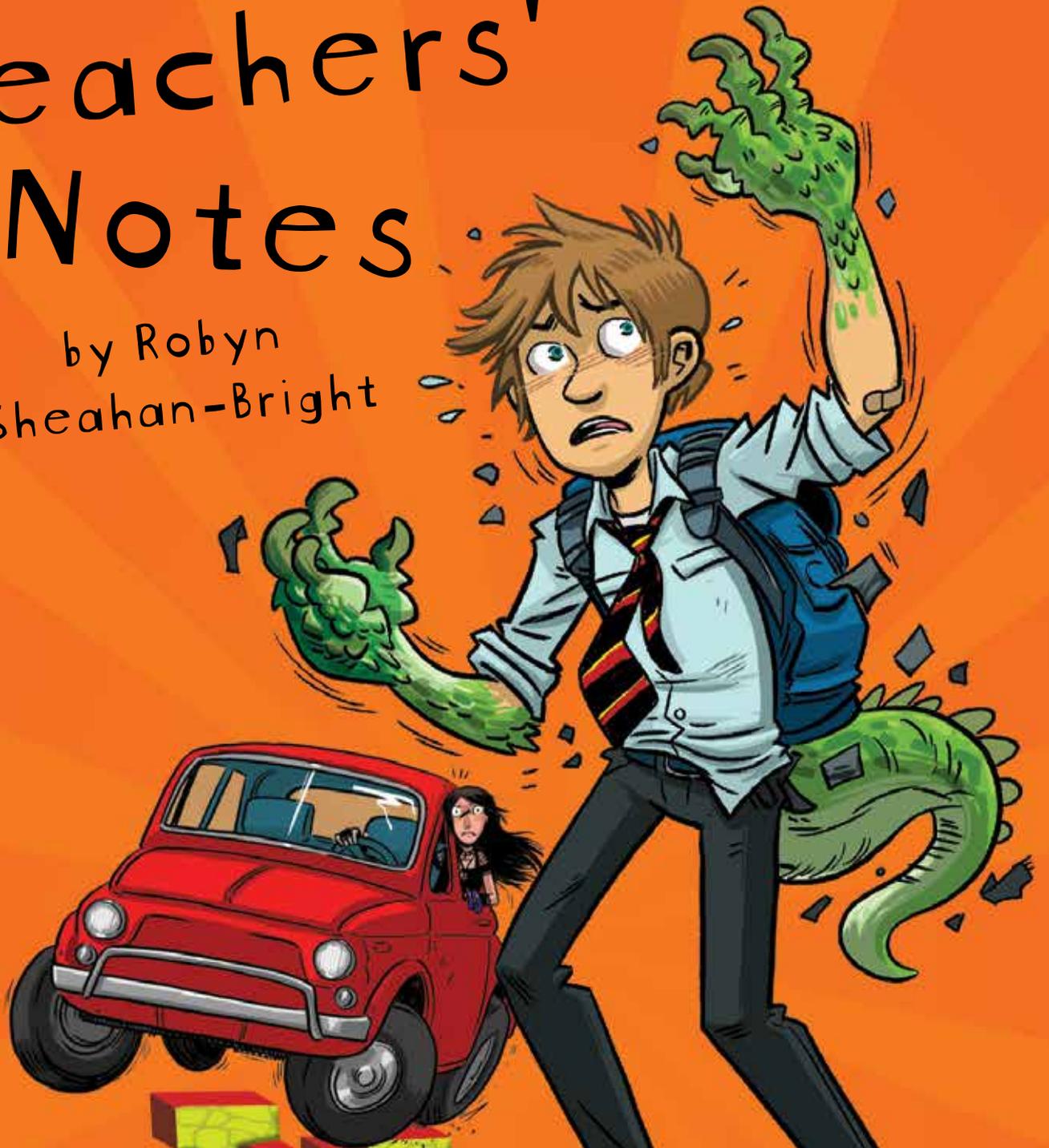


Teachers' Notes

by Robyn
Sheahan-Bright



THE TURNERS

by Mick Elliott

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INTRODUCTION

‘Abbie was wrong. Turning wasn’t a gift at all. It was a curse.’ (p 29)

