

BEVERLEY McWILLIAMS

# spies in the sky

TEACHERS' NOTES



## About the book

*Sometimes we must do things we don't want to, even if they frighten us.*

Royal Blue is a royal racing pigeon from a long line of champions. Every morning he wakes in his comfortable loft at Sandringham House, eats the very best seeds and spends the day training with his best friend to be the fastest and strongest pigeon in Britain.

But there's a war going on, and things are changing. Then one day, the King himself comes to the loft and chooses Blue for a very special assignment.

As Blue goes on missions, helping with rescues, carrying secret messages and facing dangers he never could have imagined, one thing will become clear: never underestimate a pigeon.

**Recommended for readers 7–12 years.**

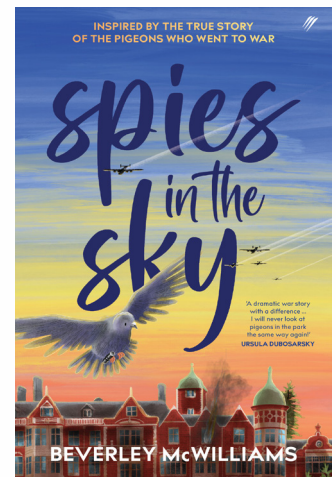
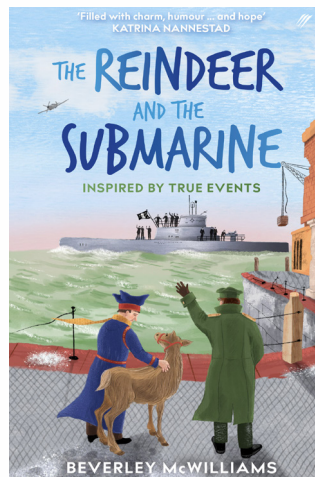
## About the author

Beverley McWilliams loves sharing history with young children. In August 2019, she published her debut picture book, *Born to Fly*, which tells the story of South Australian aviator Captain Harry Butler and received a notable commendation from the CBCA.

Beverley's writing has been published online and in magazines, and she is a regular contributor to *The School Magazine*, Australia's longest-running literary publication for children.

Beverley is the event coordinator for the South Australian chapter of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) and a member of the Australian Society of Authors. She lives by the beach in beautiful South Australia with her family and menagerie of pets (including a flock of pigeons), who provide endless inspiration. She is the author of two middle-grade novels, *The Reindeer and the Submarine* (2022) and *Spies in the Sky* (2023).

[www.beverleymcwilliams.com](http://www.beverleymcwilliams.com)



## Genre: Historical fiction

Historical fiction stories are set in real places during a particular period, but characters and events may be fictionalised. Historical fiction combines elements of both non-fiction and fiction. *Spies in the Sky* is inspired by the true story of the pigeons who served in World War Two and is based on events which occurred between 1940–1945.

### Before reading

Discuss as a class what you know about World War Two. For example, why did the war begin? How long did the war last? What countries were at war? What impact did the war have on people living in those countries? How did animals play a role in war?

### Themes

- Courage/Facing fears
- Teamwork
- Hope/Positivity
- Friendship

### Courage/Facing fears

*Sometimes we must do things we don't want to even if they frighten us. (p. 46)*

#### Discuss

- At the beginning of the story, we learn that Blue is afraid to fly over water. How does Blue's attitude change over the course of the book and what triggers this change?
- There are many ways we can show courage, for example, standing up to a bully, admitting when we have made a mistake or trying something we have never done before. Think of a time of when you acted with courage. How did you feel?
- There are many examples of bravery in this book. Choose one example. Discuss how that character showed courage.

#### Activity

- Everyone has worries and fears. Being brave does not mean being unafraid but is about finding the courage to deal with these fears.

- Write down some examples of things that worry you. For each example, note some courageous thoughts or actions that could help you face your fear.

### Teamwork

*You are part of a crew now. We're equals. We work together in everyone's best interest. You can't just think of yourself anymore. (p. 85)*

Teamwork is about working together to achieve your goal. By working as a team, we may achieve something we couldn't do alone, or we may reach our goal more quickly.

#### Discuss

- What skills do you think are most important in making a team successful?
- Both people and animals can work together as teams. Think of some examples and discuss why teamwork is important in these situations.
- What teams are you part of? How do you contribute to these teams and what do others contribute?

#### Activity

- Work in small groups. One member of the group is blindfolded. The rest of the group must guide them across the classroom using verbal commands. If they bump into any obstacles, they must start again.
- As a class, organise yourselves into a line according to your birthdate.

### Hope/Positivity

*Miracles only happen if you believe that they will. (p. 129)*

#### Discuss

Having a positive attitude can help us see the positives and feel happier in challenging situations.

- Think of examples in the story where the characters show a positive attitude in a difficult situation.
- A famous quote by Henry Ford states: 'Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right.' What does this quote mean? Do you believe this is the case?

## Activity

- We are all special, but sometimes we forget to appreciate ourselves and instead focus on things we don't like or can't do. Write down five positive statements about yourself (think about your talents, your achievements and your best qualities).
- Now work with a friend. Write down five positive statements about your friend and share these with them.

