



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA  
READING GUIDES

## Hippos Can Swim By Pablo Bernasconi

Random House Australia, 2005

RRP: \$14.95

ISBN 1741661099

Reading Level: Picture book for all ages

### SYNOPSIS

ON WRITING/ILLUSTRATING *HIPPOS CAN SWIM*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

### SYNOPSIS

Hippo is afraid of the water, so he sits alone on the shore while his family swims in the lagoon – though he won't admit his fear to them. Instead he tells them swimming is boring, and decides to find something else he can do. He can't skip rope with the rabbits or climb a tree with the birds because he's too heavy; he can't fit into a badger hole to play with the badgers; he can't even see-saw when seven monkeys are trying to lift him off the ground – but all the other animals think that's okay, because 'We can't swim, but hippos can'. Finally he plucks up his courage and plunges into the water – with delightful results. In the water, Hippo is as light as a monkey, he can jump, and he can fly like a bird. By doing what he is most afraid of, Hippo has discovered his best talents, and he now has the self-confidence to dream of even better things.

A gorgeous picture book from Pablo Bernasconi, creator of *Black Skin, White Cow* and *The Wizard, the Ugly and the Book of Shame*, *Hippos Can Swim* is an appealing story with an underlying message about finding your own place in the world.

### ON WRITING/ILLUSTRATING HIPPOS CAN SWIM

Pablo's wit and humour is conveyed through very simple, well-balanced sentences, making for a poignant lesson on having courage and being yourself. His sweet, endearing tone reveals the Hippo's initial misery and

attempts to disguise his fear, his sadness at not being able to do what the other animals can, and his elation when he conquers his fear. 'It's fantastic!' Hippo says delightedly as he boing-boing-boings through the water.

This quietly wise tale complements the quirky, original illustrations on the opposing pages. Combining a variety of textures and vivid colours, from leathery grey hippo skin to lairy T-shirts, from furry badgers to spotty blue fish, Pablo's collage-inspired method makes for fascinating viewing. The attention to detail in the animals' expressions, the surreal proportions and incorporation of human postures add an additional layer of artistry – and hilarity – to the book.

Most importantly, Pablo takes some valuable lessons – self-esteem and conquering your fears – and examines the issue from a fresh perspective with energetic, original illustrations, while refraining from loud moralising.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pablo Bernasconi was born in Buenos Aires in August 1973. He graduated from the Universidad de Buenos Aires as a graphic designer, where he later taught design for over six years. In 1998, he began work at *Clarín* Newspaper as an illustrator and designer, producing covers for over 150 editions. His work has been published in magazines and newspapers around the world, including *The Times* and *Rolling Stone*, and he regularly works for clients in Germany, USA, England, Australia and Spain. Pablo has twice won the Society of News Design award for best individual art and illustration portfolio and cover. He lives in Rio Negro, Argentina.

Like his other books published by Random House Australia, Pablo wrote *Hippos Can Swim* to reflect his value that believing in yourself, finding the courage to be comfortable with who you are and appreciating the differences in others makes the world a better place. In the author's own words, 'I think all my stories show the value of believing in yourself, the courage of finding a way to be comfortable with us, and the idea that difference can and should be good.'

## STUDY NOTES / TEACHER ACTIVITIES / POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

Themes include hippos, swimming, identity, friendship and courage.

The simplicity of the story and the humorous illustrations are perfect for reading aloud in a classroom. The text on one side of the spread against a white background and the vivid illustrations on the other

present an uncomplicated narrative that is easy for early-readers to follow.

Some questions for discussion include:

- Why does Hippo tell his family that swimming is boring? Does he really think it's boring?
- The artist uses many materials to make his collage pictures. Make your own collage of the animals around the lagoon with paper, markers, string, fabrics, etc.
- What things are you good at that make you uniquely special? Can you paint pictures, run fast or are you good at helping Mum and Dad around the house?

Pablo's inspiration for writing *Hippos Can Swim* was seeing real hippopotamuses in the water. An older class might watch a nature documentary about hippos, showing these huge creatures galloping through the water as lightly as if they were flying, and research on the internet some facts about hippos, such as:

- Hippos have webbed toes that help them paddle in the water.
- Hippos can hold their breath underwater for about five minutes.
- Hippos spend most of the daytime in the water, because it helps them keep cool in the hot tropical climates where they live. At night they come out of the water to eat grass.
- Hippos can grow to four or five metres long and weigh up to 3,600 kilograms!
- Just as the illustrations in *Hippos Can Swim* show, the eyes and nostrils of hippos are on the top of their head, so they can still see and breathe while the rest of the hippo is underwater.