



# TEACHERS' NOTES

## RECOMMENDED FOR

Middle to upper primary (ages 9–12; Years 4 to 6)

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## KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English; Humanities and Social Sciences; Science
- **General capabilities:** Literacy; Critical and creative thinking; Personal and social capability; Ethical understanding

## REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Studying the different types of narrator
- Studying literacy
- Exploring themes of interpersonal relationships and ethical dilemmas within a real-world setting
- Exploring creative writing, inspiration and imagination
- Considering unusual happenings within a framework of familiar experiences

## THEMES

- Ecology, the natural world and endangered animals
- The concept of wonder and whether all questions need answers
- Storytelling through 3<sup>rd</sup> person commentator narrator
- Family – struggles, reversal of parent-child roles, what it means to be family
- Community and belonging
- Finding your voice

## PREPARED BY

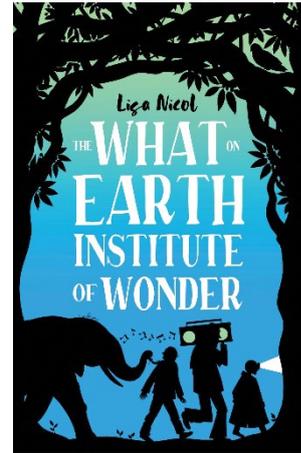
Penguin Random House Australia and Lisa Nicol

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## The What on Earth Institute of Wonder

by Lisa Nicol

## PLOT SUMMARY

*One elephant, one kakapo, one unlicensed teenage driver, one boy waiting for the world to end and a twelve-year-old girl with a very special gift.*

Sal has always had an affinity with animals – especially the lost kind. But when two rare and endangered creatures appear out of nowhere, life takes a detour into strange and uncharted territory...

A mind-boggling expedition into the secrets of the Animal Kingdom with only an invisible map of the human heart as a guide. (Unless, of course, you count the talking parrot.) What on Earth could possibly go wrong...?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Nicol is an Australian author and sometimes documentary-maker. Her feature *Wide Open Sky* about a children's choir in far west NSW won the Audience Award for Best Documentary at the 2015 Sydney Film Festival and screened in cinemas and festivals around the world. Her first novel for children, *Dr Boogaloo and The Girl Who Lost Her Laughter*, was a CBCA Notable and is currently being adapted for the screen as a musical. Her second novel *Vincent and The Grandest Hotel on Earth* was published internationally to much acclaim. Lisa lives on the east coast of Australia with two out of her three children and a dusty old dog who smells worse than an elephant fart.

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR: LISA NICOL

### What inspired you to write a story with a talking bird in it?

The idea for the character of Sal began in real life. (Don't worry, I will get to the bird.) There was a young girl in my neighbourhood who seemed to find animals everywhere. A puppy in a box floating down the canal. Lost cats and injured birds. I used to see her walking her chicken or sometimes budgerigar in the park. On a lead! I grew up with the story of Dr Doolittle which I loved. I thought if the Animal Kingdom was going to get in touch today, they would most likely contact someone like this girl, because she'd be the most likely to listen and understand what they had to say. In the first draft, Sal had a pet owl who suddenly speaks to her. But I just couldn't get the owl to work. After some serious bird research I stumbled across the Kakapo and fell in love. When I replaced the owl with a kakapo, Hector strutted in fully formed. He started speaking immediately, accent and all. And he was funny so I let him stay!

### The narrator in the story has a strong voice and has opinions. Is it your voice and your opinions?

Oh, that opinionated old narrator pops up all the time when I'm writing. I can't get rid of him (don't ask me why he's a he.) I find him pompous and quite often rude (I have to edit him a lot!). It took me a long time to accept that voice which I started hearing when I wrote. I didn't like it. It seemed old-fashioned and not at all groovy (see he'd use a word like 'groovy') But he did make me laugh. And so I decided to let him stay. But only as long as he makes me laugh. As soon as he stops making me laugh he's getting the boot.

### Is there a reason why all your books have long titles?

None that make any sense. I always curse my long titles when I have to write anything like bios because they chew up often very limited word counts. They are unwieldy, impractical and surely a handicap from a marketing perspective. I have vowed my next book will be called RAY. (Well the one after *Lewis Lewis and the Titanic Celestial Event* will be because I've already started writing *Lewis Lewis*). If there is any reason for the long titles, I think it must be my writing style which you could say is wordy. I like words and the sounds and rhythms they create when you string a lot of them together. I'm not an economical, spare writer although I admire them immensely. I also think that pesky narrator you asked about is a very verbose fellow. Full of his own self-importance.

