



## Story Summary

In a wordless graphic picture book, a young boy's struggle with anxiety is represented by swarms of tiny creatures that follow and gnaw away at him. As his schoolwork and social interactions suffer, he feels more alone and out of control. He ultimately begins to overcome his isolation when he opens up to his sister and learns that he is not the only one beset with worries.

Born in Perth, Western Australia, **Mel Tregonning** was a published cartoonist since primary school and began a long-running comic strip in a national magazine at 16. She obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Graphic Design at Curtin University and won the international Illustrators of the Future competition in 2006. She was an in-house illustrator for RIC Publications before taking time to work on her graphic picture book *Small Things*. Sadly, Mel passed away in 2014, leaving an incredible body of work.

## FOUNTAS & PINNELL EDUCATIONAL DESCRIPTION:

Wordless, graphic Picture book, illustrations enhance meaning and tone, Story elements: setting, plot and character development, Comprehension strategies: Changes from beginning to end of the story, sequence of events, tone, imagery, inferencing, cause and effect relationships, author's purpose. Back matter: Afterword, themes: Childhood anxiety, worry, friendship, acceptance

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS:

- Health and Physical Education: Living Skills: Use self-awareness and self-monitoring skills to recognize sources of stress and identify other factors, including acceptance by others, that influence their sense of themselves; encourage respect for and acceptance of differences and inclusion of all people in social activities
- Visual Art: interpret artworks and identify the feelings, issues, themes, and social concerns that they convey; create artworks using a variety of media
- Language: Read a variety of text forms, including graphic texts; Use comprehension strategies: inferring. In this book readers must infer the whole story and the emotions of the characters from the illustrations. Write in a variety of forms; identify other possible points of view

## FURTHER RESOURCES:

### Books

Pair this book with other wordless books:

*Sidewalk Flowers* by JonArno Lawson and Sydney Smith

*The Tea Party in the Woods* by Akiko Miyakoshi

*Woodrow at Sea* by Wallace Edwards  
*The Snowman* by Raymond Briggs

Or books on bullying/exclusion:  
*The Invisible Boy* by Trudy Ludwig

### Online Videos

Emotions: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SJOjpprbfeE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SJOjpprbfeE)

Picture Book Ages 8–12 | ISBN: 9781772780420 | Pages: 40

## THEMES

Bullying, Acceptance, Mental Illness, Anxiety, Art forms, Text Forms

This book could also be used for Professional Development for educators, and to spark a discussion about how educators must be watchful for signs of mental illness and/or anxiety in their students.

## BISAC CODES

JUV039240 JUVENILE FICTION / Social Themes / Depression & Mental Illness

JUV008000 JUVENILE FICTION / Comics & Graphic Novels / General

JUV039050 JUVENILE FICTION / Social Themes / Emotions & Feelings

## FOUNTAS & PINNELL

Guided Reading Level: WB | Interest Level by Grade: 5–up

## Before Reading

If possible, project the book using a document camera. Alternately, use it in small groups (e.g. at a guided reading table) so that students can see the detail in the illustrations. Look at the cover for a couple of minutes.

### Discuss:

How does the character appear to be feeling? What do you think the mood of the book might be?

## During reading

Invite a student to summarize each page aloud in his/her own words. Different students may have different interpretations about what is going on. If you feel that students have not grasped the main point of the page, ask a few specific questions to focus their attention. Otherwise, don't interrupt the flow of the story with discussion questions, at least on the first reading. You can always turn back after the reading and discuss specific sections.

### Here are some places you may wish to focus students' attention:

- p. 4 – Main character (MC) tries to join a social group (maybe he's a "new kid?"), but is not accepted and ends up being embarrassed.
- p. 5 – bullying escalates from ignoring to tripping
- p. 6 – Point to the dark strands behind the feet in frame 2. Say, "I wonder what this is?" but don't take suggestions yet. You just want the students to notice it. Point to the last frame. "Here it is again."
- p. 7 – MC is having difficulty doing his math (a test?). Students may now be able to identify that the "small things" are worries and they are starting to eat away at him.
- p. 13 – Anxiety can have physical manifestations.
- p. 14–15 – MC is having difficulty with his homework, but he lashes out at his sister, who is practicing her violin. Was it her fault? How does she respond?
- p. 17 – Did he tell his Dad what was bothering him?
- p. 21 – MC lashes out at the girl who was kind to him. Why? How does he feel afterward?
- p. 23 – Frame 3: What might the conversation be here? E.g. "Is something

wrong, son?" "No. Mom, I'm fine."

