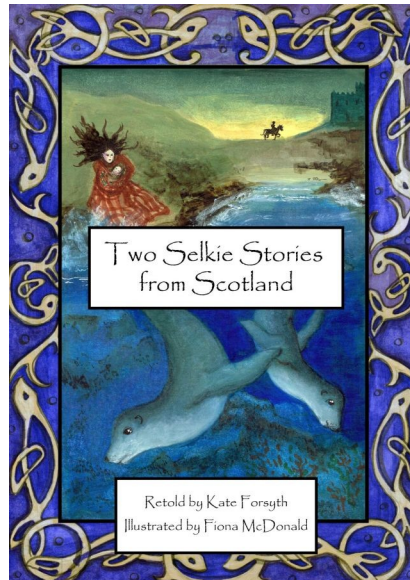


## TWO SELKIE STORIES FROM SCOTLAND

### TEACHERS' NOTES

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*The strange and magical world of the shape-shifting selkies is brought to enchanting life in these two fairy tales from Scotland, *The Selkie Bride* and *In the Kingdom of the Seals*, hauntingly retold by best-selling author Kate Forsyth and strikingly illustrated by Fiona McDonald.*

**Age range:** 7 and up. Suitable for both primary and secondary school students.

### About the stories:

Selkies are legendary shape-shifting beings who are human on land and seals in the sea. They are sometimes called *silkies* or *selchies*. Selkie stories come mainly from Scotland, especially the Western Isles, but also Orkney, Shetland, the Irish coast and the Faroe Islands. In all these places the sea is a constant presence, and seals are found there.

No-one knows exactly where such stories come from. When folklorists began to collect such tales, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, some of the old folk said that selkies were – like fairies - fallen angels, condemned to live in that form until the Day of Judgement. Others believed that Selkies were the souls of those that had drowned and that - one night each year – they were permitted to leave the sea and return to their original human form.

A Scottish historian, John MacAuley, has put forward the theory that Selkie tales were inspired by the Sámi people who travelled vast distances from their homes in far northern Norway and Sweden in small kayaks covered with seal skins. It does indeed seem possible that, long ago, a dark-eyed Sámi kayaker was seen moving swiftly through the water, dressed in heavy furs with a hood, an oar flashing like a flipper. Perhaps they came ashore, stepping out of their little seal-shaped boat and leaving it beached on the shore. Perhaps they even stayed long enough on shore to fall in love!

Selkie stories are often both romantic and tragic. Sometimes the human will not know that their lover is a selkie, and wakes to find them gone. In other stories, such as in one of the stories Kate Forsyth has retold, *The Selkie Bride*, the human husband hides the selkie's skin, thus preventing her from returning to her seal form. Perhaps the saddest and cruellest of the Selkie tales (which is not retold in this book!) is a very old and famous ballad called *The Grey Selkie of Sule Skerry* that tells the story of a woman who falls in love with a mysterious man and bears him a son. In time, her Selkie-lover returns and takes her son back to live in the sea. The grieving mother gives her son a golden chain to remember her by. Time passes, and she remarries. One day her new husband kills two bull-seals, and the younger one is wearing a golden chain. The man brings it home as a gift to his wife ... and so she realises that he has killed her son.



## About the author:



Kate Forsyth wrote her first novel at the age of seven, and is now the bestselling, award-winning author of 26 books, published in 15 countries. She has been voted one of Australia's Favourite 20 Novelists. *The Wild Girl* tells the story of star-crossed lovers Wilhelm Grimm and Dortchen Wild, who told him many of the most world's most famous fairy-tales. *Bitter Greens*, her retelling of 'Rapunzel', was called 'the best fairy tale retelling since Angela Carter'. Kate's books for children include *The Gypsy Crown* and *The Puzzle Ring*, lauded as 'a richly told tale of history, magic and intrigue by a wonderful storyteller.' Kate has spoken at conferences and festivals around the world, including at Oxford University, and has taught writing in the UK, the US, Fiji, Greece, Singapore and Australia. She recently finished her doctorate of creative arts in fairy tale retellings. Her website is [www.kateforsyth.com.au](http://www.kateforsyth.com.au)

