

TEACHER'S NOTES FOR *WHEN HENRY CAUGHT IMAGINITIS*
Published by Scholastic Press, 2008.

NICK BLAND was born in Victoria in 1973 and lived on a farm until he was five. He spent his early days climbing haystacks and sneaking into his father's painting studio. When Nick's family moved to the bush he found a whole new world to draw and explore. He wanted to be a cartoonist or a storyteller. After he finished school, he moved to the city and eventually got a job in a bookshop. The picture books in the shop inspired him and he realised he 'wanted all my words and all my pictures out of my head and onto the shelf.'

Now Nick lives in Darwin where he had a job as a four-wheel drive tour guide in Kakadu National Park while he worked on his first book, *A Monster Wrote Me a Letter*. This book was a Children's Book Council of Australia Notable Book. He has also illustrated Colin Buchanan's *Aussie Jingle Bells* and Trudie Trewin's *I've Lost My Kisses*. Several overseas publishers have picked up his books. Now he works full time as a writer and illustrator, working on the weekends as a guardian for aboriginal boys from around Northern Australia who board in Darwin.

SYNOPSIS

Henry is a very sensible boy who likes things to be ordered and tidy. But silly thoughts keep distracting him. He even finds himself imagining sailing the seven seas and wrestling a dragon. When a whale bursts out of a picture he decides to turn to *The Big Book of Sensible Things* to make them go away. It seems to work – until he has a snack he disobeys the book's advice and eats a whole watermelon. Even worse, when he tidies up and takes the rubbish out, he ends up on a trip to the moon.

Henry consults *The Big Book of Sensible Things* again and learns that he must have caught imaginitis. There is nothing to be done about this serious childhood disease. He just has to learn to live with it until he grows up. But Henry doesn't seem to mind – he sets his imagination to work and has plenty of fun in the meantime.

THEMES

When Henry Caught Imaginitis is a gentle reminder that we all need our imaginations. At the beginning of this book, Henry is a boy most adults would like to have around – he's neat and sensible. Then Henry catches imaginitis, a disease, which causes outlandish thoughts of pirates, monsters and kings. By the end of the book the neat order of Henry's house is severely disrupted but he is happy.

This book is about the creative power of the imagination. Henry's imagination helps him break down the walls of his safe house with its tidy rooms and go into a world of adventure. When applied to numbers, his imagination is powerful enough for him to understand a big concept like time and how long it will take him to grow up. We would never learn about or understand the world without our imaginations, and anyway, there is plenty of time to be serious when we grow up. In Nick's words, 'a well developed imagination is not a liability but an asset.'

WRITING AND ILLUSTRATING *WHEN HENRY CAUGHT IMAGINITIS*

The idea for this picture book grew out of the word 'imaginitis'. It came to Nick Bland when he was trying to find a word that rhymed with 'invite us' for another story. This single word

inspired the idea of a boy who catches a disease, the chief symptom of which is having a runaway imagination. Nick found that the concept threw up all sorts of visual ideas for him to play with.

Nick always includes elements in his illustrations and text that add intrigue and humour to the story. He loves the idea of both parents and kids pouring over and laughing at the little things they notice – like the butterflies in each picture that stand for the freedom of imagination, the fact that *The Big Book of Sensible Things* has such silly advice as ‘never eat anything bigger than your head’, and the valuable looking diamond ring that Henry has used to decorate his crown on the last page. Without these elements, Nick feels he may as well be writing and illustrating a textbook. When he was a kid he loved noticing things like this, especially when he’d read the book a hundred times already.

Once again, Nick has created soft, detailed black and white drawing with touches of colour. Unlike in *A Monster Wrote Me a Letter* and *I’ve Lost My Kisses*, the colour is used with a stronger sense of purpose. Each imaginary element appears in colour – the butterflies, the rocket in space, the numbers Henry adds up, the dragon, and so on. In contrast, the real world is in black and white. The last page is in full colour, symbolising Henry’s transition from a boy who ‘buttoned his shirt right to the top’ to, as Nick puts it, ‘his liberating embrace of the magic of creative thinking.’

All the black and white drawings are made in pencil, and the colour elements were first painted in with pencil used over the top to give tone and to make it similar in texture to the rest of the illustration.

As Nick is both author and illustrator of the book, the visual elements and the words evolved together. When first thinking of the story, he is already imagining what the illustrations and layout of the book will be. Working on roughs, the words continually change as he creates a sort of storyboard. This enables him to work on the story, as well as figure out more technical aspects of the illustrations such as deciding where the light source will be.

Once these detailed roughs and the story are complete, Nick begins the final illustrations. He describes this final stage as ‘a slow rendering process on expensive paper.’ The final illustrating stage of *When Henry Caught Imaginitis* took him six weeks of solid work to complete.

DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Read the story out loud for the class, looking at the pictures but not talking about them yet. Don’t forget to show them the cover and the title pages.
2. Look through the book again, this time asking what the children can see in the pictures, noticing little things like finding the butterfly on each page and the things in his house that might have sparked off Henry’s imagination.
3. Nick Bland depicts the imaginary world in a special way. Ask the children what they think it might be. What might be special about the butterflies?
4. Look at Henry on the first page. Have the students describe him. Now turn to the last page. How does Henry look now? What might the cause of his change be?
5. All the way through the story, Nick Bland contrasts imaginary things with sensible ones. He does this in both the pictures and the words. Have the children pick out some of each of these things. Does putting sensible and imaginary things next to each other make them both seem either more sensible, or more silly? Are some of the sensible things really a bit silly?

6. Talk about what the world would be like if we didn't have imaginations. Would we play games? Would we have stories, or television shows? Would anyone have even thought of making amazing things like the Sydney Harbour Bridge, or would anyone have bothered exploring the world and finding new places? Together, brainstorm a list of words that describe this world. Then starting with this list, children can write a short poem about a world without imagination.
7. Play pass-the-story. Everyone sits in a circle, and the teacher starts the story with a few sentences. After thirty seconds, the next person carries on, starting with the word the last person finished with. The story might take some very imaginative turns! You might like to record the story with a tape recorder to play back to the class later, and each child might like to write down their words, illustrate them for the class to compile a book of the story, or a play.
8. Carry a tray of ordinary objects around the room to show the class, or if they sit in groups, put a tray holding a few objects on each table. Ask the children to choose one object, or more to inspire a story of the imagination. Then they can illustrate their story.
9. The drawings in *Imaginitis* are black and white. Have children draw a picture only in black and white, then try drawing the same or a similar picture in colour. Talk about how they look different and why.