### What was the hardest thing about writing this book?

I found this book hard to write in many ways. *Vincent and The Grandest Hotel on Earth* came fast and strong. Not so with this one. I wrote a lot and hated everything I was writing. I fell into a hole and wondered if I could ever write another book. I always start a book at the beginning and then write till I get to the end. After about three long terrible months of trying to do that, I decided to write a random chapter – when Sal, Roy and Bartholomew try to leave town with the elephant. And suddenly the words started to come. It was no longer like pulling teeth. Although that chapter happens in the middle of the story, it became the first chapter of the book. And from there I wrote the rest.

### What was the most fun?

Writing is rarely fun for me. It's a lot of hard work, mostly. Especially first drafts. I prefer redrafting when I can loosen up because I have the whole story down and I can relax more and play around. But I have to say I did enjoy writing the character of Mr Longhorn, the weaselly villain of the piece. I've never had a villain character before and I had A LOT of fun writing him. And his weirdness just grew and grew with every draft. He makes me laugh out loud. If anyone reading this book wears Peter Rabbit pyjamas, they probably won't after reading it. Apologies for that.

## PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. Look at the cover of the book. What clues are given within the cover illustration to let you know what type of book this is and what it is about? Consider the colours used on the cover, too. What type of mood do they create and why?
2. Silhouettes are often used to create a feeling of mystery and wonder, often because they're dark



and mysterious and don't show specific details, such as people's faces or expressions. How do the silhouettes on the cover of the book make you feel?

3. The quote at the beginning of the novel reads: *The Animal Kingdom, of which we are a part, is filled with secrets . . . and you never know what you're going to find.* What does this mean? And does it make you look at the cover differently?
4. The opening lines of the novel read: *One of the problems when telling a strange story is that some people decide not to believe you. Just because the story is strange. If you, the person attached to those magnificently handsome eyeballs, are one of them, I suggest you close this book right now. Because this story, I'm afraid, is intoxicatingly strange...*
  - What tone does this set for the novel?
  - There are no quotation marks, and it speaks directly to the reader. Who do you think is speaking the words?

## KEY STUDY TOPICS

### The narrator

There are many different types of narrative through which stories are told. The narrator who tells the story in *The What on Earth Institute of Wonder* is a 3<sup>rd</sup> person omniscient commentator, which means it is an all-knowing (omniscient) narrator who tells us their opinions (commentator) about the story they're telling. The narrator is not the author. Even though the narrator isn't a character in the story, they have a voice and opinions that are part of the story. The narrator in this book draws attention to the act of storytelling. For example, at the start of the book, the narrator says: "One of the problems when telling a strange story is that some people decide not to believe you."

### Questions

1. When you first read the book, did you picture the narrator as if they were a character? For example, from how they told the story, did you think of them as male or female, a kid or grown-up? If so, why?

### Activities

1. What are the different narrative techniques that authors use to tell fictional stories. First person, second person, third person, omniscient narrator are some examples. Do you know of any others? Discuss these with your class. Can you think of any books that use each type of narrative? Are there any stories that use more than one type?
2. Write a couple of paragraphs to start your own story. Make sure you include at least one character, an action or event, and describe the location where

your story is set. Which narrative technique did you use? Now, can you rewrite the paragraphs using a different narrative technique? For example, if you wrote your story in 3<sup>rd</sup> person omniscient with an all-knowing narrator, perhaps try rewriting it in 1<sup>st</sup> person, knowing only what the character knows and sees.

### Hector

When Hector is first introduced on the first page of Chapter 1, the narrator doesn't let you know he's a talking kakapo until after he's spoken to Sal: *Hector, perched on the windowsill, had both eyes trained on the far end of the street.*

*'Shouldn't he be here by now?' worried Hector, sounding all antsy.*

*Hector was a kakapo. A plump and portly parrot from the isles of New Zealand.*

*'He'll be here,' said Sal...*

### Questions

1. Were you surprised to discover Hector was a talking bird? And were you surprised that Sal isn't surprised by Hector talking? Discuss with your class the effect on the reader of telling us Hector is a talking bird *after* he has spoken versus *before* he speaks.
2. Hector is a kakapo, an endangered animal species from New Zealand. Do you know of any other endangered species from Australia or New Zealand?
3. Can you think of any other books or stories in which humans can talk to animals?