‘Leo’s world was silent. He was no longer himself. He was no longer constrained by the night. It was daytime. It was time to Turn.’ (p 229)

On his thirteenth birthday, Leo Lennox experiences a huge problem. He has just grown a tail and become ‘a *Varanus komodoensis*. A komodo dragon, with an empty stomach in urgent need of filling.’ (p 5) If that’s not disastrous enough, the scaly growth has torn through the back of his pants in the school library, and he comes close to eating his school mates before he turns back into himself again. Until now, Leo had thought he was just an ordinary kid in Grade 8 at Critten’s Bluff High. But this turns out to be just the first stage in the rapid and total implosion of his life. For the ‘twist’ proves to be that his whole family are ‘Turners’ and that this ‘Turn’ had always been expected on his thirteenth birthday.

Now, as he discovers this terrible family secret, his dad Vernon goes missing, and Leo must team up with his infuriating older sister Abbie, to escape two ‘Vipermen’, ancient shape-shifters, and a whispering villain determined to feed him to a pack of genetically engineered killer pigs. All while trying to get his secret crush, Lily, to notice him.

The theme of growing up underpins the action as Leo, having entered his teenage years, discovers just how difficult it can be to fit in, especially if you’re a Turner.

This is the first instalment in a comedy–adventure trilogy which his publisher has described as: ‘Animorphs meets Andy Griffiths’ and ‘Ideal for fans of Andy Griffiths, David Walliams and Roald Dahl, and of animated series *Get Blake and Strange Hill High*’.

Read the series, and find out what you think!

BEFORE & AFTER READING THE NOVEL

- * Examine the cover of the novel. What does it suggest about the themes? After you have read the novel, examine the cover again: what does it suggest to you now?
- * After you have read the novel, use the notes below to examine the text more closely.

THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes relevant to curriculum topics (Studies of Society and History, Science, and English Language and Literacy) might be identified in this novel:

STUDIES OF SOCIETY & HISTORY (SOSE)

• Growing Up & Maturation

Discussion Point: It's no accident that Leo becomes a Turner on his thirteenth birthday. This novel uses 'shape-shifting' as a metaphor for growing up and learning to control your feelings, much as other such shape-shifting books do. [See also English Language & Literacy Genre—Shape-Shifting Fantasy below.]

Discussion Point: 'Even some veteran Turners have freak Turns sometimes,' continued Abbie. 'It takes serious concentration to control what you Turn into. It's like being possessed. But if you train really hard like I did, you can control it sooner.' (p 42) Part of this theme is learning about self-control and discipline.

Discussion Point: 'Remember, Leo,' he'd said, in an almost fatherly tone. 'No Turner really knows what they are truly capable of until each new Turn.' (p 118) Relate this quote to another aspect of growing up – discovering your own unique skills.

Discussion Point: Being 'normal' is a goal most teenagers aspire to; Leo finds himself to be more 'abnormal' than most, but strangely this gives him skills he might otherwise not have dreamed of. How does this relate to maturing, in general?

Discussion Point: Abbie and Leo's mother went missing after a 'Turn' when they were children. How has this influenced their childhood?

Discussion Point: 'It had never mattered to him that other kids had fathers who were doctors and lawyers; Leo always had a sense that Vernon simply did what he loved in life, even though the money he made as a mechanic was just enough to scrape by.' (p 19) What other values has Vernon taught his children?

Discussion Point: Sibling rivalry lies at the heart of Aunt Eyra's vicious actions: 'Mum could Turn, but she couldn't.' Leo knew from his aunt's silence that he was right. 'You were jealous, weren't you? Can't have been easy having a little sister with this skill, this incredible power that you didn't have.' (p 207) The novel is resolved when the siblings realise that Aunt Eyra has engineered their father's capture because of jealousy, not for any more significant plot motivation. Discuss the fact that sometimes such rivalries can turn 'bad' and that they need to be monitored and discussed.

