

THE BOY WHO LOST HIS SPARK

Maggie O'Farrell

Illustrated by Daniela Jaglenka Terrazzini

Walker Books

Hardback, 112PP, £14.99

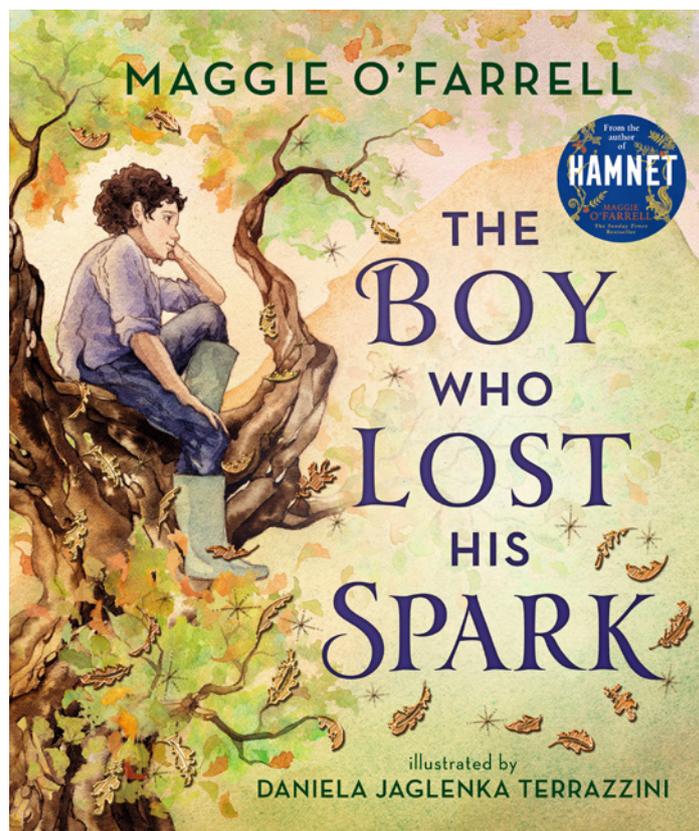
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Themes

- Coping with sadness
- Dealing with change
- Mischief and magic
- The senses
- Knowledge vs feeling
- Nature and landscape

Summary When Jem and his family move to the countryside, he doesn't like his new home one bit. It's an old cottage on the side of a hill, where strange things keep happening: shoes are filled up with conkers; the stairs become tangled in a woollen maze. Jem's sister Verity is certain it is the work of a 'nouka', an ancient creature from local folklore that lives deep down inside the hill. Jem, however, is adamant that there is no such thing. But this small mythical creature, so attuned to the hearts and minds of others, does exist. And, what's more, it is determined, through mischief and mayhem, to help Jem reignite the spark within himself once more.

Judges' Comments This remarkable and moving story of Jem as he tries to adapt to his new life in the countryside is a refreshingly quiet tale about the necessity of having a little bit of magic in life. Unhappy with his lot, Jem begins to see his world differently when a mischievous little creature called a nouka makes its presence known. The calmness of the tale reminds readers that they are in the hands of assured and expert storytellers: writer and illustrator have created a special narrative that readers will want to revisit time and time again.



About the Author Maggie O'Farrell was born in Coleraine, County Derry, and now lives in Scotland. Her books for adults have received international acclaim, including *After You'd Gone*, *The Hand That First Held Mine* and, most famously, *Hamnet*. *Where Snow Angels Go* was her first book for children, and *The Boy Who Lost His Spark* was inspired by the stories told by her Dubliner father when she was growing up.

About the Illustrator Daniela Jaglenka Terrazzini studied fine art in Milan and moved to London to study photography at the London College of Printing. She is now an illustrator of both detailed paintings and graphic surface patterns. She has illustrated numerous children's books, including *Where Snow Angels Go* by Maggie O'Farrell and *The Night I Met Father Christmas* by Ben Miller. Follow her on Twitter as @DJTerrazzini and Instagram as @danielajterrazzini.

QUESTIONS

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

1. Look at the title, typography and illustration on the front cover. Do they make you want to read the book? Why or why not? What do you think this book is about? What atmosphere is created?
2. What is your first impression of the character on the cover?
3. Look at the back cover, inside the dust jacket and at the endpapers. How do they add to your overall impression of the book? Do they change what you think the book will be about?
4. Look at the illustrations inside the dust jacket. What sort of animal or creature do you think this is? Can you make out what the writing says?
5. Look at the endpapers. Who do you think has made these footprints?

AS YOU READ

Pages 1–15

1. Do you think Verity or the nouka is behind the mischief?
2. What do you imagine a nouka might look like?
3. How does Jem feel about the family's move? How does he cope with his feelings? Have you ever felt his way? What sort of things made you feel better?
4. How does the illustrator show how Jem is feeling?

Pages 16–21

1. What sort of relationship do Jem and Verity have?
2. Do you think the noukas are real?
3. Why do you think Jem decides he has had enough of the conversation?
4. How does the illustrator show the differences between Jem and Verity?

Pages 22–31

1. Do you think that Jem is a 'troublemaker', like his teacher says?
2. Why do you think Jem wants to hide the difficulties he has?
3. Does the illustrator do a good job of showing Jem falling off his chair?
4. Why do you think Jem is so fascinated by the volcano? Why does his teacher not encourage this interest?

5. Something in the old woman's tone reminds Jem that this woman had once been a teacher. Can you read out the woman's line in a teacherly voice?
6. Why do you think Jem refuses to believe the old woman about the noukas?

