



## **NERDS VS ALIENS!**

Written by BARRY JONSBURG

**RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 8–12 YEARS OLD (YEARS 5 & 6, YEARS 7 & 8 SECONDARY)**

**GENRE:** Science Fiction

**THEMES:** Friendship, teamwork, environment, human responsibility

**CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:**

- English: Literature, literacy and language

**NOTES WRITTEN BY:** Anita Jonsberg

**ISBN (AUS):** 978 | 76118 246 4

**NB:** These notes are not intended to be used in their entirety. Please choose the activities and questions that are suitable for your class.

**ALSO:** Please check all videos for suitability on or around time of use.

## INTRODUCTION

Aliens are on their way to Earth but never fear - the future of our world rests in the hands of three eleven-year-old nerds. A laugh-out-loud alien adventure novel for young middle fiction readers from the internationally acclaimed, bestselling Australian author of *My Life as an Alphabet*.

## PLOT SUMMARY

*'The world will end at ten thirty-six in the morning, on the fourteenth of March this year.'*

This is the message aliens send to eleven-year-old nerds Harrison (Aitch), Ally and Mo. How do they send it? Via the magnetic letters on Mo's fridge, of course.

Aitch and Ally aren't sure what to believe, but soon they're in an alien spaceship travelling at lightspeed to Jupiter's icy moon Europa. Mo is worried his mum will be furious that he boarded an alien craft with strangers. And Aitch is not too happy that they've kidnapped his dog.

But maybe the aliens aren't that scary after all? They say they want to save the planet. It's only humans they're not so impressed by ...

The future of the human race might just be in the hands of three nerds and their lazy dog. What could go wrong?

A wild ride that's full of laughs from the bestselling author of *My Life as an Alphabet*.

## BEFORE READING

- Having looked at the title and cover, have students draw mind maps of their understanding of the words 'Nerd' and 'Alien'.
- In pairs, have students consider what clues to the story they can find. This can be re-examined as the story progresses.
- In small groups, have students make posters of words associated with the title, or use a wordcloud app.

## Q&A WITH BARRY JONSBURG

### Why did you want to tell this particular story?

'Sometimes (actually most times) stories just pop into my head and that's what happened with this one. I had started a book I called *Visitors* about a kid who thinks he's in contact with aliens. It didn't really get very far, so I just put it on the back burner and wrote something else. But some stories don't allow themselves to be forgotten. I went back to *Visitors* and thought it had some potential, especially if I played around with the "fourth wall" – addressing the audience directly. It's fun for a writer to break "rules" if you can get away with it...and, yeah, I had fun with this one.'

### Why does humour play such an important role in your novels?

'I'm not sure, to be honest. I have written books that don't have much in the way of humour. I guess it's always about finding the tone that sits properly for that type of book. Given this was about a bunch of kids meeting aliens after messages left on a fridge, I think it was always going to be a book that tried to be funny. I certainly hope it raises a few laughs.'

### Is humour needed in novels now more than ever?

'I think so. Sometimes the world can seem a pretty miserable place. Books can offer escape and if you can have a laugh while escaping that seems to me to be healthy. I love novels that make me laugh and think. *Nerds vs Aliens*, I would like to believe, does both.'

### What do you want kids to take away from reading this book?

'That reading is fun, obviously. It seems that fewer children are reading for pleasure these days. There are so many competing pleasures, whether that be social media or video games, that reading appears less attractive. However, I firmly believe that reading is of huge importance in our development, as well as being the best form of entertainment. There are millions of fictional worlds to explore. How exciting is that? So, fun, first and foremost. but there's also other things – the imminent threat posed by climate change being the most obvious.'

## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

### PART ONE: BROCCOLI

#### ONE

- Why is Part One called Broccoli? What do students think of when they imagine this vegetable?
- Look at pages 1-3. What type of narrator is telling the story? Look at first, second and third person narrators and the different effects they have on readers.
- Characterisation: What do readers discover about the narrator? Students might choose four quotes and explain how they helped them understand the narrator.
- Look up HD 219134 (pg 6) with students. Have students note three facts about it. More info can be found here: [HD 219134 - Wikipedia](#). There are many science sites too, adjust for your class.
- Have students look for examples of sarcasm between Harrison and Mo. Is sarcasm between friends a positive sign? Discuss why or why not.

