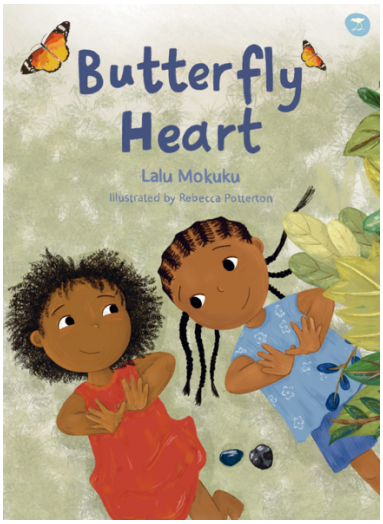


Butterfly Heart

Author: Lalu Mokuku
Illustrator: Rebecca Potterton
Publisher: Jacana Children's Books

The Otto Foundation Children's Book Award
Picture Book Shortlist 2026

Butterfly Heart follows the close friendship between two young girls. Neo and Mosa are best friends who share everything and have heart-shaped stones to remind them of their special connection. But when Mosa's heart begins to slow, Neo must face the pain of watching her best friend struggle with an illness. As Mosa's heart grows weaker, Neo learns about the fragility of life, the power of memories and the comfort of knowing that love never truly stops.

Through sweet, simple moment of childhood joy, *Butterfly Heart* gently explores themes of friendship, loss and healing. Neo holds onto her stone heart that reminds her the Mosa's spirit will always be with her.

A tender, lyrical story for young children learning to navigate grief through the enduring power of friendship.

- Jacana Children's Books

Teaching notes

These notes have been written by the Otto Foundation to provide teachers and caregivers with ideas to develop reading comprehension and support literacy skills. They encourage deep reading of the text and illustrations, which may happen over a series of reading sessions, not just one sitting.

These notes have been written with Grade R, 1, 2 and 3 readers in mind, but teachers and caregivers will need to adapt them to the age and experience of their readers.

Themes

- Friendship
- Grief
- Illness
- Acceptance
- Love
- Family

Before reading the story

- Open up the discussion by allowing the children to share their initial responses to the front cover of the book. Encourage them to discuss what they see and their responses to it.
  - *What do you notice about the cover illustration?*
  - *What does the cover illustration make you think about?*
  - *Are the girls on the cover sisters, cousins, friends or strangers? Why do you think this?*
  - *What animal are the girls on the cover creating with their hands?*
  - *How does the cover illustration make you feel?*
  - *What do you like most about the cover illustration?*

- Explain that the title of the book is **Butterfly Heart**. Ask the children to share their thoughts about the title.
  - *What do you think* **Butterfly Heart** *means?*
  - *Make a* **butterfly** *with your hands. Make a* **heart** *with your hands.*
  - *What do you think the girls on the front cover might be saying to one another?*
  - *What do you think might happen in this story?*

- Read the back cover blurb aloud. Explore how the children may change their ideas about the story now that they have more information.
  - *Look at the front cover again. Who do you think* **Mosa** *is and who do you think* **Neo** *is? Why do you think this?*
  - *What is* **kgati***?* (a traditional South African rope jumping game)
  - *What kinds of different* **illnesses** *can you name?*
  - *Have you ever experienced someone you cared about struggled with a serious illness? What was that experience like? Who did you turn to for comfort?*

Reading aloud discussion points

- On page 1 we meet Mosa and Neo.
  - *Look at the illustration on page 1. Do you recognise the two girls from the cover of the book? What are their names?*
  - **Mosa** *and* **Neo** *are* **best friends***. What is a* **best friend***? Is it a good thing to have a* **best friend***? Why or why not?*
  - **Mosa** *and* **Neo** *live a* **stone's throw away** *from each other. What does it mean to live a* **stone's throw away** *from someone? Who do you live a* **stone's throw away** *from?*
  - *What game did* **Mosa** *and* **Neo** *play when they met with their friends? What do you like to play when you meet with your friends?*

- On pages 2–5 Mosa and Neo skip with their friends.
  - *Who is watching the children play from the window?*
  - *How many jumps did Neo and Mosa's friend do over the skipping rope? How many jumps do you think you could do over a skipping rope?*
  - *The children sang as they skipped. What song do you think they sang?*
  - *Look carefully at the illustration on page 3. Can you spot the butterfly?*
  - *The children sing* **Lub-Dub Lub-Dub Lub-Dub** *as they skip.* Ask the children to stamp rhythmically to **Lub-Dub Lub-Dub Lub-Dub** going faster and faster, following your lead.
  - *Look at the illustration of Mosa on page 5. How do you think Mosa feels after skipping so fast? Why do you think this? What do you think Neo is saying to her?*

- *Neo says her heart is* **thumping**. *Put your hand on your heart and feel it* **thumping**.
- *What does Neo say her heart is pumping?*
- *What does Mosa tell Neo about their hearts?*