Discussion Point: Abbie and Leo spar verbally with each other but theirs is a healthy form of sibling rivalry. Discuss.

SCIENCE

- **Animals, Birds, Reptiles, Insects, Fish, Amphibians**

Discussion Point: This book is a veritable cornucopia of different birds, animals and other species of wildlife, eg Leo turns into a 'Venezuelan pebble toad' (p 118) and encounters a 'bald-headed uakari' (p 120). Research some of the creatures mentioned.

Discussion Point: One of the characteristics of animals and other species of wildlife canvassed in this novel is their predatory behaviour; some feed on particular creatures. 'But as it tried to strike its first blow, the Viperman discovered that it was not fighting a condor at all, but the most feared enemy of any snake: a mongoose.' (p 231) What other particular predatory behaviour was revealed in this text?

Discussion Point: 'You have to be careful not to let the creature's instinct take control of you completely. But there's nothing like being able to take full advantage of the freedom and power of inhabiting a different species.'(p 25) What animal would you choose to turn into if you were a Turner? Why? Have fun with your students imagining the perfect animal to 'Turn' into in order to escape a sticky situation. When Abbie and Leo are caught in the hamster farm, they imagine the sort of animal they might need to be to escape: "Have you tried Turning?" "Not yet. I was waiting for the opportune moment." "Now seems pretty good." "Right you are." He heard her breathe in deeply. "It'll need to be something small and agile to get out of these ropes," said Leo ... "I'd just hate you to Turn into a slug or something," he added.' (pp 188–9) Then consider the animals you would not like to turn into.

- **Genetic Food Modification**

Discussion Point: The very contemporary issue of factory farming chicken and other meat to feed the mass market is raised in the NEDRUM'S CHIGGENS operation run by Leo and Abbie's ghastly Aunt Eyra 'Those-are-hamster-meat-too.' Abbie's face had changed from white to green. 'Why not just farm chickens?!' 'I-produce-hamster-meat-at-three-per-cent-the-cost-of-any-other-species-of-livestock. None-of-my-clients-has-complained-yet.' (p 200) Debate the ethics of such farming.

Discussion Point: The effects of such farming have impacted on Aunt Eyra too: 'Breeding-chemicals,' she said, massaging the electro larynx against her throat. 'Chemicals-to-accelerate-growth. To-stunt-growth. To-alter. To-evolve. All-very-effective. Eventually. But-also-unstable. Radioactive. Toxic-even,-with-prolonged-exposure.' (p 200) Research the side-effects of such chemical intervention in natural processes.

Discussion Point: The novel also takes aim at farming which purports to be ‘sustainable’: ‘Their-flesh-tastes-like-chicken-but-they’re-so-bony. But-without-legs-they-are-free-to-grow-fat. I-even-introduced-a-moulting-gene-to-make-them-shed-their-fur-prior-to-harvesting. They-make-excellent-pillow-stuffing. I-have-orders-from-all-over-the-world. We-even-grind-up-their-bones-into-garden-fertiliser. Very-self-sufficient-farming-practices-don’t-you-think?’ (p 201) Research the topic of ‘sustainability’ in relation to contemporary farming practices.

Activity: Research some genetically modified or cloned animals, eg Dolly the Sheep or featherless chickens.

Activity: Research factory farming of chickens.

(Any of the topics above might be researched online, so only sample references have been included in the **Bibliography**.)

ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERACY

Study the writing style employed in this narrative, and examine the following sub-topics:

- **Genre – Shape-Shifter Fantasy**

Discussion Point: This is a shape-shifter adventure/fantasy in which two teenage shape-shifters find themselves engaged in Indiana Jones–like escapades, pursued by two Vipermen, a crocodile (gharial), komodo dragons, piranha fish and a bear. Discuss the conventions of such adventure/fantasies and how this novel employs them.