## Friendship

*We perched together on the cathedral that had protected us through the raid. Tough old Commando, baby Billy, Miracle Mary and me. Our feathered crew back together again. (p. 195)*

### Discuss

- What makes a good friend?
- How are you and your friends similar? How are you different?
- At the beginning of the book, Blue is focussed on his own achievements. How does this affect his friendship with Khan? Do you think Khan is a good friend to Blue? Why?
- Sometimes friendships can change. At first, Commando and Blue don't get on, but they are good friends by the end of the book. Why do you think their friendship develops?

### Activity

- Using the template attached, decorate the paper people to look like you and your friend. On the back of the picture, write down what makes them a good friend to you.

## English

### Narrative voice

*A bullet skimmed my head, so close I heard the whistle in my ears and felt the heat singe my feathers. But I kept on flying. I blocked my ears to the noise and the commotion. I just concentrated on each beat of my wings that took me one flap further from the snipers and brought me one flap closer to home. (p. 172)*

*Spies in the Sky* is written in first-person narrative and told from the point of view of Royal Blue, a pigeon.

### Discuss

- What distinguishes first-person, second-person and third-person narrative?
- Why might writers choose to use first-person narrative instead of third person?
- How can a different character's perspective alter the way events are described in a story?

### Activity

- Visit your school library. Working in small groups, select ten books. Record the title of each book and whether it is written in first, second or third person. Which narrative was most common in the books you selected? Come together as a class to discuss results.
- Select a scene from the book which has multiple characters. Rewrite the scene from another character's point of view.

## Literary Techniques

Literary techniques include figurative language (simile, metaphor, alliteration, onomatopoeia, personification) and imagery (the use of words to create vivid pictures through appealing to our senses). Appropriate use of literary techniques can make writing more powerful and effective.

### Discuss

- Discuss the different literary techniques noted above and what they mean.
- How do literary techniques affect the way a reader responds to a text?

### Activity

- Identify literary techniques used in *Spies in the Sky* and complete the below table. An example of each has been given.
- Look at extracts from a selection of different texts (fiction, non-fiction and poetry). Do certain texts utilise more literary techniques? If so, why do you think that is the case?

Simile/ Metaphor	'The plane plunged, plummeting like a seagull diving for fish.' (p. 111)
Alliteration	'majestic marigold', 'syrupy-scented' (p. 31)
Onomatopoeia	'click, click, click of the turning pedals and the clunk, clunk, clunk of the chain.' (p. 160)
Personification	'rain drummed on the roof', 'thunder growled' (p. 45)
Imagery	'I soared above the ivy-clad cottages ... A whistle screeched. An engine huffed. Plumes of billowing smoke puffed through the air.' (p. 17)

## Poetry

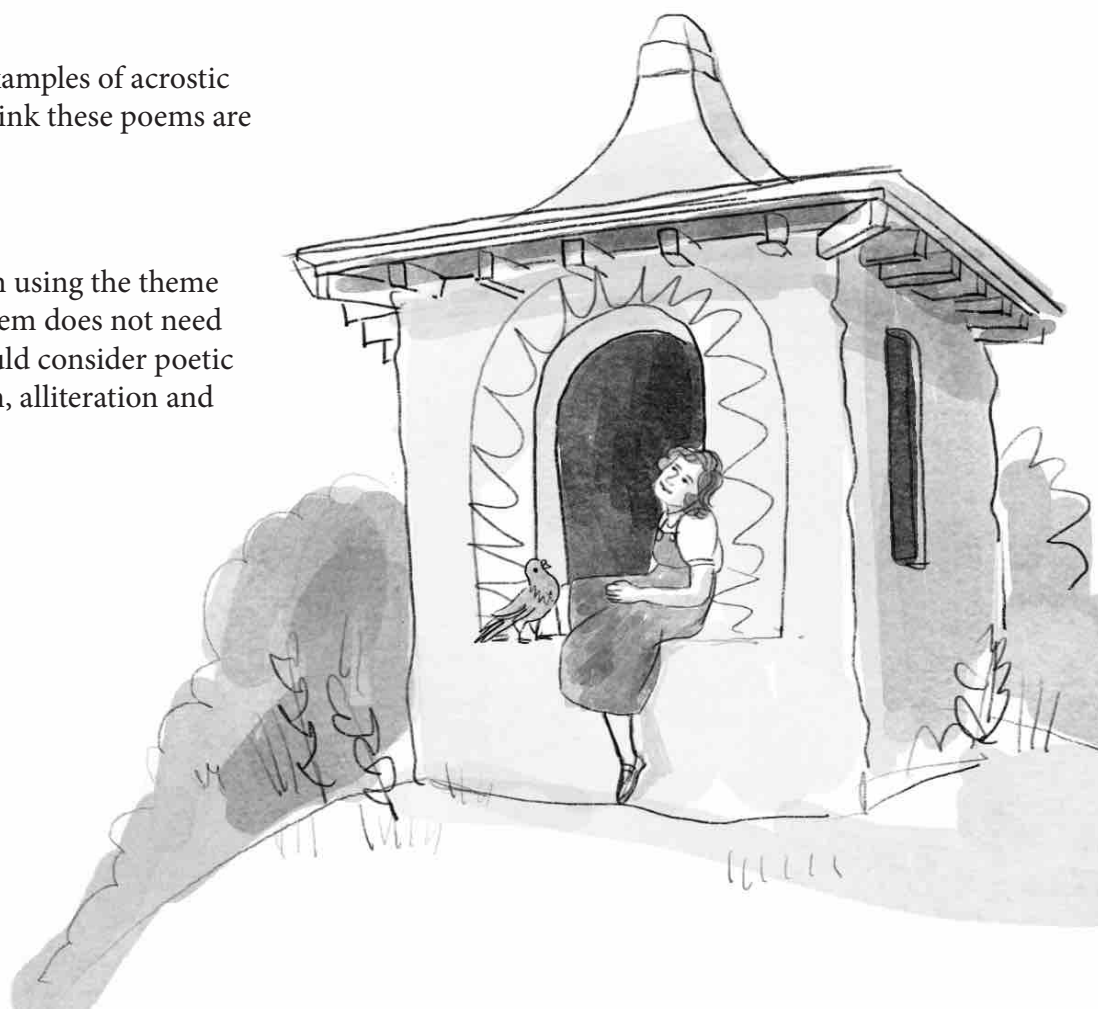
An acrostic poem is a poem where the first letter of each line spells out a word when read vertically. This word relates to the theme of the poem.