#### TWO – THREE

- TWO is very short. Have students consider why the author has crafted it this way – how might it shape readers' experiences?
- Reflect on what literary terms have been explained so far - how many are familiar to students and which are new? Explain if/why English teachers get excited by students' use of metalanguage.
- Oddjob the dog is introduced as a reluctant walker. What pets do students have? Are they, like Harrison, expected to care for and exercise them? Harrison describes it using hyperbole as '*child abuse*', which is typical of his dramatic speech.
- Do students think that aliens would leave messages on a fridge? What other forms of communication might they use? Discuss as a class just for fun.
- Page 17 features a detailed description of Ally, showing that too much description can bore readers – note this as something students can bear in mind in their own writing.
- Look at Ally's descriptive writing (pp 17-18). What is the term for the metaphors she is using here? [Answer: mixed metaphors] What does her writing tell us about Ally's character? Rewrite the paragraph so that the metaphors and similes are more what her teacher might have expected.
- On page 20, we learn that aliens have been watching our TV shows to learn about us. Have students consider what shows they think would give aliens the most

accurate information about humans and Earth. Depending on these shows, what strange ideas could aliens get about us?

#### FOUR

- Readers are given the choice to skip this chapter. How many students would choose to do this and why?
- On page 23, readers are given an abbreviated description of a park. Have them do a description of their, or someone else's, home in the same style.
- Ally is reading *The Fermi Paradox*, which explores the idea of the existence of other intelligent life. Find an explanation by Brian Cox here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbNPBcUgDTs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbNPBcUgDTs)
- Do students believe that Harrison is being mean to Mo? Have them consider how they might react if a friend said they had been contacted by aliens.
- Harrison remembers a time when his friends were honest, yet still supportive, about his dream of being a stand-up comedian (pp28-29). This section is presented as a script – why do students think the author has used this text type here?

#### FIVE

- Harrison summarises the last chapter effectively at the beginning of FIVE. Have students emulate this style by summarising their day so far. Then have them reflect and edit out any unnecessary detail – do readers need to know that they brushed their teeth, for instance?
- Ally suggests a welcome for the aliens on pp 34-35 and Harrison seeks help from Al on pp 35-37. Individually, or in pairs, have students think about and create a welcome of their own. What would they include and why? What would they include as a 'symbolic gift'? What would they have as a 'universal message of peace and friendship'? (\*This could also be a creative summative assessment.)

#### SIX – SEVEN

- The friends draw up questions for the aliens on pp39-40. Where do we get our ideas of aliens' appearance from? Is there one that appears more frequently than others? Why might that be case?
- Harrison wonders what the aliens might do to him on page 40. Where do ideas/myths about aliens intimately examining humans come from? Do students think these stories are true? Watch this (show clip from 9.45 to 13.57 minutes) [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZLJZG85EQ8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZLJZG85EQ8)

- At the beginning of Chapter Seven, readers discover more about Ally. Harrison says she thinks '*violence is normal*', as she sees it at home. How does this affect our understanding of Ally? Have students think about what things seem normal to them that might not be to others. (Thinking only.)
- As well as the letters on Mo's fridge, Ally says she found an extra chapter in her book. This is another example of magic realism. If there is access to iPads or other devices, have students look up the meaning of magic realism and find two examples.
- Ally says the aliens have perfected the Dyson Sphere – find a one page summary here: [Dyson sphere - Energy Education](#) and describe it in your own words.
- Ally says she both loves and hates Harrison (pg 50). Ask students whether they think this is possible and reflect on who or what they both love and hate. This is an example of a dichotomy (a division or contrast between two things are, or are represented as being, opposed or entirely different – Oxford Dictionary). Have students write down two more examples of dichotomies.

## EIGHT

- This chapter begins again as metafiction, where the author, through narrator Harrison, teases the reader about the pace of the story, noting that readers simply want the '*good*' stuff, or action, in the novel. He uses food as an analogy, reminding readers that '*Broccoli*' – the title of Part One, must come first. What does this mean in terms of a narrative?

