

Teachers' Notes
Written by Beth Cregan

WORM STORY BY MORRIS GLEITZMAN

SYNOPSIS

In *Worm Story* Morris Gleitzman takes the reader on an action packed and amusing journey through the human body as Wilton leaves his home on the ledge to learn the truth about why he is different. Along the way he teams up with Algy, another parasite, and together they take on the task of discovering why the sludge gods are angry and just what has gone wrong with the human body they call 'home'.

The concept of transformation, often found in traditional literature, is used in a subtle way to create a poignant, vivid and comic narrative.

Wilton the worm, also known as '*Wriggles*' is transformed from isolated outcast to courageous hero. Algy and Wilton are transformed into an unbeatable team, discovering not only the mysteries of the human body but also the joy of traveling alongside someone who believes in you. And the world, in which they live, thanks to both of them, is transformed from a chemical war zone to a land of peaceful equilibrium.

Whilst the story takes place in the murky depths of the human body and the main characters are parasites, the themes and relationships that unfold mirror childhood experience. The thoughts and feelings of the characters are developed with great sensitivity and good humour, encouraging readers to reflect on the world and the way they live and relate to others.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

Children love to laugh so, above all, literature should be simply enjoyed. Students will enjoy *Worm Story's* humorous imagery, word play and unexpected twists. However, this novel is also a useful text for developing 'The Thinking Curriculum' due to the philosophical and reflective nature of many of the themes. It is important that a balance of whole class, small group and individual activities is maintained to meet the broad range of student needs. Mixed groupings and open-ended tasks will encourage active discussion and a high level of student input. The story provides many opportunities to students to explore narrative texts and to discover new ways of including these skills and techniques in their own writing.

FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS

'Wilton's hope molecules were buzzing. So were his fear molecules' (p4)

A range of feelings are explored in *Worm Story*. The character's feelings vibrate and buzz, almost taking on a life of their own.

- Whilst reading *Worm Story*, keep a 'Feelings List' to track the range of feelings that are introduced; such as hope, loneliness, fear, determination and indignation.
- Define the meaning of these emotive terms if necessary.
- Use this 'Feelings List' to encourage readers to identify times in their lives when they have experienced similar feelings. What experiences triggered the feeling? Allow students to reflect on these experiences and use this as a stimulus for reflective writing and personal narrative.
- Look at the words the author uses to describe the action of the feelings. Fear molecules buzz. Indignation molecules vibrate and hope molecules sag. How do these descriptions match the character's feelings? Do our feelings behave in such a way? Draw illustrations to match these descriptions.

If the character's feelings are buzzing and vibrating perhaps they are more visible to others around them. Crying alerts others to how we might be feeling but some feelings can be well hidden.

- What would be the positives and negatives of having our feelings always visible?
- Are there some feelings we would like to keep private? Which feelings and why?

'The storm was bad but it was nothing compared to how miserable he felt inside.' (p7)

- Draw a mind map to show all the factors in Chapter 1 and 2 that contribute to Wilton feeling so alone.
- Draw a 'Feelings Story Map' to track Wilton's feelings and moods from the start to the end of the story. Is there a pattern or change to the way he is feeling? What events lead to Wilton feeling more positive? You could include these events on your story map.
- We can tell how another person is feeling by looking at their behavior. What else can we use to imagine how another person might be feeling?
- Write a diary from the point of view of one of the main characters. How are they feeling? Use your own experiences to add depth to your writing. Focus on a chapter or incident in the story.

FRIENDSHIP

Wilton and Algy's friendship takes a little time to get moving.

- When do they first cross each other's path? Describe the meeting.
- How do they initially feel about each other?
- Wilton describes Algy as a loony. Why?

- What event finally sparks beginning of this important friendship?

Having a friend is very important to Wilton.

- Why do you believe friendship is so important?
- Think of a time when you felt completely isolated and alone.

'Algy may not be long and wriggly but just how important is that in a friendship?'

- Brainstorm all the qualities of a great friend, like loyalty, courage and empathy.
- Find examples of these qualities in the friendship between Algy and Wilton.

Wilton describes Algy as being the bravest and most considerate friend in the world.

- Look at the list of qualities you felt were important in a friend and rank them in some order.
- What qualities do you rate as most important?