### Discuss

- Have a look at some examples of acrostic poetry. Why do you think these poems are effective?

### Activity

- Write an acrostic poem using the theme word 'Pigeon.' Your poem does not need to rhyme, but you should consider poetic devices such as rhythm, alliteration and simile.



# Humanities and Social Science (HASS)

## History

### World War II

#### Discuss

- What have you learned about World War Two and its time period from reading *Spies in the Sky*? Was there anything that surprised you?

#### Activity

Conduct further research into one of the following topics (some possible research questions have been suggested).

- **The Blitz:** *The Luftwaffe wasn't just targeting ports and bases, it was dropping bombs on towns and cities, sweeping across the skyline, bringing a reign of terror Jack called The Blitz. (p. 128)*

Where did the word Blitz come from? What was life like for people during the Blitz and how did they protect themselves and their families?

- **Dig for Victory:** *The borders of majestic marigolds and syrupy-scented lilacs were gone. The beds of rambling rose bushes and fragrant hyacinths had turned into a pile of mud. (p. 31)*

Why was the Dig for Victory campaign so important? When was it implemented in Australia? What impact did the campaign have on both Britain and Australia?

- **Women in World War Two:** *There were women too – WAAFs ... some of them drove trucks about the base; others worked in a small wooden hut called the operations room. (p. 96)*

Consider the different roles women played in the war. Why was their contribution so vital to the war effort? How do you think views on women workers changed during/ after World War Two?



### Animals in war

*When a crew is stuck in a dinghy surrounded by miles of freezing ocean, us pigeons might be the only hope of rescue. (p. 75)*

Many animals served in World War One and Two, including horses, dogs and pigeons. Animal mascots also provided support and comfort to many troops who were far from home.

In 1943, the Dickin Medal was established to recognise the bravery and devotion of these animals. There are also memorials which commemorate the role animals have played in war, including The Animals in War Memorial, London. Australia recognises February 24 as a National Day for War Animals, and people are encouraged to wear purple poppies as a mark of respect.

#### Discuss

- As a class, discuss the contributions animals have made in war. In particular, what have you learned about the role pigeons played in World War Two from reading this book?
- Consider the importance of war memorials/ medals and why we should remember what happened in wars.

## Activity

- Read, *The Real Pigeons in World War II*, (p. 215–222). Research another pigeon who received the Dickin Medal (see <https://www.pdsa.org.uk/what-we-do/animal-awards-programme/pdsa-dickin-medal>). Provide a summary of the bird's service, including a picture if possible.
- Read the 'Feathered Heroes' and 'Unlikely Heroes' articles written by the author that discuss the roles different animals have played in war (see <https://www.beverleymcwilliams.com/children-s-non-fiction>). Was there anything in these articles that surprised you?
- Choose an animal who served in the war and design your own war memorial or medal for them.

## Science

### Blackout

*The blackout blinds were drawn in the barracks, the runway flames extinguished. (p. 98)*

During the war, everyone had to cover their windows and doors at night to prevent any light which might assist enemy bombing raids. Streetlights were also switched off and vehicle headlights dimmed.

### Discuss

- What impact do you think the blackout had on people's lives and what dangers might result from blackout restrictions?

### Activity

- Investigate the best way to create a blackout using different materials.
- Place a torch inside a box. Cover the box in various materials (e.g. newspaper, card, cloth, different coloured paper). Do any of these materials stop light from getting through? Which materials are most effective? Why do you think this is the case?

## Flight

*I concentrated all my energy, straining my muscles and pounding my wings ... I dipped my head and tightened my tail feathers, steering straight through the dangling bobs. (p. 2)*

### Discuss

- What are the four forces which affect flight?
- Birds fly at differing speeds, heights and distances. Some birds can't fly at all. Discuss the features which enable a bird to fly.
- How does the shape and size of a bird's wing determine its flight?