## NINE

- Weird sayings like '*time flies*' feature in the opening of chapter nine. This idiom is often used, though its meaning is purely metaphorical. Further idioms are mentioned, like '*looking a gift horse in the mouth*', '*barking up the wrong tree*' and '*letting the cat out of the bag*'. What do these sayings mean? Discuss. A short, useful video can be found here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUT\\_WSavAC8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUT_WSavAC8)
- Pages 59-60 feature Harrison's greeting to the aliens. Have students rate his efforts out of ten and justify their views. The greeting contains his state's motto. What are other states' mottos? Are they true? What do they tell us about how each state would like to be perceived?
- The chapter ends with a cliffhanger that foreshadows Oddjob's part in what comes next. Have students summarise their predictions about what part Oddjob might play.

## **PART TWO: CHOCOLATE MUD CAKE (WITH A POSSIBLE DOLLOP OF ICE CREAM)**

- Having read PART ONE: BROCCOLI, what are readers expecting from part two, given the title?

### **TEN**

- Harrison tells another untruth at the beginning of this chapter. He has admitted earlier to readers that he is an unreliable narrator. And reiterates it here. Does this mean that students don't believe anything he says? Just some of it? Why?
- Having read to the end of TEN, have students write a short description of what they think the alien ship will look like. Then have them do another featuring their expectations of the aliens' appearance.

### **ELEVEN**

- Readers learn more about Mo in this chapter. Does this further characterisation agree with what students imagined about this character? Is the Mo they imagined very different? How?
- At the end of this chapter, Harrison reminds readers of Broccoli. This is by now synonymous with what types of information in the novel?

### **TWELVE**

- The aliens' appearance surprises the friends and they mistake the aliens for ordinary kids. Readers are reminded that they have already been told they can shapeshift. Students could write a script or record a short discussion between the aliens regarding how they should appear to Mo, Ally and Harrison.
- Why have the aliens called themselves Jack and Jill after the nursery rhyme characters? Why would they have learned our nursery rhymes? If you're up for a short diversion, you may want to check this out (as always, check which examples might be suitable for your class): [www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9IZ97KyBX4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9IZ97KyBX4)
- Ask students where they would like to go if they were aboard a spaceship. What do they think about the friends' suggestions?

(If students are interested in the space/time travel element watch here from 1.58 [How To Time Travel | National Geographic](#))

### **THIRTEEN – FOURTEEN**

- Mo becomes anxious because of 'stranger danger' on page 97. Would students have made a different choice about accepting a lift with aliens? Have them explain their reasoning.

- On Europa, the friends experience some odd creatures. Have students draw or model their impressions of these creatures, or invent one of their own.
- Ally asks questions about the universe on page 104. What questions would students ask?

## FIFTEEN

- Pages 106-107 feature another 'slapstick' scene (the previous being Oddjob with his sausage on a stick). Discuss the concept of slapstick – what happens that makes this scene so funny? The word slapstick comes from an Italian prop called a *battacchio*, which was used to create sound effects for acts of violence, which were actually harmless and funny instead.
- A more serious tone is established and contrasts with this earlier scene when Harrison asks the aliens why they have come all the way to Earth. Harrison thinks the aliens are going to invade Earth and tension builds as Jack says *not really*. What do students think is going to happen?
- Harrison notes that our perception of time varies according to what we are (or aren't) engaged doing on page 113. An explanation of the *impressive truth* referred to on this page can be found here. [How Your Brain Makes Time Pass Fast or Slow](#)

## SIXTEEN – SEVENTEEN

- What's wrong with too much description? Have students read pp 119-120 and discuss. Students can reflect on their own writing – the exercises they have done earlier and narratives they have written.
- Harrison imagines how Oddjob might be feeling to see him on page 121. Do animals have feelings like we do or is this an example of anthropomorphism? Write this short scene from what you imagine may be Oddjob's perspective.

