

***Nit Boy 2: Bug Out!* teacher notes**

Synopsis

Bug Out! continues the story of nit-loving Lewis, whose afro has now been shorn by his arch-nemesis, deputy principal Ms Herrick; and Ned, the first-ever jumping louse, who finds himself (seemingly) alone on Lewis's barren scalp.

Lewis is horrified to discover Ms Herrick will be teaching his class until the end of term, and he vows to drive her away from the school forever, and to get his hair and nits back. Angry with his mother, who allowed his head to be shaved, he goes to stay with his entomologist father, Huck ... and Huck's chocolate Labrador, Boston. Huck's laboratory full of live insects gives Lewis an idea and, with his friend Chris, he gathers many creepy-crawlies in a plastic container.

Meanwhile, Ned collapses in exhaustion and despair. Then he hears another nit voice on the scalp. His friend Sheena has survived. Their reunion is marred by a giant, slobbering tongue which descends from the sky, but they escape, and Ned speculates that the huge, brown, dirty creature attached to the tongue is the dog ... or the "Other Forest" ... his father warned him about. He believes that his mysterious mother may live there, and persuades Sheena to leap to the dog with him.

Lewis and Chris sneak into the school early in the morning, and empty the container of insects into Ms Herrick's classroom desk drawer. Later in the day she opens the drawer and runs screaming from the room, followed by her students. Lewis decides to repeat the prank the next day. Chris refuses to be involved, saying that Ms Herrick must be phobic about insects, but Lewis decides that the possibility of driving her away from the school justifies his actions.

Meanwhile, Ned and Sheena walk nervously through the dark and creepy Other Forest. Despite his exhaustion, Ned (who has never enjoyed human blood) refuses to drink dog blood. They are chased by fleas, and eventually captured and bound. A hungry crowd surrounds the nits, and the huge and hideous Head Flea arrives to pass judgement on them. At the last moment, Ned and Sheena are saved by the intervention of an aging flea, Sahaj, who offers to take them to Ned's mother.

The following morning, Lewis returns to the school, accompanied by Boston. He plans to plant bugs in Ms Herrick's office desk, but the deputy head arrives just as he opens the container. Lewis and Boston hide in a small cupboard. The insects escape, one eventually biting Lewis so hard that he screams and bursts out of the cupboard. Ms Herrick, Lewis and Boston flee the room, covered in bugs.

Meanwhile, Sahaj leads Ned and Sheena in circles all night, before finally taking them to the dog's tail. Maru, Ned's mother, stands at the end of the tail, singing sadly to herself. Sahaj introduces them, and Maru explains that Ned's father Keith visited the Other Forest in search of a wife to breed nits with jumping legs. She travelled to the scalp with Keith, but once she'd laid a single egg was banished to the Other Forest. Maru convinces the famished Ned to try a little dog blood — and he finds it delicious. He is horrified. He is a filthy, low-down flea. And now he must decide where he belongs: on the scalp, or in the Other Forest?

Lewis escapes expulsion, due to his mother's pleas, but is sentenced to a half-hour detention every day until the end of term. Huck collects him from school, and explains that he is departing on a bug-collecting trip. Boston is in the van, breathing in Lewis's ear.

Ned decides to return to the scalp, and farewells Maru. He and Sheena make another giant leap.

Lewis feels two nit bites on his right ear. He checks the mirror, and thinks he sees two tiny nits. To Lewis, this is awesome.

Themes

Bug Out! has themes of family, friendship, and identity.

Family: In *Nit Boy 1: Lift Off!* Lewis and Ned struggled against the demands of their ‘custodial’ parent: Ned’s father and Lewis’s mother. In *Bug Out!* each seeks out the ‘absent’ parent. In particular, Ned sets off into the danger of the Other Forest (despite his dead father’s warnings to avoid the place), believing that he will find his mother there. Lewis, angry with his mother, goes to stay with his father. Ultimately each returns home, acknowledging that they will miss the absent parent (although not in all aspects: Lewis is happy to leave his father’s cooking behind, and Ned does not really want to live among fleas).

Friendship: What’s most important: to stand by your friends, or do something you feel you really have to do? Ned, Lewis and Chris make this decision more than once during in the book. Ned decides to leave for the scalp despite Sheena’s refusal to come along (she then changes her mind), but when it becomes clear that the Other Forest is not a viable home for her, he returns to the scalp. Chris refuses to prank Ms Herrick a second time, as he feels bad about frightening her so badly; Lewis decides that pranking her is justified in order to rid the school of her tyranny. Who made the best choices? Is there ever one right choice?