### Activity

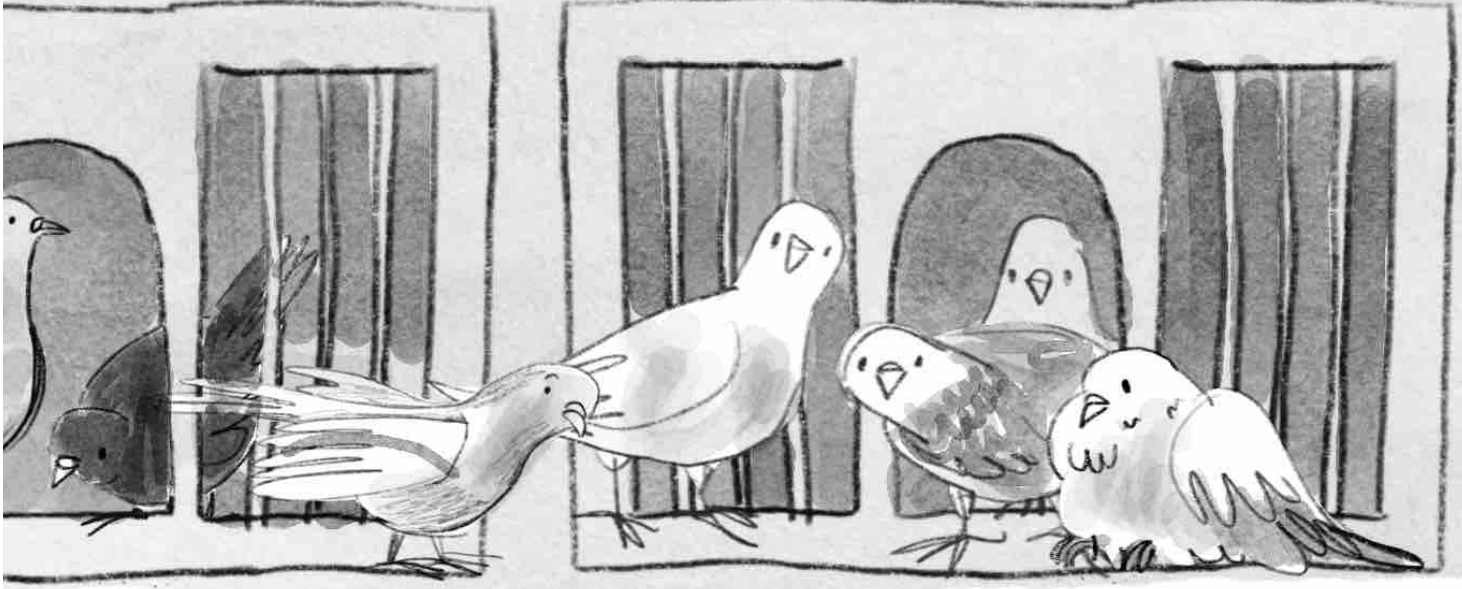
- Using the method of making a paper aeroplane, design a paper bird. Test your bird's flight. Can you modify your design to improve its flight?
- As a class, race your modified birds. Which designs worked most effectively and why?

## Design and Technology

### Digital technology

*A strange stillness followed. Most of the people were gone. They'd slipped into half-submerged shelters in their gardens or ducked through the doors of large concrete buildings that scattered the city. (p. 188)*

Air raid shelters were used to protect people during enemy air attacks. Underground stations, tunnels and cellars were often used as air raid shelters. In 1940, the British government began building communal shelters in towns and cities. Many homes also had their own shelter. Anderson shelters were constructed in gardens. These were made of corrugated iron and partly buried in soil. Morrison shelters were used indoors. They looked like large tables and had a steel top and wire mesh sides.



### Discuss

- Have a look at the different shelters online. Look at the materials used, as well as at the shapes and designs? How effective do you think these shelters would be in protecting people during air raids? As well as been able to withstand attacks, what other factors are important to consider when designing a shelter?

### Activity

- Design your own air raid shelter.
- Consider: what materials you might use (strength, water resistance), size (how many people could use the shelter), shape and structure, and what you might have inside your shelter.

## The Arts

### Visual art

*Haven't you seen the posters ... Doctor Carrot, the children's best friend? Potato Pete, who makes good soup? (p. 34)*

The 'Dig for Victory' campaign encouraged the people to help the war effort by growing their own food. The purpose was to keep people fed and healthy in times of food shortages and to boost morale.

### Discuss

- Have a look at the different Dig for Victory posters you can find online. Discuss what

makes these posters effective (consider their use of colour, slogans and images).

- Can you find the 'Doctor Carrot' and 'Potato Pete' posters mentioned in the story?

### Activity

- Design your own Dig for Victory poster.

*As she bobbed, her feathers shimmered violet, plum and peacock green, like the inside of a beautiful seashell (p. 58)*

Pigeons come in various shades of black, white, red (brown) and blue (grey) with many different patterns and markings. The shimmering colours that can be seen, especially around the neck, are a result of the structure of their feathers and a reflection of light.

### Discuss

- Before reading the story, how would you describe the appearance of a pigeon? Has your opinion changed?