Worm Story introduces the concept of learning and copying attitudes and behaviour from your friends.

'I've been watching you,' said Algy, squiz molecules shining. 'Watching how brave you are. You don't run away from killer fungus or insults or underpants. I've decided to try to be more like you.' (p77)

- How do Wilton and Algy influence each other and change each other? Are the changes that take place positive or negative?
- Can you think of a time when you admired a friend and copied their attitudes or behaviour?
- Friendship can be empowering. What does that mean?
- Sharing a belief in each other helped Wilton and Algy achieve their goal. Find examples of how they encourage each other to keep going.

'I need you to help me save the world.'

- Algy was only using Wilton as a food source to achieve his ultimate goal to save the world. True or false. Discuss.

'Wilton knew friends were meant to support each other.'

- How do friends support each other?
- How do Wilton and Algy support each other?

Wilton is over come with grief when he learns the news of Algy's death.

- Write a speech that Wilton could use to describe the friendship and what it meant to him.

- Stop reading the story at the point of Algy's death. After Algy's death Wilton is left with only his memories. He has lost the one thing he wanted most of all - a true friend. Was it worth it?

ACCEPTANCE

'Don't torture yourself,' said the patch of slime next to Wilton on the ledge. 'We're outcasts. Accept it.'

- What is an outcast?
- Why is Wilton an outcast?

'I wish I was like the others. I wish I was tiny and popular.'

- Where do we get our ideas about what is popular?
- Who determines what physical characteristics are acceptable and admired?
- What happens if you do not fit this mould?
- Think of a time when you felt different or out of place?

'I'm only a worm wedged under a fingernail and you are a mighty Janet but I know how you feel.'

- How does Wilton know how Janet is feeling? What feeling and event is he referring to?
- The emotional drama and bullying causes great physical stress for Janet. How does she cope with this? What changes her situation or her feelings?

In *Worm Story* the microbes call Wilton names like *'Fatso'*.

- How does name calling make us feel?
- Why do you think Wilton doesn't object to Algy calling him *'Wriggles'*?
- If you could choose a nick name for yourself what would it be? Does your family have a nickname for you?
- After Wilton discovers that Algy is in fact eating him, he momentarily objects to being called *'Wriggles'*. Do we have unspoken rules about who can use our nickname?

'Wriggles' is a great example of a nickname. It perfectly describes the character and what they do without having any negative connotations.

- Have a look at the nicknames of some famous people. Do they match the individual?
- Have a go at writing nicknames for other characters in the book, like Algy, Janet and the killer fungus

Wilton does not change physically but he comes to accept who he is.

- What factors help him accept his size and shape?

EXPOSITION

Academic Controversy is a teaching strategy to encourage students to work together to explore an issue from a variety of different perspectives. It could be used effectively to explore issues and themes in the book such as body image, stress and even pet therapy.

- Divide the class into groups of four with two sets of pairs (AA BB)
- Present a topic related to the themes in the story phrased as a statement.

Childhood is a time of great freedom and happiness- free of the stress associated with adult life.

- AA presents an argument, which agrees with the statement.
- BB argues in the negative.
- Allow ten minutes for each pair to discuss and construct their argument
- Each pair must present their case with no interruptions
- The group of four then discusses the issue together and reaches a consensus, which they present to the class.

DREAMS AND GOALS

- Wilton's dream is two fold. What does it consist of?
- Does Wilton achieve his dream?
- What sacrifices does he make along the way?
- Do you have a dream or a life ambition?
- Imagine yourself in Wilton's shoes. Think about being in a situation where you are fighting to save the world? Describe what you see and how you feel?

STRESS

Look at the physical responses to stress in Janet's body, like increased heart rate, headaches etc.

- What sorts of situations cause children stress?
- Draw a mind map to illustrate this information

Janet's friendship with a dog helps her feel better.

- What do you know about pet therapy?
- How is it used to help isolated people make connections?
- Research this topic and write a report to share with the class.

EXPLORING AND INTERPRETING NARRATIVE TEXT

STRUCTURE

Beginnings and endings mark our lives. We naturally look for starting and ending points and these moments are rich in imagery. Focusing on the beginning and ending of a story is concrete and manageable for young readers and writers.

