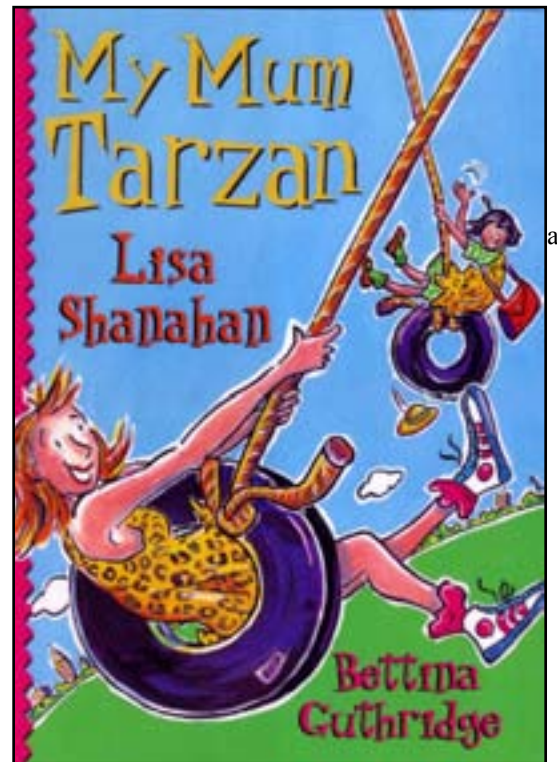
Synopsis

Lisa Shanahan's narrator in *My Mum Tarzan* is a young girl whose mother has a wonderful, imagined life. But it's her actual life, too.

She dresses up in different costumes, depending on the weather, her daily routines or her moods, and plays a variety of roles. On stormy days she is a pirate, sometimes she is a mermaid, an astronaut, an Egyptian princess, fairy, the Man from Snowy River, or Tarzan. Other times she is just Mum.

Throughout the story, we have the responses of other family members, neighbours, other shoppers, other students, as well the narrator's own responses. Mostly the adults disapprove and wonder when Mum will ever grow up. Dad wonders this too, but he seems far more indulgent when he says it.

The other children in the playground enjoy the fun, but as she tells us about Mum's adventures, the narrator only lets us know how much she likes Mum's roleplaying three quarters of the way through the story. Then she tells us that she loves it, and when she goes to bed she asks Mum for reassurance that she won't grow up just yet.



Publisher's Comments

It's almost as if a story knocks on the door and there you are as a publisher on the other side, waiting to open it. I remember when Fay Weldon first visited Australia, she was witty and articulate and a writer with a wonderful satiric eye, but my first impression was that her appearance was oddly conservative. When I looked more closely, however, she had a single lock of her hair dyed hot pink, tucked away behind one ear. My wife was much taken with this and said that one surprising streak was adventurous enough for her too. Our eldest daughter was about 8 and appalled by the idea. She said, 'Well if you do that, I won't walk down the street with you. I'll walk on the other side.'

This shocked us both. And as the children grew up, we often commented on the way their generation seemed so conservative, compared with ours. It came up repeatedly, in matters as trivial as appearance, and as serious as political activism. But when I looked more closely, I became aware that although the children appeared to be embarrassed by their parents' generation being 'out there', secretly they admired it, too.

Then along came Lisa Shanahan's text about a mother who is more of a big kid than her own daughter. I expected the adults in the story to deplore her behaviour, but I was fascinated by the way the narrator only risks letting us know that she admires Mum quite late in the piece. I love Lisa's fresh read-aloud energy anyway, but given the theme, I knew I had to publish it. Libby Gleeson and Craig Smith's *Where's Mum?* is a favourite of mine and so is John Burningham's classic *Come Away from the Water, Shirley*.

Burningham creates two separate worlds, with the actual one of Shirley's parents quite boring and far less real—in the sense of compelling—than the world of Shirley's imagination. But like Gleeson and Smith, Lisa Shanahan blurs the boundaries between the actual world and the imagined. And she takes the idea farther: Mum specifically lives out her fantasies, whereas in Gleeson's book we are left wondering whether the imagined world could be actual.

I knew that Bettina Guthridge was the right illustrator for this book. She does high energy, madcap illustrations better than anyone else in Australia. And she has a great eye for detail. I knew that she could make her characters do anything physical that could be imagined, but in order to 'earth' the fantasy, the book needed to have all sorts of little familiar details and social comments, too, so that the reader would locate the story in his or her own world—not just space-out on the wonderful imagined scenes.