### Activity

- Using template 2, make an origami pigeon.
- Using template 3, create and colour a pigeon. You may choose a pigeon from the story and use the descriptions in the book to help you, or design and colour your own.



## Music

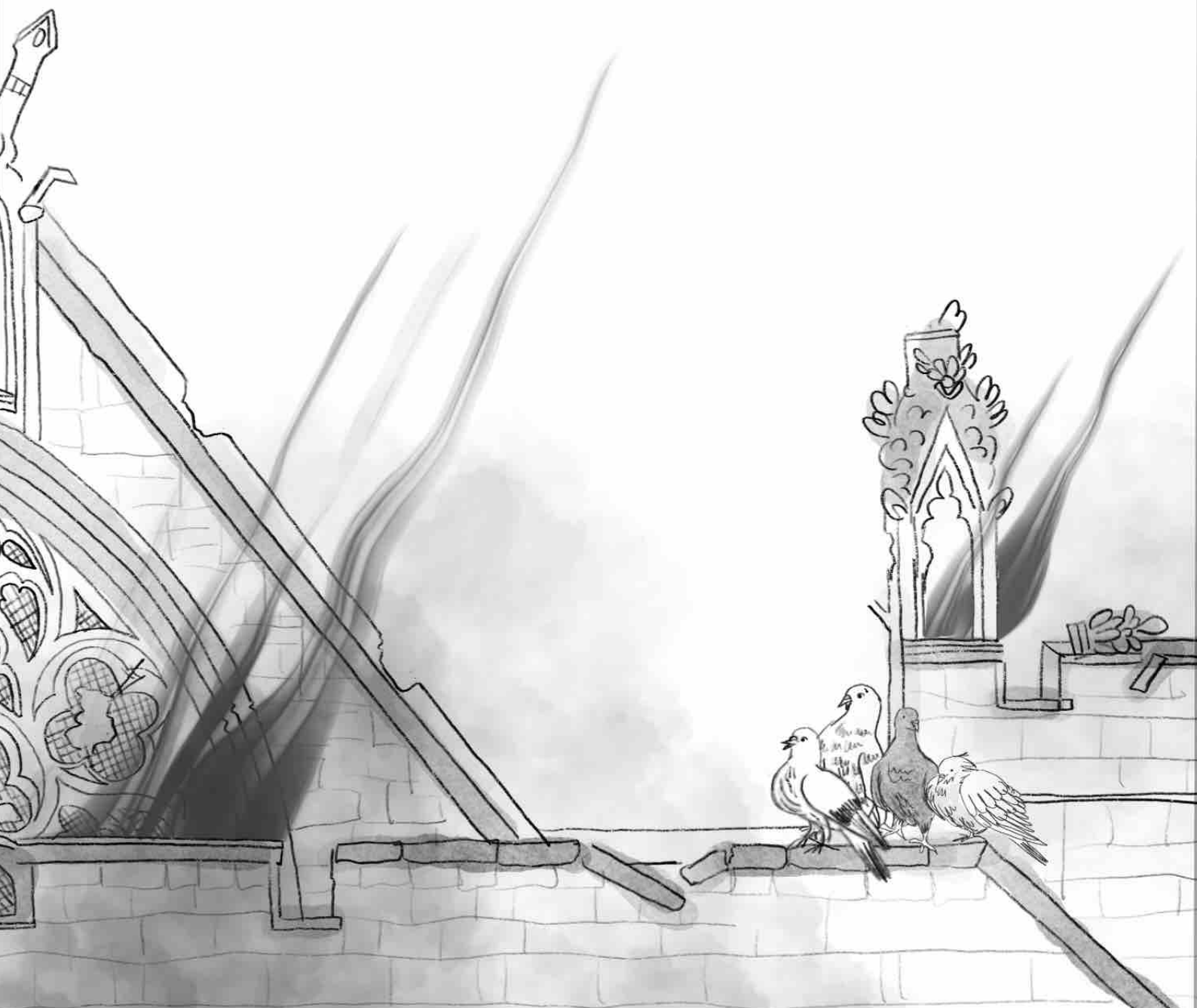
Music played an important role in World War Two, helping boost morale and keep people's spirits high. Unlike during World War One, most people now had access to music in their homes through radio and record players. Jazz and swing were popular forms of music during this era, and popular artists include Vera Lynn, George Formby and Glenn Miller.