### Activities

1. On page 123, Bartholomew describes Hector as smelling like a 'musty old violin case'. If you were to describe how your pet, or a friend's or family member's pet, smells, what description would you use? The more unusual, the better!

### Characters

Choose two characters from the story who are your favourite (human or animal). Write a detailed character description of each including personality, physical appearance, flaws, strengths, values, ambitions and passions. Compare and contrast the two characters. Do they change throughout the story? What do they learn? Draw a character arc to show what hurdles they overcome and how they change.

### Favourite quotes

This story has lots of philosophical comments in the text, which relate to both the characters and story as well as being universally relevant. Pick your favourite



philosophical quote from the book (a few are listed below) and discuss with your classmates how it is relevant to both the story and to something in the real world. This could be something personal to you, something that's happened to somebody else or something you've read about or seen on TV.

*'I hate it when people tell me not to worry,' said Roy. 'In today's world, it's just not realistic.'* (Roy, page 11)

*'All you can do is offer,' he'd say. 'And then it's up to others if they want to accept.' Which was kind of Bartholomew's philosophy on life in a nutshell.* (Bartholomew, page 30)

*Strange never feels strange forever if it hangs around long enough.* (page 22)

*Failure can bring people together as much as success. It's just not quite as fun.* (pages 38-39)

*'When I woke up, I realised: there's not just one end of the world, there's many.'* (Roy, page 193)

*She had let herself be big. Just like an elephant. Not so much the big on the outside but the big on the in.* (page 264)

### Making change happen

*'Sometimes, when I am filled with dread about what is happening to the Earth and all the animals and everything else, I feel so frightened. And so, I tell myself: they won't let it happen. They won't let all those beautiful, incredible animals become extinct. They won't. But lately I've had to ask myself, who are "they"? ... And now I know ... We are "they".'*

Twelve-year-old Sal, with Bartholomew and Roy and Hector, is determined to make her small corner of the world a better place for all – for the humans and animals both. After her actions help to get her voice heard, she then spearheads the opening of The What on Earth Institute of Wonder to help educate people about 'the untold wonders of this world'. In the real world, young people around the globe have spearheaded many movements for social, political and environmental change.

### Questions and activities

1. Research other examples of change-makers and influential people in the world who have used their talents, skills, experiences and passion to inspire others to make changes. For instance, you could explore the story of 11-year-old student Molly Steer who campaigned against single-use plastic straws. You can learn about her campaign [Straw no More here](#). Other examples of inspirational change-makers who you could find out more about include:

- Greta Thunberg

- Jane Goodall
- Mahatma Gandhi
- Malala Yousafzai
- Jade Hameister
- Adam Goodes
- Helen Keller
- Anne Frank
- Craig Reucassel
- Jessica Watson
- Mary Mackillop
- Turia Pitt
- Deng Thiak Adut
- Eddie Woo
- Kurt Fearnley
- Tim Flannery
- Weary Dunlop

(You can find lots more examples of inspiring people in *Shout Out to the Girls*, *High Five to the Boys* and *Stand Up for the Future*, which all feature stories about Australians who have done amazing things in our past and for our future.)

2. In pairs, discuss some of your hopes for the future. For example, your career path, the type of society you want to live in, the place in which you would like to live.
3. Visit your local council, state parliament or federal parliament to find out more about how our government works.
4. Pick a specific environmental issue that you are passionate about and research whether there are any groups you could join, petitions you could sign or ways to help promote the cause. Write down your findings in a list.
5. Write a letter to your local Member of Parliament to ask them to support a cause or make change in an area you feel strongly about, such as sustainability, climate change, caring for wildlife, or another cause.
6. Watch a documentary about Greta Thunberg – *I Am Greta* is a documentary film, and *Greta Thunberg: A Year to Change the World* is a three-part series about Greta's travels (currently available on ABC iView).



7. Design a poster with a strong, simple message about an issue you are passionate about. What words will most clearly get across your message?
8. Create a website with a photo gallery to publish your ideas to help your class achieve a wider awareness for your cause. Include a 'Call to Action', to inspire people to join your cause.

## THEMES

### Wonder

The *What on Earth Institute of Wonder* is filled with wonder, wonderings and wondrous things. Think about the word 'wonder' and its use in the title and text of the novel before answering the following questions.