Discussion Point: ‘How many Turners are there?’ he asked. ‘It’s impossible to know exactly,’ said Vernon. ‘We’ve worked hard to keep it that way. But it’s thought to be only one for every ten thousand or so people. It is hereditary, and tends to be the dominant gene passed down from generation to generation.’(p 21) This introduces the fantasy ‘world’ which Leo has entered as a Turner. The conventions of such a fantasy require that the secondary world has rules and conventions, which are gradually built up as the novel progresses. What other rules govern the ‘Turners’ world?

Discussion Point: The ‘shape-shifter’ is a particular type of archetype within the fantasy genre. Research at sites such as Fraser, Christine, ‘3 Roles of the shapeshifter character archetype’ <<http://www.betternovelproject.com/blog/shapeshifter/>>

Discussion Point: Read other books about shape-shifting such as those mentioned at: ‘Popular Young Adult Shape Shifter Books’ <<http://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/young-adult-shape-shifter>>

Discussion Point: With the Idiosphere, Leo reads the rare Almanac presented to him by his dad on his thirteenth birthday. It provides some background to his new-found skills, but because Leo has special skills it doesn't contain all the information he needs. What makes Leo different to other Turners?

Discussion Point: Elements of the grotesque horror novel appear throughout this work. For example, the description of Aunt Eyra suspending the four Turners over the carnivorous pigs (pp 213–14) is particularly gruesome. What other aspect of the novel did you find horrific?

Discussion Point: Compare the way Leo copes with 'Turning' to how Abbie deals with this skill.

• Literary Devices

Activity: Find examples of the use of literary devices in this novel, using the table below to identify examples.

Simile	eg 'diving towards her like a torpedo.' (p 167)
Metaphors	
Personification	
Other?	
Literary Reference	eg ' <i>He-looks-rather-majestic-suspended-with-that-hammer-in-his-little-paw. Shall-we-call-him-"Thaw"?</i> ' (p 206)

Activity: Leo loves word play (pp 2–3). Discuss some of your favourite words.



• Humour

Activity: This is a constant aspect of the narrative, often explored via dialogue, eg ' "Thanks, Abbie," he said. "That was just the sort of pep talk I needed. You should write motivational posters." ' (p 160) Identify incidents which are particularly humorous.

Activity: Identify techniques by which humour is generated. For example, this novel is full of the sort of scatological humour which readers of Roald Dahl, David Walliams and Andy Griffiths love. Add quotes to the following table:

Sarcasm	'Yep,' said Abbie. 'And if that happens again, either I'll kill you or you'll kill us both.' Leo swallowed hard. 'No pressure, then.' (p 162)
Irony	
Exaggeration	
Black Humour	'I-asked,' it said, 'if-we-should-sprinkle-your-sister-with-a-little-salt?' (p 194) 'Suddenly the pig dropped back onto the mud, leaving Trimble with one less toe. 'Entrée-is-served!' said Aunt Eyra, her voice a shrill singsong from the electro larynx. 'Mains-are-about-to-arrive.' (p 222)
Scatological Humour	'Titmouse. He and Jinks always cracked up at that. Did any animal have a more hilarious name? Shih-tzu maybe.' (p 163)
Carnavalesque and Grotesque	'Hamsters, thought Leo shutting his eyes in revulsion. They're giant, hairless, legless hamsters.' (p 173)

• Structure

The structure of the story can be analysed in terms of the key narrative features used to engage the reader's attention:

a) *Strong beginnings and endings to chapters* are one way of structuring a narrative, for example: Beginning: 'Leo didn't mean to demolish the living room.' (Ch 8, p 50)

Ending: 'Leaper smiled toothily. 'That's the real question, isn't it?' (Ch 18, p 106)

b) *Suspense* can be built by using leading statements such as: 'Later he would reflect that being covered in gorilla droppings would have been nothing compared to what was to come.' (p 49) Or it can be developed using clues to keep the reader guessing, eg the ways Leo and Abbie locate the address of the spare parts dealer in Swindleton (p 66).

Activity: Find other examples of how suspense is built in this novel.

Activity: Draw up a list of these and other key strategies used in this novel's narrative structure.