- On pages 6–7 Mosa and Neo make a special promise to one another.
  - *Look at the illustrations on page 6–7. What are Mosa and Neo doing?*
  - *What two objects do Mosa and Neo find to hold close to their hearts? Why do you think these stones are special to them?*
  - Ask the children to hold out their hands and show you their thumb, index finger, middle finger, ring finger and pinkie fingers.
  - *What is a* **pinkie promise***? If you were making a* **pinkie promise** *with a friend what would it be?*
  - *Can you spot the butterfly on pages 6–7?*

- On pages 8–9 Mosa discusses her stone heart with her mother.
  - *What is another word for* **supper***?* (dinner) *What do you like to eat for* **supper***?*
  - *What does Mosa drop while eating her meal?*
  - *What does Mosa's* **Mama** *describe her* **stone heart** *as?*
  - *How does Mosa explain the importance of her* **stone heart** *to her* **Mama***?*
  - *Mama describes Mosa's heart as her* **body's engine**. *Is this a good description of a heart? Why or why not?*

- On pages 10–11 Neo discusses her stone heart with her grandmother.
  - *What does* **Nkgono** *mean?* (Grandmother in Sesotho and Setswana)
  - *Look at the illustration on page 11. How does* **Nkgono** *help Neo at bathtime? Who helps you when you wash and get ready for bed at night?*
  - *What does Neo show her* **Nkgono***?*
  - *How does Neo explain the importance of her* **stone heart** *to* **Nkgono***?*
  - **Nkgono** *says:* **"A strong friendship is precious"**. *Do you agree with her? Why or why not?*

- On pages 12–13 Neo and Mosa go skipping with the friends again.
  - Ask the children to stamp rhythmically to **Lub-Dub Lub-Dub Lub-Dub** of the skipping song again, following your lead.
  - *Neo and Mosa do not agree on the new skipping song. What does Neo think it should be? What does Mosa think it should be?*
  - *Do you think the skipping song should be* **Da-Da Dhamma** *or* **Da-Da Dhanna***? Why do you think this?*
  - Ask the children to stamp rhythmically to **Da-Da Dhamma** and **Da-Da Dhanna,** following your lead.
  - *Neo and Mosa laugh about not being able to agree on the skipping song. What do you think this says about their friendship?*
  - *Can you spot the butterfly on pages 12–13?*

- On pages 14–17 Mosa starts to feel sick.
  - *What is Mosa holding when Neo comes to visit her?*
  - *Mosa wants to* **run and skip** *with Neo, but she can't. Why can't Mosa* **run and skip***?*
  - *What does Neo hear when she puts her hand on Mosa's heart?*

- Ask the children to stamp rhythmically to **Lub-D…ub Lub-D…ub Lub-D…ub** following your lead.
- *Does* **Lub-D…ub Lub-D…ub Lub-D…ub** *sound like the healthy beating of a heart? Why or why not?*
- *Why do you think Mosa has to sit down while the other children are skipping?*
- *What does Neo do with Mosa instead of skipping?*
- *Mosa describes her heart as* **fluttering***. What does* **fluttering** *mean?*
- Ask the children to make a butterfly with their hands to illustrate **fluttering**.
- *Why does Mosa describe her heart as a* **butterfly***?*
- *How many butterflies can you spot on pages 16–17?*

- On pages 18–19 Mosa is sick and cannot play with Neo anymore.
  - *Look at the illustration on page 18. How do you think Mosa is feeling? Why do you think that? What do you think Mama is saying to Mosa?*
  - *Neo misses Mosa and Nkgono says she must be* **patient***. What does it mean to be* **patient***? When have you had to be* **patient** *for something?*
  - *What did Neo draw a picture of?*
  - *Look carefully at the illustration on page 19. What month does the calendar show? What month are we in now? What will next month be? What was last month? What month is your birthday?*

- On pages 20–21 Neo visits Mosa.
  - *What does Mama tell Neo when she tries to visit Mosa at home?*
  - *Why does Neo say* ***"Maybe her engine needs a service"*** *to Mama?*
  - *Look at the illustration of Mosa in the hospital on page 21. How can you tell Mosa is in the hospital? What two special objects does Mosa have with her?*

- On pages 22–23 Neo is missing her friend, Mosa.
  - *Describe what is happening in the illustrations on page 22.*
  - *Why does Neo not want to play kgati anymore?*
  - *What does Neo do instead of playing kgati?*
  - *Do you think Neo's* **stone heart** *is bringing her comfort while she misses Mosa? Why do you think that?*
  - *What does Nkgono encourage Neo to do?*
  - Ask the children to stamp rhythmically to Mosa's skipping song **Da-Da Dhanna, Da-Da Dhanna** following your lead.
  - *What animal does Neo think of as she sings Mosa's skipping song?*
  - *Why does Neo feel* **half happy, half sad** *when she thinks of butterflies? Do you ever feel* **half happy, half sad***? What makes you feel this way?*
  - *How many butterflies can you spot on page 23?*

- On pages 24–25 Neo learns that she won't see Mosa again.
  - *Why is Mosa never coming home again?*
  - *How does Mama explain to Neo and Nkgono what has happened to Mosa?*
  - *What message did Mosa ask Mama to tell Neo?*
  - *What does it mean if someone has* **passed away***?* (they have died) *Can you still be friends with someone who has* **passed away***? Why or why not?*
  - *Neo starts to* **sob** *at the sad news. What does it mean to* **sob***? What does Mama give to Neo when she starts to* **sob***?*