Read the beginning paragraph of *Worm Story* and collect as much information as possible about the character.

- Who is Wilton?
- What information do we have about his physical appearance?
- Where is the story set?
- What is he doing on the ledge?

Morris Gleitzman has started this story with action rather than lots of detail and description. This creates intrigue and suspense.

- Introduce the writing technique of 'Show Don't Tell'. What do you think that means?
- What techniques does the author use in the first chapter to 'show' us what the story might be about?
- Does it make you want to read on? Why?

Explore a range of story beginnings and classify them according to their function. Story beginnings serve some of the following functions:

Introduce the character

Introduce the problem or complication

Describe the setting

Bring the reader straight into the action.

- Which category fits the beginning of *Worm Story*?
- Which type of story beginning appeals to you most as a reader?
- Which one do you use most often when writing your own stories?
- Write the classifications for story beginnings on small cards and have students pick a category and write an interesting story beginning to match it. Students can then share their story leads and see if class members can guess their category. In order to capture your reader's attention the beginning of the story must be interesting.
- Start a class book of interesting and exciting story beginnings and encourage students to add to the list.

VOICE

This story is written in the third person. Compare and contrast the style of 1st and 3rd person.

- Why might the author have chosen to use this voice?
- When would it be better to write in the first person?
- Write a new story beginning for *Worm Story* told from Wilton's perspective. Compare these versions to the original to highlight why authors choose to write in a particular style.

SETTING

- Where does this story take place?
- What similarities does this setting (inside the human body) have with your world?

- What differences might exist in the two worlds?

Compare Wilton with a human being.

- What similarities can you find?
- Illustrate Wilton and label his body parts.

Squish molecules = eyes

Chat molecules = mouth

Noise molecules = ears

Think molecules = brain.

Map the journey Wilton and Algy take through the human body and beyond adding descriptions and images where necessary.

Many biological/scientific terms are mentioned during the story.

- Look up these nouns in a dictionary.
- Start a 'Worm Story Dictionary' which provides readers with information they need to understand the story. Include nouns that have been given a new meaning i.e. panadol = spaceship.

PLOT

Begin by exploring and extending the language of narrative writing. Focus on the novel's orientation, conflict and resolution. The main character's problem and the resolution of that problem becomes the plot. This plot is action-packed and fast moving. An effective plot holds lots of surprises.

- What problem do the main characters present?
- Does the writer drop clues or hints?
- These hints are called plot hooks. In your own words, what do you think is meant by a plot hook?
- To highlight this point, focus on the part of the story where Wilton first meets Algy. What clues does the author give to show that Algy may have met Wilton before?
- Were there unexpected twists in *Worm Story*?
- Look at the ending of the story. Did you expect Algy to reappear?
- Can you relate to this story in any way through your own experiences?
- Is there an underlying theme or message throughout the plot?

After reading a chapter, pick the single most important:

- word
- line
- image
- object
- event

Explain your answer.

DIALOGUE

Dialogue is an essential writing technique used to bring the characters to life and move the story along. In *Worm Story*, the dialogue between characters gives the reader important details that are needed for the plot to unfold.

'Why is Janet so upset?' he said. 'There's liquid coming out of her upper body section.'

'Round here we call a face a jiffing face,' said another. 'She's crying because the others are being mean to her.' (p71)

- Find other examples of vital information being provided through the dialogue of the characters.
- Choose one of these events and turn it into a cartoon strip.

Dialogue can also come through internal monologues which detail the feelings and thoughts of the character.

- Focus on an event in the story such as Wilton trying to decide whether he will save the world or stay and live happily with the worms he had met on board the dog.
- Set the timer for three minutes. Students can write an internal dialogue for Wilton. What thoughts are running through his head?

LANGUAGE

One of the most appealing features of this narrative is found in vivid 'word pictures' or strong imagery which brings the story to life. Instructing students to include good descriptions in their writing is such an abstract concept but telling them to provide clear word pictures is concrete and easier to understand.

- Find examples of vivid word pictures in the story. These are times when the author paints a clear picture that helps you 'see' the story
- What images come to mind when you think about the story?
- Why do they stay with you?
- Build a class list of descriptive words in the story.