• Setting

Discussion Point: Choose a passage which describes the locale vividly for you. Discuss the passage with the class, eg 'The zoo is inside Yakspike Island, five kilometres or so off the coast of Wharfport. It juts out of the ocean like a giant knife. It has sheer granite walls on every side with no entry point onto which a boat can be moored. It bears no sign of life but for a single tree, which rises from its uppermost peak. It is totally inhospitable to humans, which is why nobody ever goes there.' (p 105)

• Characters

These include **Major characters**: Leo Lennox, his father Vernon, and sister, Abbie; Lily Cummings; Jimmy Tonkins, Leo's best friend; Gary Leaper; Neville the Chimpanzee mechanic; Emerson Trimble; Aunt Eyra.

Activity: Draw up a character chart and find key quotes which give a clear picture of any of these characters, and isolate events which demonstrate their natures. Then write a brief character study of the person using the quotes and events to illustrate the points made in your summary.

Question: Which character was most intriguing and why? Which character would you like to have heard more about?

Activity: Some characters are described in vivid details using metaphors which indicate their nature, eg 'The man's potato-shaped body was squeezed into tight grey coveralls and a black turtleneck skivvy that struggled to contain the fleshy jowls hanging from his meaty cheeks. His pug-like face was too small for the wrecking ball of a head that sat so heavily on his shoulders that his neck had disappeared into his chest. Most peculiarly, his lips were either naturally shiny or glistening with pink lipstick.' (p 192) Find other examples of this sort of characterisation.

• Sequels and Series

Activity: Read the teaser at the end of the book. What might happen in this second novel? Write an imagined synopsis.

• Visual Literacy

Activity: Create a graphic novel interpretation of an incident in the novel. (See **Bibliography** for resources.)

Activity: Design a different cover for this book. (See **Bibliograph** for resources.)

Activity: Create a book trailer for this novel. (See **Bibliograph** for resources.)

Activity: Read the description of the 'Viperman' (p 56) and then draw your own interpretation of him.

FURTHER QUOTES FOR DISCUSSION

Read the following quotes and discuss them in relation to themes raised above:

1. 'Abbie finished painting the last stroke of glossy black polish on her little toe. Black was her preferred colour for all things. Hair. Clothes. Attitude. She had long since concealed all the elements that identified her as Leo's sister.' (p 11)
2. 'Turning isn't a disease,' said Abbie ardently, her eyes burning with enthusiasm. 'It's a power, a gift.' (p 20)
3. 'By Leaper's account, Wharfport had once been a thriving fishing town; in fact, it had thrived so successfully that there were no fish left. Relentless trawling had left only toadfish in its once teeming bay.' (p 107)
4. 'This is big, Leo,' she said. 'If you were a freak before, this confirms that you're king of the freaks. For all we know, you could be a ticking Turn-bomb.' (p 131)
5. 'I am forever discovering that we Turners have barely scratched the surface of our potential as a species.' (p 141)

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

1. Choose a scene from the novel, **write a script** and then act out the scene for your classmates.
2. **Design a poster** to advertise this book. (See Bibliography for resources.)
3. The **title** of any book is important. What other title might this one have had?
4. **Write a song** about Leo and Abbie's experiences.
5. **Debate any of the topics** covered in this novel.

CONCLUSION

This action-packed adventure is irreverent and topical. It deals with the issue of growing up but also with genetic engineering and the ethics of animal modification. It's a shape-shifter adventure/fantasy which has a lot to say, too, about becoming a teenager and learning to be yourself.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author Biography

Mick Elliott is a children's television producer, scriptwriter and animator. Since 2001 he has worked at Nickelodeon Australia, overseeing award-winning series for kids of all ages. His credits as producer include **CAMP ORANGE**, **PLAY ALONG WITH OLLIE**, **SLIMEFEST** and hundreds of advertising campaigns. His work at Nickelodeon has won more than twenty international awards, while his animated short films have screened at over sixty festivals worldwide.

Mick lives in Sydney with his wife, two kids and a garden full of lizards. Do not under any circumstances follow him on Instagram! But if you must, ask your parents first.

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Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. In 2011, she was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, in 2012, the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Australia, and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award.