- *How does Neo feel when she holds Mosa's* **stone heart***? Why do you think that?*
- *If you were Neo, what would you do with Mosa's* **stone heart***?*

- On pages 26–29, Neo and her friends are all missing Mosa.
  - *Look at the illustration of Mosa's friends on page 26. How are they feeling? Why do you think they feel this way?*
  - *What happens to Neo when she holds the two* **stone hearts***?*
  - *What is your favourite memory of Mosa from this story?*
  - *What does Neo think of when she sees the butterflies?*
  - *Do you think it is a good thing for Neo to play with the other children again? Why or why not?*
  - *What will Neo always think of when she hears the skipping song?* (best friends forever)
  - *How many butterflies can you spot on pages 28–29?*

Topics for discussion after reading the story

- Ask the children:
  - *What did you like most about this story?*
  - *What is something you have learnt from reading this story?*
  - *If you were writing this story, what would happen to Neo next?*
  - *Who do you think should read this story next and why would you recommend it to them?*

Activity ideas for after reading the story

- Ask the children if they have ever had someone important to them die or move away. Be mindful that this is a sensitive question. Ask them to draw a picture of the person they miss and to share their favourite memory of that person.

- Ask the children if they have ever had someone important to them die or move away. Be mindful that this is a sensitive question. Create a memory box with the children. Ask the children to each choose an object to contribute to the memory box that reminds them of the person they miss.

- Ask the children who they can talk to if they are feeling sad or missing someone who has died or moved away. Brainstorm a list of trusted and supportive adults who the children feel they can speak to if they need to.

- If you feel it is appropriate to explore more stories about grief with the children, these are some recommended titles:
  - *The Memory Box* by Joanna Rowland
  - *The Sad Book* by Michael Rosen
  - *The Memory Tree* by Britta Teckentrup
  - *The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst
  - *We Need to Talk About Death* by Sarah Chavez

Please see the following pages for Grade specific CAPS aligned skills covered in these teaching notes.

CAPS skills covered in teaching notes

Listening and speaking

Grade R

- Listen to stories
- Listen and respond to simple questions
- Listen without interrupting
- Talk about pictures
- Participate in discussion and asks questions
- Ask questions
- Give explanations

Reading

Grade R

- Use pictures to predict what a story is about
- Predict what will happen in a story through pictures
- Recognise and point out common objects in pictures
- Interpret pictures
- Make up own story by 'reading' pictures
- Pretend to read
- Make links to own experience when reading with teacher
- Discuss and describe characters in a story
- Describe characters in stories and give opinion
- Answer questions based on the story read

Listening and speaking

Grade 1

- Listen to and express feelings about a story
- Listen without interrupting, taking turns to speak and asking questions of clarification
- Respond to pictures
- Listen to stories with interest and enjoyment, drawing on a picture to show understanding
- Listens for the detail in stories
- Talk about personal experiences and feelings
- Answer closed and open-ended questions
- Participate in discussions

Reading

Grade 1

- Develop book handling skills (holding the book and turning pages correctly)
- Uses book cover to predict what a story is about
- Use pictures in the book for understanding
- Make up own story by 'reading' pictures
- Discuss a story identifying main idea and characters
- Ask questions related to a story told and read
- Recognise cause and effect in a story
- Give an opinion on what was read
- Answer open-ended questions based on text read
- Interpret information from pictures

Listening and speaking

Grade 2

- Listen to stories and answer higher-order questions
- Listen to a story with enjoyment and answer questions related to the story
- Listen to stories for a longer period with enjoyment
- Listen without interrupting showing respect for the speaker
- Use ever increasing vocabulary when answering questions
- Understand and use appropriate language in context
- Ask questions and comments on what was heard
- Talk about personal experience
- Express feelings about a story

Reading

Grade 2

- Read books as a class with teacher
- Use the cover of a book to predict what a story is about
- Use pictures in the book for understanding
- Identify key details in what was read, such as main characters and setting
- Express whether a story was liked and justify response
- Express personal response to a text read
- Give opinion on what was read
- Answer open ended questions based on text
- Answer higher order questions based on text read
- Recognise cause and effect in a story
- Describe main ideas in a text
- Identify key details in what was read

- Answer closed and open-ended questions and justify answers
- Participate in discussions, asking and answering questions and suggesting ideas
- Discuss different cultures represented in a story

Listening and speaking

Grade 3

- Listen for main ideas and detail in stories
- Listen to story for cause and effect
- Ask questions for clarification
- Express feelings and opinions about text and gives reasons
- Talk about personal experiences
- Answer open-ended questions and justify answer
- Answer higher order questions based on text
- Participate in discussion
- Engage in conversation as a social skill, accepting and respecting the way others speak
- Listen without interrupting

Reading

Grade 3

- Read books as a class with teacher
- Discuss main idea, characters, plot and 'problem' in a text
- Answer a range of higher order questions based on text
- Express whether a story was liked and justify answer
- Interpret information from pictures
- Use illustrations in text to increase understanding