## Discuss

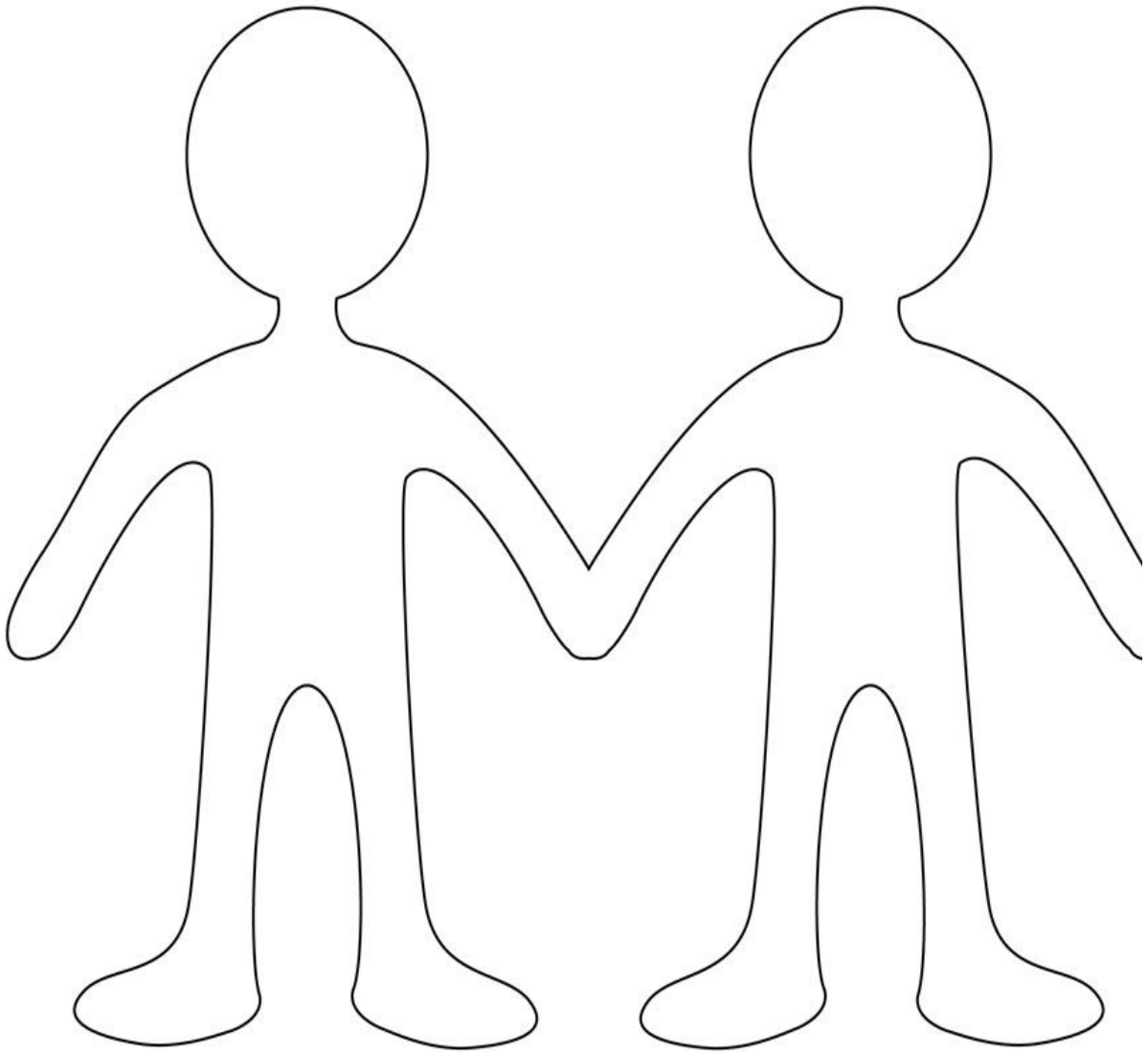
- How does music impact our mood and emotions?
- As well as boosting mood and morale, what other roles do you think music played in people's lives during World War Two?

## Activity

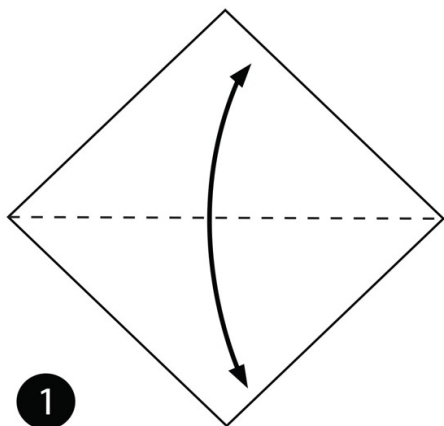
- Listen to these popular wartime songs:
  - 'Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy'
  - 'We'll Meet Again'
  - 'We're Going to Hang out the Washing on the Siegfried Line'
  - 'The White Cliffs of Dover'
- How do these songs make you feel? Why do you think they were popular in wartime?



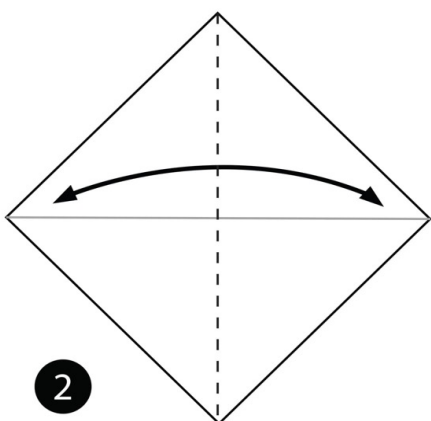
# TEMPLATE 1 – FRIENDSHIP



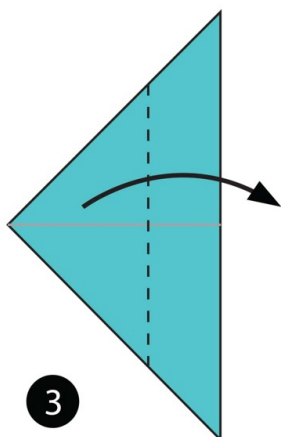
## TEMPLATE 2 – ORIGAMI PIGEON



Fold the paper in half, then unfold it

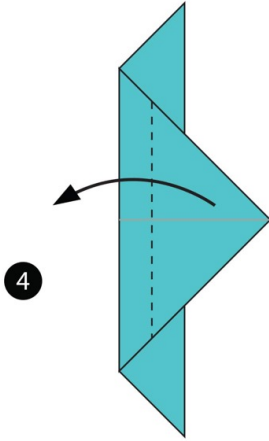


Fold the paper in half the other way (leave folded)

