

Nit Boy 1: Lift Off! teacher notes

Synopsis

Lift Off! entwines two stories: that of Lewis, a boy with a huge afro and a great fondness for his thousands of head lice, and that of Ned, who lives on Lewis's head and is the first-ever jumping louse.

The story opens with Lewis being sent home from school by deputy principal Ms Herrick, who calls him "filthy." Lewis resists his mother's attempts to treat his head with lotions. He is determined to keep his nits. Meanwhile, Ned hatches on Lewis's head. Ned's father, Keith (the Head Louse) is thrilled because here, for the first time, is a nit who can jump – a nit who will help head lice conquer the world. Ned is not very keen to jump anywhere. He doesn't even like the taste of blood. He befriends a girl nit, Sheena.

Lewis stays home for two weeks, increasingly bored but unwilling to relinquish his nits. Meanwhile, Ned grows up, marries, and becomes father to hundreds of jumping nits. He infuriates his father by hanging out with his buddy, Sheena, instead of jump-training.

Lewis returns to school, and Ms Herrick checks his hair, just as hundreds of lice make their first jump. They land on Ms Herrick's head, and she runs away, scratching madly. Meanwhile, Ned is in hiding. He still does not want to jump. His father disowns him.

The jumping nits quickly start a nit plague. Schools and businesses are closed, and many people have their heads shaved. Everyone blames Lewis. Meanwhile, Ned is wracked by guilt and uncertainty – why isn't he like other nits? – and resolves to jump.

A new anti-nit device, the NitBuster, is trialled at Lewis's school. Ms Herrick applies the NitBuster to Lewis's head, but thousands of nits remain. Ms Herrick shaves Lewis's head. Meanwhile, Ned's plan to jump is foiled by the NitBuster. He survives the attack, and goes in search of his father and Sheena. Keith is semi-conscious. Then their clump of hair is shaved from Lewis's head, and falls to the floor. At last, Ned jumps – back to Lewis's head – taking Keith with him. They hide in Lewis's ear. Reconciled, Keith dies in Ned's 'arms'.

Lewis is heartbroken at the loss of his nits. Then he feels a tiny bite in one ear. One nit left. He heads off to class.

Themes

Lift Off! has themes of family, friendship, and finding the courage to be different.

Family: Lewis and Ned struggle against the demands of their 'custodial' parent; in particular, Ned is torn between his father's insistence that he jump, and his own desire to stay quietly on the scalp. Both also have absent parents: Lewis's father no longer lives at home and does not appear in this book; no one can tell Ned who his mother was. (This is brought sharply into focus in *Nit Boy 2: Bug Out!* which features the 'absent' parents.)

Friendship: Sometimes, you have to choose between your friends and your sense of duty. Sheena urges Ned not to jump; but he is spurred on by his sense of duty to Keith. Lewis (temporarily) loses the friendship of his best mate, Chris, who blames him for the jumping nit outbreak; but chooses nonetheless to continue in his duty of care to his nits.

Courage: It takes courage to be different: to love and protect your headlice; to be the only nit in the world who loathes the taste of blood and doesn't want to jump.

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 (notably in *Home and Away*) 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

"When Tristan pitched the idea of a story about a jumping nit plague, I was astonished – my moans and groans about the nit infestation in my daughter's curly hair had inspired *this*? Tristan explained that his secondary inspiration was Tim Winton's wonderful *The Bugalugs Bum Thief*, another story of a town besieged by unprecedented (and crazy) events. As the story developed, I was thrilled by his skill at

blending a very intimate story (a head louse, a boy, and their families) with a whacky, out-there plot-line (jumping nit plague).

“He was also clever in keeping it on the right side of ‘gross’. Everyone who worked on the book (myself, the designer, the illustrator, the proof-reader) got itchy, but *not* grossed out! This is so important, because we want whole families to enjoy *Nit Boy* — because at core, families are what these stories are about.”

Marketing & Promotion:

Bookmarks, website, competition: We have printed 30,000 Nit Boy bookmarks, to be distributed through the trade and by the author. The bookmark directs children to the website www.nitboy.com, where they will be able to enter a competition to win prizes including Wii products, fluffy flea toys and afro wigs.

Author appearances: Tristan is booked to speak at the Sydney Writers Festival, the Brisbane Writers Festival, the Scotch College Literature Festival (Melbourne), Byron Bay Writer’s Festival and in many schools.

Media, reviews: All media publicity potential will be maximised, including the author’s television and radio contacts. At this stage (late March) the following are confirmed: Reading Time (article), Magpies (review), Australian Bookseller & Publisher (review), K-Zone (article) Disney Adventures (review).

Study Notes:

Discussion points:

- Did Ned do the right thing in finally deciding to jump? What would you do if your parents or other adults pressured you to do or be something that you felt was against your nature?
- Which is more important: Lewis’s love and protection of his nits, or Lewis’s responsibility to do what is right for the rest of the people in his town?
- This story is told from two points of view: Lewis’s and Ned’s. Talk about how their experience and understanding of key events differs. For example, what does each experience when Lewis’s mother uses the anti-nit shampoos? And when Ned gets married? And when Ms Herrick applies the NitBuster to Lewis’s head?

Activities:

- Creative writing: Ask children to create their own creepy crawly characters. Where do these creatures live? What do they eat? How do they relate to each other? What adventures do they have?
- Art: Ask children to draw these insect characters, and then develop their story into a short comic strip.