## EIGHTEEN

- Earth is going to become an intergalactic tourist destination. Jack says there are many planets already on tourists' radar. Think about what is good and beautiful about our planet that might make visitors from space want to come.
- Why does Jack suggest that humans can be kept in cities? Students can read pp 128-129 and list the reasons using evidence from the text. Are the aliens right in suggesting this? Why or why not?
- Jill says that people don't own Earth but that rather, they belong to it on page 130. This requires a change in perspective for not only the characters but ourselves. What effect might this perspective have on human behaviour?

## **NINETEEN – TWENTY**

- How might the friends have reacted if the aliens had arrived in a scary form (like the one they jokingly assumed) at the beginning of their relationship?
- The aliens think there are thirty years left for us to effectively save our planet. Research this statement. What evidence can you find from reliable sources to support or refute this?
- Consider the beginning of TWENTY. How does the author alter the serious tone of the previous chapter to bring readers to a more positive place?
- Discussion – to what extent do we trust Harrison, Mo and Ally to save our world?

## **ENGLISH**

### **LITERATURE**

- Choose a section of the novel and analyse the writer's purpose and the techniques he uses to achieve them.
- Reflect on the literary terminology introduced throughout the novel and design a Powerpoint that gives their meanings and uses. Add examples.
- Write a poem that includes all the literary techniques used and/or mentioned in the novel.
- Focus on one character and explain how he or she is effectively 'drawn' or characterised for readers.
- Write an extra chapter set ten years after the ending of the novel.

### **LANGUAGE**

- Look at the main characters' speech. Are there certain words or phrases that the characters use? Make a chart with three columns to add evidence for each.
- Choose a section of the novel and rewrite from another character's perspective. Make sure you sound like that character.
- Make a diorama of a scene, accompanied by descriptions from the novel you have used in designing it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**BARRY JONSBURG** is a multi-award winning internationally acclaimed author of twenty-eight books for children and young adults. His novel, *My Life As An Alphabet*, was adapted as a major motion picture, *H is for Happiness*, starring Richard Roxburgh, Emma Booth, Miriam Margolyes and Deborah Mailman. It won the CinefestOz prize for best Australian motion picture of 2019 and in 2020 it won the Kplus award at the Berlin International Film Festival and the teen screen award at the Molodist Kyiv International Film Festival. It was also nominated in ten categories in the 2020 Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts awards. Two Hollywood producers, upon seeing the film in the United States, have contracted the book with the intention of making the story into a Broadway musical. The project is in the early stages of development.



His books have been published in twenty countries and translated into fourteen languages, winning many awards both domestically and internationally. For example, *My Life As An Alphabet* won the German Gold Leserpreis award 2014 in the category "Kinderbücher", selling twenty-five thousand hardback copies in its first three months of publication. It also won the Victorian Premier's Award and the Territory Read Award for best children's book. Other awards in his career include the Queensland Premier's Award, the South Australia Premier's Award, the Children's Peace Literature Award, the Gold Inky Award and the Indie Book Award. He has twice been shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Award. *The Whole Business With Kiffo and the Pitbull* and *Pandora Jones: Admission* were awarded a place on the prestigious White Ravens list of best YA books worldwide.

## ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE NOTES

**Anita Jonsburg** is an English teacher who loves working with students and listening to their insights, ideas and analysis. She is less thrilled by administration.

## CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

(In alphabetical order of authors)

### ONLINE LINKS IN FULL

HD 219134, Wikipedia:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HD\\_219134](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HD_219134)

Brian Cox Explains the Fermi Paradox, YouTube:

<https://youtu.be/NbNPBcUgDTs>

Do ALIENS Exist!? 🙈 🚀 | Facts about SPACE for Kids 🧠 | Colossal Questions, YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZLJZG85EQ8>

Dyson sphere, Energy Education:

[https://energyeducation.ca/encyclopedia/Dyson\\_sphere](https://energyeducation.ca/encyclopedia/Dyson_sphere)

Idioms | Award Winning Teaching Video | What Is An Idiom? | Figurative Language, YouTube:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUT\\_WSavAC8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUT_WSavAC8)

10 Dark Origins of Nursery Rhymes | Mental Floss, YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9IZ97KyBX4>

How to Time Travel | National Geographic, YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SafwXdP7ylc>

How Your Brain Makes Time Pass Fast or Slow, YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSy0Z7XCF3E>