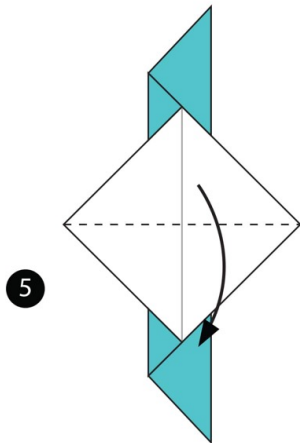


Fold the paper to the right along the dotted line

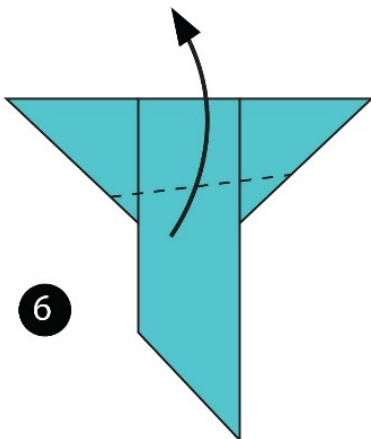
# TEMPLATE 2 – ORIGAMI PIGEON



Fold the top layer of the paper to the left along the dotted line

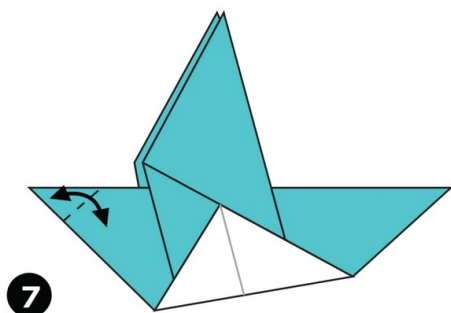


Fold the model in half down along the dotted line

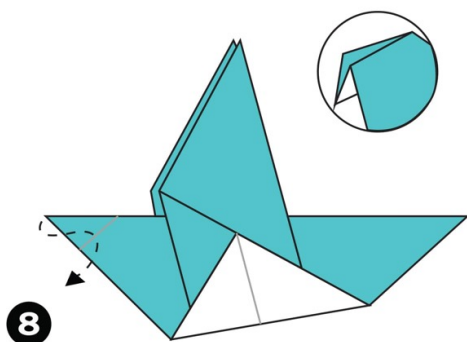


Fold the top flap of paper up along the dotted line.  
Repeat on other side.