- p. 29–31 – Sister tells about her own worries. This act of revealing her own vulnerability has a big impact on MC (p. 31 frame 9 depicts his realization)
- p. 34–35 – His conversation with his sister gives him the courage to show his parents his poor math results. How do they respond? How does this affect his sleep that night?
- p. 36–37 – Now he notices that everyone has worries ...
- p. 38 – ... including his friend. Now it's his turn to be supportive.

## After Reading

### Discuss:

Instruct students not to name classmates when discussing this sensitive issue publicly, but they could do so in private with a teacher or counselor.

- Exclusion is a type of bullying. In what situations have you witnessed/experienced exclusion? What can you do about it?
- Turn back to page 4: Identify the characters. How do you know whose perspective we are seeing? Who is the leader of the social group? Who are the followers? How did the author communicate that information? What non-verbal information do people use when trying to navigate social situations? Page 7: How can anxiety over social rejection affect someone's ability to concentrate and do well in school?
- What are the challenges of fitting in as the "new kid"?
- Hiding emotional issues from others often makes them worse. Who are some trusted adults you could speak to if you are anxious? How might things have gone differently if MC had told his Mom or Dad how he felt earlier?
- Worry is universal. Everyone has a story we don't know. What sort of things might people be worried about? How can you support someone who is anxious? What can you do if they lash out at you?
- Contrast the spread on p. 10–11 with p. 36–37. What has changed? Have the other kids suddenly developed worries, or has MC just become aware of them?

- What is the significance of the book's title? How has the author visually conveyed the little things that eat away at people?

## Activities

- Invite a mental health worker or the school counselor to have a conversation with the class about anxiety, acceptance, or another mental health issue relevant to your class.
- After reading and discussing the book, make it available for students to read independently.
- Read some books by author-illustrators Chris Van Allsburg (e.g. *Jumanji*, *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*) or Shaun Tan (*The Arrival*) that use a similar black-and-white illustration technique. Compare the two artists: What effect does the lack of color have? How do they convey specific emotions through their artwork? Think about their use of color (or lack of it), facial expressions, and body language.
- Experiment with drawing and shading using charcoal, charcoal pencil, or regular pencil. Highlights can be added with white chalk. If at all possible, use heavily textured art paper. Start with simple shapes, such as the 3-D solids used for math lessons (spheres, cylinders, pyramids, and prisms). Each student can have one right on their desk. With the curtains open on a bright day, and the ceiling lights turned off, there should be enough light to really see the highlights and shadows. If not, provide additional side light from a lamp or projector. Encourage interested students to progress to sketching and shading their own hand; objects such as vases; and even a human face.
- Examine some graphic novels or comic strips. Together with your students, make an anchor chart of the elements used in this text form: frames, panels, speech bubbles, thought bubbles, facial expressions, captions, splash page, action or sound effect bubbles. They can refer to this chart when creating their own comic strips.
- Use comic-strip creation software (e.g. Bitstrips for Schools) to create a comic strip that conveys a social issue. If students have not used the software before, they will need time to experiment and do some self-

directed activities in order to become familiar with its features before embarking on this specific assignment. If such software is not available, provide comic panel templates on which students may create comic strips by hand.

- Have students write a narrative for the story, either from MC's perspective or that of a different character (e.g. write a series of diary entries from the point of view of the girl who befriended MC).
- Art activity: **Worry Demons:** Use two sheets of heavy, white paper. Place a few drops of ink or thin black tempera paint near the middle of one. Press the second sheet on top, spreading the paint firmly around with the heel of the hand. Peel off the top sheet. You now have two copies of the worry demon that are mirror images of each other. Set one aside to use in the symbolic activity below. To the other one, when dry, add optional googly eyes and/or use a fine-point gel pen to add legs, teeth, or other details. Tell students to think of something either that frightens or worries them, or that they believe frightens or worries some people. If some students have difficulty thinking of one, have the class brainstorm a list. Using a black gel pen, they can write the name of this worry as a title on their picture (e.g. "Teasing," "Failure," etc.). These can be used on a bulletin board display. Next, brainstorm as many strategies as the class can think of to deal with worries. Some (such as confiding in a sibling), can come from *Small Things*; others can be their own ideas. Then, students take turns symbolically dealing with their worry. They pick up the second copy of their worry (the unembellished one that was set aside), state a strategy from the brainstormed list (e.g. "I can tell a counselor"), crumple up the worry, and toss it from a short distance to a waste basket. Later, students can write or draw the strategies using bright colors on shield-shaped paper. These can be added to the bulletin-board display. A tile for the display could say something like "Worry Doesn't Have to Win."
- Drama: Have students write skits about acceptance or bullying to present to younger students in the school.