Drac and the Gremlin reminded us years ago how important makeshift is in children's play, with a cardboard tube becoming a sword in the child's imagination. So Bettina and I discussed some of the everyday objects that could be transformed during play. This was lots of fun with some lively exchanges. Hazel Edwards told me once that she was taking belly-dancing classes: that's how the Egyptian princess could work, for example.

It was also important to me that all young readers could feel empowered to share in Mum's game-playing. It is so easy for children's literature to become a middle and upper middle class enthusiasm and I truly don't believe that children need the extravagantly expensive toys that load up shopping trolleys at gift-giving time. So I wanted it to be clear that Mum did not have a vast and expensive wardrobe department at her command. (Although I suspect that, unconsciously, Lisa Shanahan's background in the theatre lies behind this text). Mum needed to make umbrellas and toilet brushes and old flippers magical. My favourite interpretation is where she becomes an astronaut. We all need fantasies like that to get through the dusting and vacuuming! Bettina saw all sorts of possibilities there.

The one scene that was difficult was the fairy scene. It was hard to indicate that everyday objects had been transformed into fairy objects—and of course there are the actual fairy shops and tiaras and wands that have been so popular in recent years. So this is a scene where the imagined world and our actual world are closer. The reader doesn't have to make such a leap of the visual imagination to get into this one. It's also the one scene in which the narrator looks a bit out of sorts. (There's a connection.)

One interesting scene that will make readers wonder is the second last one, where Mum is just Mum and the teacher, Mrs Zantiotis, is dressed outrageously and is imaginatively crossing swords with a student. This lets us know that Mum is not so weird after all: there are other adults who haven't forgotten how to play, so Mum is not alone in her childlikeness. The possibility of a playful universe is growing as the world outside this book is by implication reimaged in a child's optimism.

Resisting the pressure to grow up is there in our society's narratives from *Peter Pan* to the idea of the "inner child". When it is resisted altogether, the result is often tragic, as the child is portrayed increasingly beyond our reach. Here at the end of *My Mum Tarzan*, though, there is no room for pathos: simply the acknowledgment that the time for play will eventually pass—but reassuringly not "just yet".

Style

All Lisa Shanahan's picture books are wonderful to read aloud, due to her early training as an actor, and *My Mum Tarzan* is no exception. The structure of this story is that of a catalogue or list of similar episodes, with the accumulation of the scenes building the energy and excitement of the story to its climax.

This reflects the way children's fantasies grow. They start with an idea, which gets bigger and bigger, like a balloon. Sometimes this is a group activity—with each member of the group adding a detail to enlarge the initial proposition. Think of Patricia Wrightson's *I Own the Racecourse* and the way every member of the group holds his or her breath, waiting to see what will happen if the balloon bursts. In *My Mum Tarzan*, the narrator won't let the imagined world be deflated. She doesn't want Mum to grow up "just yet".

Bettina Guthridge wanted to use lots of saturated colour in this book. Adults are seeing these years in our society as very grim, with constant talk of war and terrorism, and are afraid that their children will lose the joy of childhood. So one of the main features of the illustration style was to be the colour—just the simple joy of the retro palette Bettina has used is so "out there"! The designer Donna Rawlins picked this up, too, in her use of the pink and blue endpapers (reflecting the irrelevance of gender roles implied by the title and the comic scene when Dad comes home).

Bettina also wanted to adapt a line that she had used in the *Egg* books by Margaret Clark. She used a loose felt-pen line that would align the visual style of the book with the exuberance of children's own drawing and we both felt delighted with the result, which hints at this without any suggestion of condescending to children with a style that is *faux naïf*. To put as much thought into the pictures and yet maintain a feeling of spontaneity makes this Bettina's best work to date.

Mark Macleod

Publisher, Mark Macleod Books

Educational Applicability

- Links to PD, HSIE, Social Studies, English

Before Reading the Text

- Look at the front cover. What do you think the book will be about? Does it look like a serious or fun book.
- Does the mum in this book look like a normal mum? Does anyone have a mum that acts like Tarzan?
- What does your mum do during the day?
- What does your dad do during the day?

During reading the text

- Before reading the text show the illustrations and guess what mum is dressing up as on each page
- Discuss if this is a realistic portrayal of family life or fantasy?

After reading the text

- Have a dress up day at school—dress up costumes must be recycled items you have at home.
- Choose one of the dress up characters mum is impersonating and write about being that character for a day—what you do, what adventures you find yourself in/
- Read books written by Lisa Shanahan, and books illustrated by Bettina Guthridge.
- Change the story to My Dad—as a class write and illustrate a variation on this story.