Metaphors and similes are used to build effective word pictures. Morris Gleitzman also uses symbolism to build imagery. One good example is the way he describes Wilton's infection as a 'war with killer fungus'. The white cells become the army fighting the battle.

"Mission accomplished young worm," she said. "Fungus engaged and destroyed."

"Thank you," said Wilton. I'm very grateful to you and your troops.' (p126)

- Look at the metaphors and similes. How are do they compare? Find good examples in the story.
- Practice writing metaphors. Choose a noun (umbrella) Ask yourself what this could be compared with? (It looks like a roof) Now write your metaphor.(The umbrella was a roof over my head)

Children are interested in the way language works. In *Worm Story* Morris Gleitzman plays on the conventions and structure of language in a humorous way.

- Explore the use of puns such as Janet/planet and terms like an interjanetary war.
- What are puns?
- Ask students to collect as many puns as they can find being used by advertisers in different media and create a pun display. Write a pun as a heading for the display.

Slang and the imagery evoked by slang is another way of giving language a humorous twist.

- Which characters in the story speak in a different dialect based on slang?

Much of the language of the bacteria is based on the names of disinfectants. This is an invented language.

- Read through these pieces of dialogue and see if students can substitute known words for slang and invented words.
- Read *Jabberwocky* to see how Edward Lear uses invented language to great effect whilst maintaining the correct syntax. Have a go at writing like this and see if your classmates can understand your message.

CHARACTERS

We can learn a great deal about a character by finding out what is important to him/her.

- Work in pairs to write interview questions for characters in the book on the topic of what is important to them?
- Role-play the interviews.

Focus on a dramatic event from the story involving one or both of the main characters; such as Algy needing to explain to Wilton that he is feeding on him or Wilton deciding not to tell Algy where they are when they first land on the dog.

- Draw the character's face and add any symbols, words or images that are bouncing in the mind of the character at this time
- Who was your favourite character?
- Did the characters remind you of people you know?
- Did you identify with Wilton or Algy? Have you experienced similar feelings before?
- What was your first impression of Wilton and Algy? Did you change your mind?
- Keep a diary as if you were a character in the story. Write down events and reflect upon how they affected you.

FOCUS ON GENRE: HUMOUR

Conceptual incongruity is when something out of the ordinary takes place. In *Worm Story* two tiny parasites solve Janet's stressful problem and ultimately change her fate. The humour is successful because children identify with the characters and the problems they face.

- What is satire?

Many readers consider humorous writing makes light-weight reading.

However, the purpose of satire is to use humour to criticise some aspect of human behaviour and show it up for what it really is.

- What comment about society is Morris Gleitzman making in *Worm Story*?

Children's enjoyment of vulgar and obscene forms of humour is a universal phenomenon.

- Create a simulation game where the story has been banned from use in schools because of its connection with worms and underpants.
- Have students write a letter defending the use of this book as a legitimate text in school programs.
- Ask students to include things they may have learnt or themes they have explored through reading the book.