#### Questions and activities

1. 'Wonder' can be used as both a verb and a noun. Here are two definitions from the Macquarie dictionary:  
noun: something strange and surprising; a cause of surprise, astonishment, or admiration  
verb: to think or speculate curiously; to marvel  
How do these definitions apply to The What on Earth Institute of Wonder story and characters?
2. We never discover how the elephant came to be wandering around Larry, nor how Hector the kakapo came to Sal's house. Sal is left wondering about that, even at the end of the book. Sometimes, it's the questions that are important rather than the answers. Discuss this statement with your class.

### Luck versus fate

The narrator refers to the town of Larry as 'a bad luck town'. But we learn that it isn't down to bad luck that nothing good happens to people in Larry, it's down to the postman not delivering the mail to people if there is good news in it.

#### Questions and activities

1. How does this tie in to the idea that people make their own luck and / or that parts of a person's life are predetermined (ie, that what happens is down to fate)?
2. On Larry's welcome sign on the outskirts of town, it says: *Welcome to Larry, Don't get your hopes up.* How are the ideas of 'luck' and 'hope' linked in the story? Are there any characters that are more lucky and/or more hopeful than others?

### Belonging and fitting in

*Experiencing belonging – knowing where and with whom you belong – is integral to human existence. Children*

*belong first to a family, a cultural group, a neighbourhood and a wider community.* (Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, DoE)

#### Questions and activities

1. What does it mean to be a part of a community? Is it different to being a part of a family? If so, how and why?
2. Sal refers to Bartholomew as 'like family'. Is it possible to choose your own family in this way? Discuss in relation to your own family and family friends.
3. Throughout the book, you get the impression that Sal and her family are seen as misfits and 'strange' by the people of Larry. Do you think this was the case before her mum started moon-watching and Roy became a doomsday prepper? What evidence is there in the book to support your thoughts? And how does it affect Sal's sense of belonging? Discuss with your class.
4. *While the people of Larry didn't like being the unlucky town, they were used to it. It was a bit like being on a team that always loses. You know you're going to lose. Everyone else knows you're going to lose. But it's still your team. Your town. And that counts for something. After all, failure can bring people together as much as success.* Do you agree with the narrator's thoughts that failure can bring people together? What else helps to bring people together? (Some examples might include: coming together in happy celebrations such as the birth of a baby or a wedding, coming together to help communities in need such as victims of a natural disaster.)

### Parent-child role reversal

*'I was trying to take some responsibility. Something you wouldn't understand!'* (Sal speaking to her mum, page 224)

#### Questions and activities

1. Sal and her mum switch roles in their house. Make a list of the child-like ways Sal's mum acts and the grown-up things that Sal does. By the end of the book, do they switch all the roles back?

### Feelings

There are so many different feelings that are explored through the characters in *The What on Earth Institute of Wonder*.

#### Questions and activities

1. Roy Roy is filled with anxiety, which Sal tells us began when their father left and their family life as



they knew it came to an end. How does Roy's anxiety manifest itself in his doomsday prepper persona?

2. *A fizzy furious heat erupted from Sal's chest into her head like a can of shook-up coke.* (page 224) This description conveys how Sal feels her anger physically. Think about how you feel physically when you're angry. Are there any other emotions that you feel that affect you physically, too?
3. *Sal felt SO angry. She remembered what Bartholomew's mum had said. That being angry means deep down you're actually really sad about something.* (page 225)  
Do you agree with this statement by Bartholomew's mum? Are there any other feelings you can think of that seem to be one thing but are rooted in something else?

### Conservation

At the end of the book, there's a note from the author that begins by saying:

*The Earth and all its creatures are like a magnificent jigsaw puzzle. If we remove too many pieces, we risk things falling apart...*

The text then goes on to describe all the amazing things that the African forest elephant does for its specific ecosystem and environment.

### Activities

1. Choose an Australian animal and research all the ways that it contributes to its specific ecosystem and environment.

### Ethical dilemmas

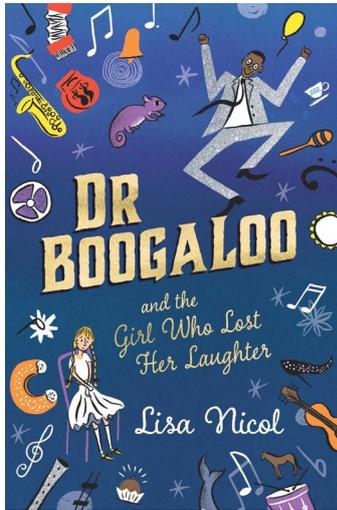
Sal, Bartholomew and Roy (and Hector) essentially kidnap Lady the elephant, and Bartholomew breaks the law by driving without a licence. Although the gang believe they are doing the right thing to save the elephant, the townspeople disagree – as does the law.