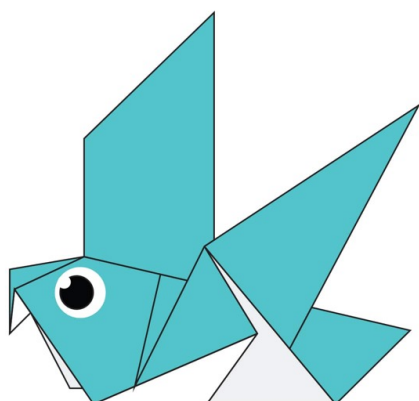
## TEMPLATE 2 – ORIGAMI PIGEON



Fold the paper along the dotted line. Unfold it

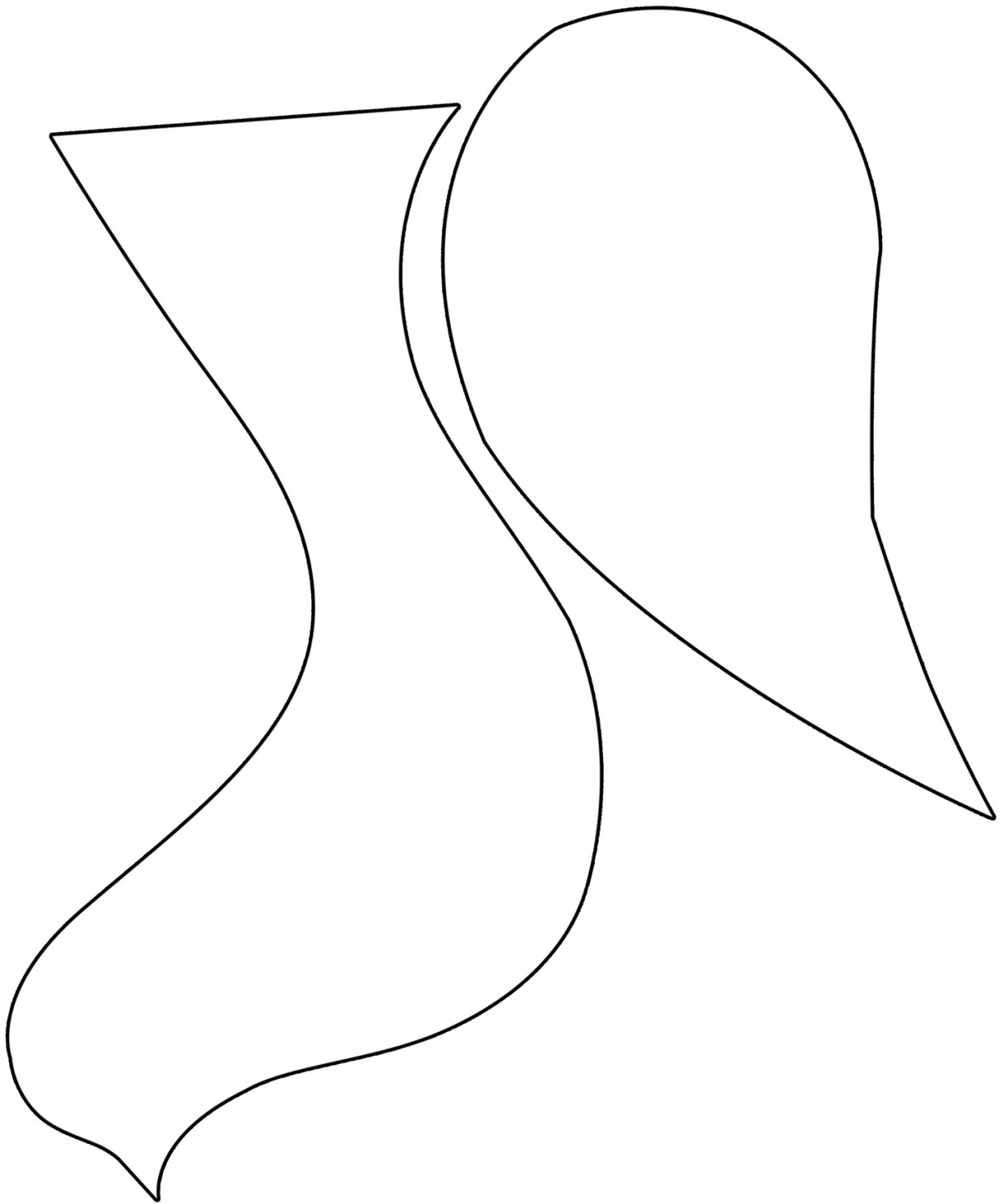


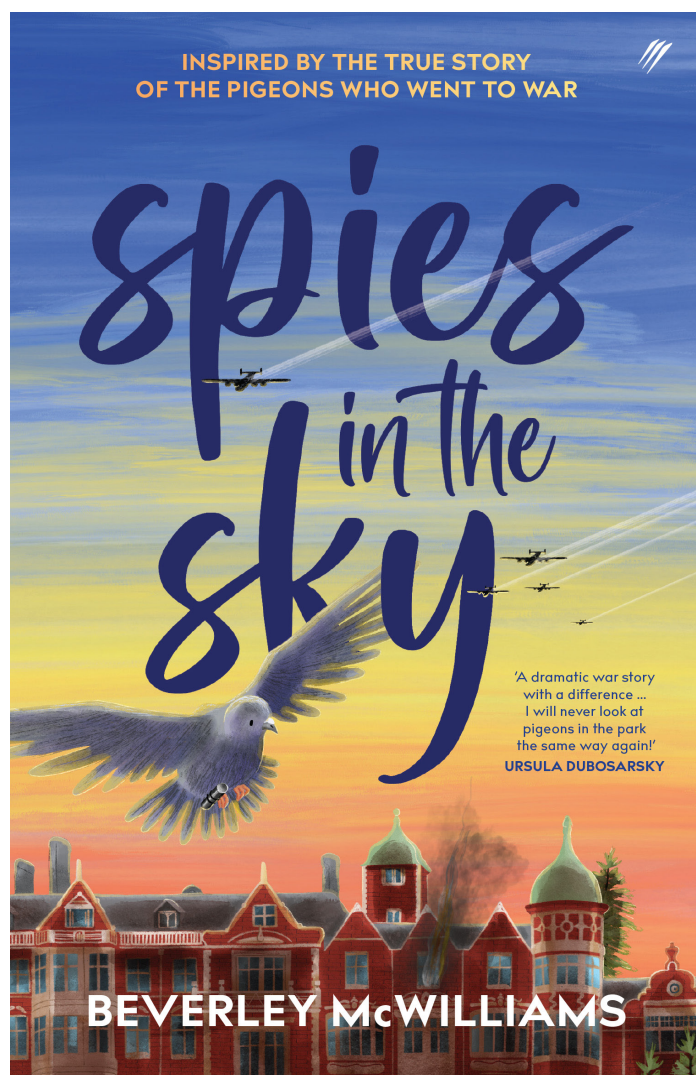
Inside reverse fold using crease from previous step



Decorate your pigeon

# TEMPLATE 3 – COLOUR A PIGEON





**PANTERA**  
PRESS

SPARKING  
IMAGINATION,  
CONVERSATION  
& CHANGE