Kate says:

*My grandmother's grandmother was Scottish.*

*Her name was Ellen Mackenzie and she grew up on the Black Isle in the Highlands of Scotland. Her home was edged on all sides by the waters of rivers and firths leading out to the sea.*

*Ellen's mother was called Margaret McPhee, and as everyone in Scotland knows, the McPhee clan was descended from Selkies. The name McPhee is derived from an older version of the name MacDuffie, which comes from the Gaelic term MacDubhSithe, meaning 'son of the dark fairy'. Family legend says that the first McPhee took a Selkie as a bride!*

*Ellen emigrated to Australia in the 1850s and, apart from some books and clothes and a sprig of heather, she brought a head stuffed full of old tales. She told these stories to her daughter Jinny, who told them to her daughters, Clarice, Gwen and Marjory (nicknamed Joy), and they – my great-aunts and grandmother - told them to me.*

*I always loved the tales of selkies, who were seals in the water and humans upon the land. It seemed the best of both worlds. People drowned if they sank beneath the waves, and mermaids could only flop about helplessly on land. Selkies, however, could plunge through the fathomless deeps, and then shed their sealskin and run and dance on the shore. I loved wondering if I had Selkie blood in me, and if one day I'd find the way to transform into a seal.*

*Like many Scottish fairy tales, 'The Selkie Bride' is full of love and loss, magic and mystery. A Selkie woman is seen dancing on the shore. A man steals her sealskin and hides it from her and so she is trapped in human form. Though the Selkie bride pines for the sea and her own kind, the man marries her and they have children. Eventually, the Selkie bride finds her sealskin – often with the help of one for her children – and so she returns to the sea, leaving her human family bereft. In many tales, her descendants are seers and singers, poets and players. Often they have webbed hands and feet, or may have been born with a caul of skin over their heads. If so, their families hide or destroy their caul so that they will not run away to the sea. I always loved that story, and wished that I had been born with Selkie blood so that I could swim through the waves with all the sleek grace of a seal, but still dance in the moonlight whenever I wanted.*

*A lesser known tale is 'The Seal-Hunter and the Selkie'. A man who makes his living by slaughtering seals finds himself transformed into a Selkie for a night, and charged with the task of saving the life of one he has injured. He is overcome by remorse and promises to never kill a seal again. This was always one of my favourite tales, for I've never liked the idea of killing such beautiful creatures. It was also, I thought, more joyful and hopeful than many of the Selkie tales, which are often tragic, and so was a bright counterpoint to the melancholy feel of 'The Selkie Bride'.*

*I loved retelling these two old tales, and tried to recapture some of the lilt of my grandmother and great-aunts' voices in the story's cadences and rhythm. They are stories I will love to tell aloud.*



**About the illustrator:**



A graduate of the Julian Ashton Art School in Sydney, Fiona McDonald has worked as a graphic designer, doll-maker, cloth sculptor and artist. She is also the author of several books of non-fiction, including the best-selling *The Popular History of Graffiti* (Skyhorse Publishing 2013), as well as an illustrated novel for younger readers, *Ghost Doll and Jasper* (Skyhorse, 2012). Currently she works as a graphic designer as well as running her own toy-making business, Granny Fi's Toy Cupboard.

*Two Selkie Stories from Scotland* is her first picture book.