Identity: Throughout the two books, Ned has been desperate to understand who he is — why is he the first-ever louse with jumping legs? And yet when he learns the answer he struggles against it: he is part-flea, and nits believe fleas to be dirty and disgusting. Eventually, with his mother’s help, he begins to see that his mixed birth makes him perfect in his own way, and at the last realises he cannot tell the difference between a gooey-eye nit kiss and a gooey-eye flea kiss.

Writing Style

Tristan Bancks has written a book that is fast moving, funny, and kid-friendly: he uses their language, but without condescension.

The humour will pull the young readers in, and the fast pace will hold them and carry them through a story that, for all its ‘gross factor’, has a soft and serious heart.

The point-of-view shifts in each chapter, giving the reader an intimate insight into the lives and thoughts of the two characters. While there is much to smile at, there is also much to think about and discuss.

Author Motivation: Tristan Bancks

“I’m ashamed to say it but I like weird and gross stuff. I think this is key to me climbing inside the mind of an eleven-year-old boy and staying there for months on end as my stories unfold.

My editor, Nicola, knows that I enjoy weird stuff so she used to tell me stories about her family’s ongoing battle with nits. And we realised that every family is out there battling these creatures on a daily basis. But no one had really written a book about it. We decided that nits could make for fantastic characters. What is their world like? What do they eat? Who do they love? And why do humans despise them?

So the idea was born and, from that initial conversation about nits, an entire world emerged. Ned became the world’s first-ever jumping nit. Lewis grew a never-been-cut blonde afro filled with thousands of the beasts. Ned’s dad, the Head Louse, decided he wanted nits to take over the world. M. Herrick, the bug-phobic deputy principal, became Lewis’s nemesis. It was mayhem. An epic battle of man versus mini-beast.

And, in the midst of it all, are two kooky characters, Lewis and Ned, who just want to be together.”

Author Background:

Tristan Bancks is a writer and film-maker who lives in Bangalow, NSW. As a teenager he worked as an actor before spending four years in London, writing, researching and presenting television shows on some of his favourite things – adrenaline sport, movies, music, travel and pop culture. Since returning to Australia, Tristan has made several short films, including the award-winning *Soar*, screened around the world, including Qantas Inflight and the U.S. Sundance Channel. His latest short film, *Every Day at School*, was funded by SBS and Film Australia for their Change the World in Five Minutes initiative. Its aim is to inspire classes to spend the first five minutes of every school day changing the world in some small way. Tristan has written sixteen books for children, including the *Dream Racers* series (Macmillan Education Australia), about kids who set up a go-kart race team, and the *Mac Slater, Coolhunter* series (Random House Australia, Simon & Schuster USA), about a kooky, inventor kid who travels the world, hunting cool.

Editorial Comment: Nicola Robinson

“I wasn’t sure where the *Nit Boy* story could go once Lewis’s afro had been shorn, but once again Tristan surprised me. He created a stand-alone story that rounds out Lewis’s journey, as well as introducing the world of the Other Forest, with its menacing flea population — absolutely inspired! And for all the whacky excitement of Ned’s Other Forest adventure, his meeting with his mother is deeply moving.

“Also, Tristan has kept the story on the right side of ‘gross’. We want readers to get a little itchy, but not grossed out! *Nit Boy* is about family and friendship; these books are to be shared in homes and schools (just like headlice, if you think about it).”

Study Notes:

Discussion points:

- Did Ned make the right choices, jumping to the Other Forest despite Sheena’s refusal to go, then returning to the scalp to save her life? Which is more important: friendship, or following your gut feelings about what is right for you? When should you put your friends’ needs before your own?
- Lewis decides to prank Ms Herrick a second time, despite Chris’s warnings and refusal to take part. Was his action justified? What would you do in this situation?
- This story shows Ned in two very different settings: Lewis’s shaved head, and the ‘Other Forest’ (dog’s coat). Talk about the types of language the author uses to capture each setting. What words are used to describe the scalp (moonscape, desert, wasteland) and the dog’s coat (undergrowth, forest, darkness)? Whose point of view is being shown? How might Ned see other settings ... a human knee, a finger-nail, a fluffy cat-tail?

Activities:

- Creative writing: Ask children to write a short story describing a meeting between two different creepy crawly species (for example, a cockroach and a fly). What would happen? How would they relate to each other? What adventures might they have?
- Art: Ned looks like a nit, except for his jumping legs. But what would happen if other insects were mixed? What would a cross between a bumble-bee and a centipede look like? Ask children to draw their own blended insect characters, based on research into actual insects.