

TEACHERS' NOTES FOR *BORIS MONSTER, SCARED OF NOTHING*

Written by Sofie Laguna

Illustrated by Ben Redlich

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SOFIE LAGUNA graduated from the Victorian College of the Arts in 1992 and has acted in theatre, film, radio and television. In 1995 she studied writing at RMIT and has since written for adults and children, including radio plays, picture books, chapter books and novels. Her picture books include *My Yellow Blanky* and *Too Loud Lily*.

Acting and writing are closely related for Sophie. She loves bringing her books to life through performance for audiences of children.

BEN REDLICH has been drawing for as long as he can remember. Growing up, his concerned mother watched as Ben developed an obsession with dinosaurs and monsters, the main subject matter for his fledgling artistic abilities. He doodled his way through school, and upon leaving Year 12 he nurtured his love of cartoons by studying animation at TAFE in Brisbane. Since then he has gone on to illustrate several children's books, including the *Octavius O'Malley* series by Alan Sunderland, and *Circus Carnivore* by Mark Svendsen. He also wrote and illustrated *Who Flung Dung?* He currently shares his home with two flea-carrying monsters, more commonly referred to as cats.

SYNOPSIS

Boris has the longest horns, the sharpest teeth and the pointiest talons of any monster he knows. Even he finds himself scary. One day, after catching a glimpse of himself in a shop window and getting a nasty scare, he decides to be 'Boris Monster, SCARED OF NOTHING'. He embarks on a campaign of naughtiness and his teacher decides he needs an activity. The only thing available is ballet. Boris doesn't care; he's scared of nothing.

Although the studio is lined with mirrors and Boris has to dance with his eyes shut to avoid seeing himself, he soon finds he loves ballet. After a whole year of twirling and leaping, Boris's friends finally convince him to open his eyes, and Boris discovers he likes what he sees.

WRITING *BORIS MONSTER, SCARED OF NOTHING*

As a writer, Sofie Laguna enjoys holding workshops with school students and performing her stories for them. As part of one of these workshops she asked students to make up and draw characters. She then asked them to give their character a secret fear. One boy drew a monster and said the monster's secret fear was himself. Sofie thought this was a brilliant idea for a story. As she was on tour, she quickly scribbled the first draft down while eating dinner that night.

Over the next six months, Sofie wrote many drafts of the story. Realising it was too long, she drew rough pictures for it and laid them out with the text on the floor, rather like a storyboard that is used to plot a movie. This helped her see what the final form of the picture book might be like, and what words would probably be better shown by illustrations and could be cut.

For Sofie, writing a story, no matter whether for an adult or child, is about its crafting, about finding the right words with the right rhythm. Sometimes she acts out the

story while she's writing to help her discover what a character might say and do. At the heart of a story are its characters and their struggles. Boris might be big and scary, but he isn't as mean as the other monsters think. He is hiding behind a front. Sofie wanted to explore what could lie behind that front, and the idea that maybe Boris is only acting mean because that's what's expected of him.

Sofie decided early on that it would be wonderful to place Boris in the unlikely world of ballet to take him out of his comfort zone. Because ballet studios are usually lined with mirrors, he can't avoid his own terrifying image. He has no choice but to face his biggest fear and is finally liberated from it. Like many performers, through pretending to be someone else, Boris learns a lot about himself.

As with her other picture books, Sofie found seeing the illustrations for *Boris Monster, Scared of Nothing* like seeing your own thoughts with new twists that you never expected—rather like having a dream. She loves Ben's magnificent monsters, especially Mr Gill.

ILLUSTRATING BORIS MONSTER, SCARED OF NOTHING

Ben Redlich loves drawing monsters, so he jumped at the chance to illustrate *Boris Monster, Scared of Nothing*. This story offered the unusual twist of having a central character who becomes more and more involved in the world of ballet and dreams of being a part of extravagant performances.

While Ben often uses oil paints to create his illustrations, this time he used coloured pencil and ink. His monsters come from his own imagination, with some inspiration from traditional tales and legends from Greece, Rome, China and Russia, and occasionally from the book that was his favourite when he was growing up: *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. The adult monsters in the book are mostly based on legendary monsters. Mrs Meegle is based on the Gorgon, who had snakes for hair, and Mr Gill is a satyr. Ben invented the younger monsters and made Boris stand out in sharp contrast to them by being huge and shaggy with very impressive horns, teeth and talons.

At the beginning of the book, Boris inhabits the ordinary world of home, street and school. As he begins to enjoy ballet (albeit with his eyes closed) he is transported and visions from his imagination fill in the background. We see settings of ballets like *Swan Lake*. Other visual references to ballet, such as *The Nutcracker Suite*, are scattered through the pictures.

Boris undergoes a visual transformation that mirrors his emotional transformation. At the beginning he is shaggy, messy, paint spattered and clumsy. By the end he is the picture of elegance, with beautifully combed hair (well, most of the time).

DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Look at the front cover of the story with the class. Discuss who Boris might be and the expression on his face. How do we know he is scared? What might he be afraid of?
2. Read the story out loud for the class, perhaps in a small group so they can see the pictures properly.
3. Look through the book again, this time asking what the children can see in the pictures, noticing little things like the picture of the ballerina and the angry nutcracker figure on the first page.

4. Talk about how the monster feels about himself, and how and why his feelings change. Do people sometimes feel bad about themselves? How do they make themselves feel better? Does Boris look different as well as feel different?
5. Do we normally think of ballet-dancing monsters? Why might Sofie Laguna have wanted to put the two things together in her story? Discuss the ballet references in the pictures.
6. Look at the monsters in the story. How has Ben Redlich made them up? Talk about the features he has given them and how they combine parts of different animals to make them look strange.
7. Make some blob monsters. Put a blot of paint on one side of an A4 sheet of paper and fold it in half to make a bigger, symmetrical blob. Once this is dry, use ballpoint pens to add details to turn the blob into a monster. Pin the pictures up on the wall to make a monster gallery.
8. Students can have fun making monsters or monster costumes out of recycled craft materials.
9. Children can make up and perform a play based on *Boris Monster*, or create monster dances and perform them in front of the class. The dance could be about different parts of the story, such as when Boris sees himself in the mirror, or is practising with his eyes shut, or when he feels happy with himself at the end of the story. The class could even have a monster dance party.