Fiona says:

*My father's family came out from Scotland in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century as free settlers. Even though that was over 150 years ago the family still think of themselves as fierce, freedom fighting Highlanders.*

*I have always loved fairy and folk tales, particularly Celtic ones and was very keen to illustrate Kate's wonderful re-telling.*

*When I discovered the story behind Kate's family and the link with the Selkie bride I decided to do a bit more digging and found that the McPhee clan and the McDonalds were connected. Unfortunately it was not always in friendly circumstances. There times when the clans united against a common foe and then there were other times when each tried to take over the other's lands. At one point it seems a McPhee became an estate manager to one of the McDonalds but he mismanaged the estate so badly he was subsequently executed for it.*

*The history of the Highlands is complicated but fascinating and when it gets involved with the Seelie court (good fairies) and the Unseelie court (bad fairies), there is never time for boredom.*

*I love illustrated books, particularly those from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: Arthur Rackham, Edmund Dulac and E.H. Shepard. I also enjoy illustrations from the 1950s and 60s. With the Selkie Stories I wanted to evoke the cold, bleak but beautiful northern Scottish islands while maintaining a realistic style with detail and movement in the watercolour paintings and pen-and-ink drawings.*

### **Some suggested themes and questions for further discussion and exploration in class:**

Atmosphere: Selkie stories are often sad. Why do you think that might be?

Setting: The sea is a very popular setting for stories of mythical creatures such as selkies, mermaids, and more. Explore the reasons for this popularity.

Shape-shifters: Shape-shifters (sometimes known as were-beasts, as 'were' comes from an ancient Germanic word meaning 'man') are often found in traditional tales as well as in modern fantasy literature. What other kinds of shapeshifters can you think of? Are they generally positive, or negative?

Language: Kate Forsyth uses particular words and phrases to recreate the Scottish feel of the stories. Can you find examples of these?

Reading the pictures: Sometimes, as with the double-spread illustration of the wounded seal king, it is the pictures only and not words that tell the story. Can you find other instances in the book when this happens?

Illustrative styles: Have a look at the work of the classic artists whom Fiona McDonald mentions. Do you think her style has been inspired by them?

### **Some ideas for creative activities:**

A class play based on one of the stories.

Look at a map of the places where selkies are found, and locate the Black Isle on it, where Kate Forsyth's ancestor was born. Draw your own map of an area where you might come across a selkie.

The crests of the McDonald and Mc Phee clans can be found in the book between the two stories. Draw a crest for the seal hunter's family in *In the Seal Kingdom*.

Write your own selkie story.

Write a song that could be sung at a selkie feast.

## **Some suggestions for further reading:**

### **Fiction:**

*The Secret of Ron Mor Skerry*, by Rosalie K.Fry (also published as *The Secret of Roan Inish*): This novel for children aged 8-12, which delves into the mysterious world of the selkies through a young girl's search for her little brother, was the inspiration for the famous film, *The Secret of Roan Inish*.

*Thomas Trew and the Selkie's Curse*, by Sophie Masson: Part of the Thomas Trew series, in which a young boy journeys to magical lands, this novel for 7-11 year olds is set in the underwater world of the selkies.

*Seaward*, by Susan Cooper: This novel for 9-13 year olds is a beautiful love story and powerful fantasy based on selkie legends.

*Troll Mill*, by Katherine Langrish: Second in this author's West of the Moon trilogy, this novel for 9-13 year olds explores selkie tales in an engrossing and believable way.

*The Folk Keeper*, by Franny Billingsley: A novel with an intriguingly creepy take on the selkies, this is for readers aged 9 and over.

*Sea Hearts* by Margo Lanagan(YA/adults): This multi-award winning novel profiles not only the selkies but also the whole community of Rollrock Island where humans and selkies mix.

### **Non fiction(adult reading):**

*The People of the Sea*, by David Thomson:

This is the most complete book ever written on the selkie legend. David Thomson's travels in the Scottish Hebrides and the west coast of Ireland, from childhood to adulthood, made him fascinated with the selkie legends, and the people who told them. The people he met told of men rescued by seals in stormy seas, of babies suckled by seal-mothers, and of men who took selkie women for wives - stories centuries old, handed down to them by their ancestors. Wonderful stories, and an amazing section too on the songs seals sing, complete with music notation!

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