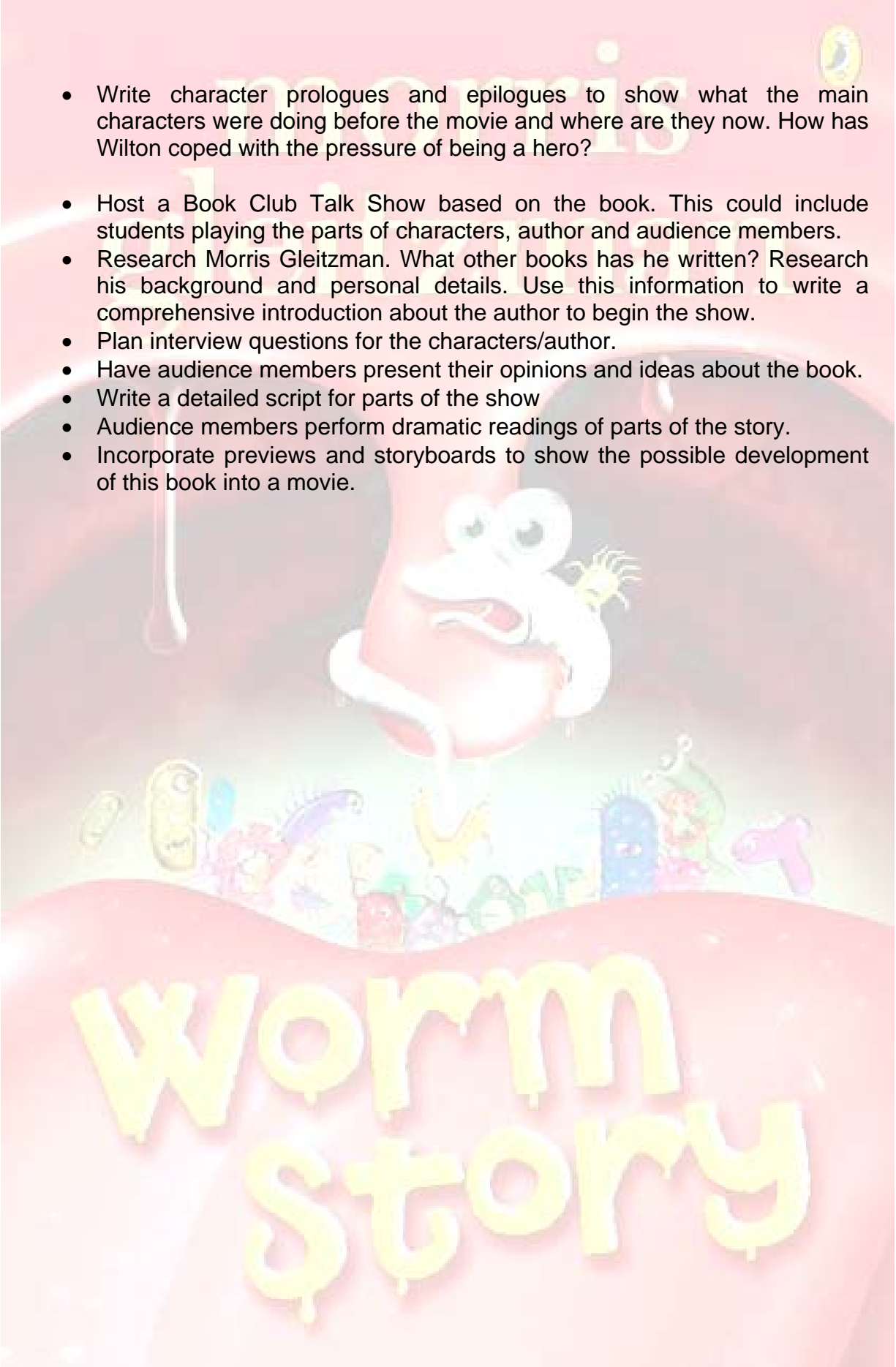
A CLASS PROJECT: *Worm story*, The Movie

Why not embark on a class project to celebrate the humour and dramatic action in this story? This project would provide a meaningful and humorous way to integrate and extend writing and thinking skills related to this text. This project also provides a much-needed opportunity for students to plan and take control for their own learning.

- Create a character that is to become the unseen 'Director' in this project. This director is looking for the next big movie idea and has asked for some possible leads from this group of students.
- Students must write a pitch to sell this movie to the Director. This will require some review of techniques used in persuasive and analytical writing. Students should be aware of their opening paragraphs. They must be convincing and give solid information and examples from the story.
- Why would this story make a great movie?

The Director was impressed with the idea but requires more information to give to the Marketing Director.

- Students need to work in pairs to produce a storyboard of at least three of the story's climatic moments. These will be used as previews to advertise the movie.

- 
- Write character prologues and epilogues to show what the main characters were doing before the movie and where are they now. How has Wilton coped with the pressure of being a hero?
 - Host a Book Club Talk Show based on the book. This could include students playing the parts of characters, author and audience members.
 - Research Morris Gleitzman. What other books has he written? Research his background and personal details. Use this information to write a comprehensive introduction about the author to begin the show.
 - Plan interview questions for the characters/author.
 - Have audience members present their opinions and ideas about the book.
 - Write a detailed script for parts of the show
 - Audience members perform dramatic readings of parts of the story.
 - Incorporate previews and storyboards to show the possible development of this book into a movie.