### Questions

1. Is it ever okay to break the rules if you believe you're doing the right thing? Discuss different opinions within your class.
2. Can you think of any other stories, true or fictional, in which characters break the rules to do good?



FURTHER READING FROM PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

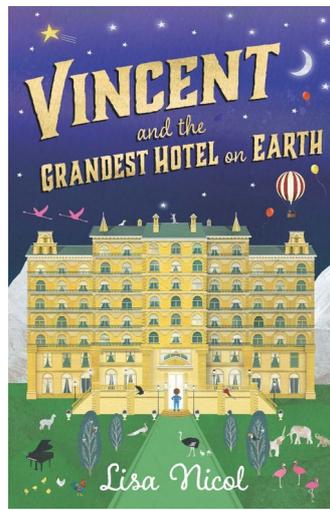


*Dr Boogaloo and the Girl Who Lost Her Laughter*  
by Lisa Nicol

Dr Boogaloo was no ordinary doctor. Not at all like the one you might visit if you had a sore tummy. No, Dr Boogaloo was a very different type of doctor. He treated folks who suffered from rather unusual complaints. And how did he treat them? Why, with the most powerful medicine known to mankind . . . Music!

Blue was no ordinary girl. For starters, her name was Blue. But what was truly extraordinary about Blue was the fact that she hadn't laughed for 712 days. Not a hee hee, a ho ho or even a tiny tee hee.

According to Dr Boogaloo, music can cure anything. (Of course, you need the right dose of the right music. No point listening to a jive if you're in need of some boogie-woogie, and you can't just substitute a toot for a blow!) But no laughter was definitely a case for alarm.



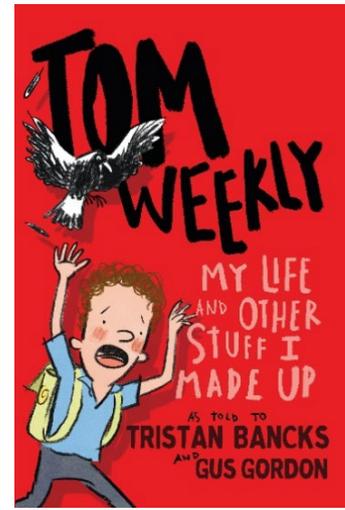
*Vincent and the Grandest Hotel on Earth*  
by Lisa Nicol

Perched high on the snowy slopes of the Mabombo Ranges lies The Grandest Hotel on Earth. It's wilder than the African savanna, more fantastical than Disneyland and more magical than Shangri-la.

So when ordinary 11-year-old Vincent meets the hotel's young Florence he sets off on a path leading into his most wondrous dreams. But of course, dreams have a funny way of taking strange and surprising turns and, before long, Vincent is torn between right and wrong, friendship and family and the most enticing of desires – to see into the future...

Warning: this book includes insanely cute pocket dogs, travelling by llama or jet pack, chocolate fountains and shoes that play Bach.

*Teachers' notes available.*



*Tom Weekly 1: My Life and Other Stuff I Made Up*  
by Tristan Bancks & Gus Gordon

I'm Tom Weekly. This is a nail-biting – make that toe-biting – thrill ride through my life.

This is where I pour out whatever's inside my head. Like the time a bloodthirsty magpie was out to get me. Or when I had to eat Vegemite off my sister's big toe. And don't forget the day I ate 67 hot dogs in ten minutes. My life gets a bit weird sometimes but that's how I roll.

Top 3 reasons to read this book:

1. Cures for nits
2. Hover underpants
3. Instructions for teleporting

*Teachers' notes available.*



## WORKSHEET: NEWSPAPER REPORT

Write a newspaper article about the African forest elephant coming to Larry. You could include interviews with some of the characters, and don't forget to draw a picture to go with your report!

# DAILY NEWS

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## ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QTY	TOTAL
The What on Earth Institute of Wonder	Lisa Nicol	9781761041556	4-6	\$16.99		
Dr Boogaloo and the Girl who Lost her Laughter	Lisa Nicol	9781760892364	4-6	\$16.99		
Vincent and the Grandest Hotel on Earth	Lisa Nicol	9781760892661	4-6	\$16.99		
Tom Weekly 1: My Life and Other Stuff I Made Up	Tristan Bancks & Gus Gordon	9780143790082	4-6	\$9.99		
<b>TOTAL</b>						

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