Pages 32–39

1. Did the nouka look how you imagined? How do the pictures of the nouka add to your impression of it?
2. Why do you think the nouka lives 'beneath the grass, beneath the soil, through the layers and layers of rock, deep down inside the hill'? Does the illustrator do a good job of showing this?
3. What exactly woke the nouka? What sorts of things can the nouka sense?
4. Do you think that Jem's teacher will be so impressed with the drawing that he won't notice the spelling, as Jem hopes? Do you think the spelling should matter?
5. How are Jem's thoughts and feelings in conflict? Have you ever experienced anything like this?

Pages 40–53

1. The nouka enters the house through a little swinging flap in the door. What do you think this is actually for?
2. How are the nouka's senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch) different to those of a human? Can you find an example of each (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch) in this section? Does this help bring the scene to life for you? Can you imagine yourself in the nouka's shoes?
3. Why do you think the nouka is so drawn to the fire? Does this remind you of anyone or anything else?
4. How does the illustrator create a different mood inside and outside the house?
5. Why do you think the illustrator chose to hide part of the mother's face and body on page 54?
6. What effect does the nouka's song have on others? If the nouka sang to you, what sorts of things might you hear and do?
7. Why is the nouka looking for Jem?

Pages 54–65

1. Why do you think the baby can see the nouka, but others can't?
2. How does the author show how old the nouka is?
3. How do you think the nouka plans to persuade Jem to stop bottling up all his sadness?
4. If the nouka came across your parent or guardian or teacher, what sort of unexpected thing might it convince them to do?

5. Why do you think the school gates are one of the nouka's favourite spots?
6. What are the marks on Jem's diagram? Who do you think made them? Do you think it was fair that Jem's teacher made him redo the diagram?
7. What mood does the illustrator create in the school-yard spread, and how?

Pages 66–71

1. What do you think happened to all the other noukas? Where did they go?
2. What sorts of things do people believe in that they cannot see?
3. 'The kinds of things we all get the urge to do but usually stop ourselves' – can you think of any other examples? What stops people doing these things?
4. Are you ever 'unpredictable, restless, sparky'? How might this be a good thing? Can it ever be good to be naughty?
5. 'Maybe we could all do with a shake-up now and then, to let our wild sides take over. People have to let off steam sometimes, just like a volcano. It would never do to keep everything locked up inside us, would it?' What do you think? What sorts of things could you do to let off steam?
6. Why can Jem not wrap his head around the origin of the noukas? Do you agree with the old woman that life would be dull if we understood everything about it? What sorts of mysteries fascinate you?

Pages 72–84

1. Why do you think the leaf-fight didn't have the desired effect on Jem? What might the nouka try instead?
2. Why do you think Jem, unlike other humans, is able to hear the nouka?
3. How do both the author and the illustrator create suspense as Jem approaches and uncovers the nouka?
4. How does Jem now feel in this landscape? Does it remind you of anyone earlier on in the story?

Pages 85–89

1. How does Jem feel upon seeing the nouka for the first time? How does the author show this?
2. Why does Jem like it when the nouka visits, do you think?
3. Why do you think the nouka darts off?
4. Do you think Verity will get to see the nouka? Why or why not?

Pages 90–101

1. Why do you think Jem wants to have a fire at the top of the hill? What convinces his mother to do so?
2. How would you describe the mood in the spread on pages 98–99?
3. What effect has the nouka's touch had on Jem? How has Jem's body language changed since the beginning of the story? Why do you think Jem now likes it here?
4. Who do you think the leaping figure is, and why are they clapping?

Pages 102–112

1. Would you like to celebrate nouka day?
2. Do you think Jem or Verity will ever see the nouka again?
3. Did you like the 'Song of the Nouka'? Why do you think the lyrics and musical notation were included? Have we seen the nouka writing or lyrics on any previous pages?

AFTER YOU HAVE READ

1. Does the nouka remind you of any real-life animals or legendary creatures?
2. What is the most mischievous thing you have ever done? Did you get into trouble for it?
3. Did you enjoy the story? Why or why not? What part of the story did you enjoy the most?
4. What did you think of the ending? Why do you think the writer ended the story this way?
5. Who was your favourite character and why?
6. How would you describe the setting? Would you like to live here? Do you prefer the city or the countryside, and why?
7. What season do you think this story is set in, and why?
8. What was your favourite picture or spread (two facing pages) from the book, and why?
9. How many times did the spreads contain no writing at all? Did you like when this happened?
10. Do you think the cover illustration was strong? Would you have picked something else? Why or why not?
11. Do you like the colours used in the pictures?
12. How did the pictures make you feel?
13. Does the illustrator show us anything that the writer does not mention?

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR OLDER READERS

1. What is the main conflict or problem at the heart of this story?
2. What do you think is the message of this story?
3. Do you think it's important to express your feelings? Why?
4. Do you think science and reason have all the answers, or are there some things we can only know through feeling and intuition? Can you give examples?
5. What words would you use to describe the different characters in the book? Could you relate to any of the characters? Do you think the illustrator did a good job of giving personality to the characters or of showing us how they are feeling?
6. How does Jem change throughout the story, and why?
7. How would you describe the atmosphere of this book? How do the author and illustrator each create this atmosphere?
8. What was your favourite description in the book? Why do you think the author used so many different senses in their descriptions? Were there any words you didn't understand?
9. How do you think the artist created the pictures? Do you think these were good choices for the story? Why or why not?
10. How would you describe the illustrator's style? Does it remind you of anything?
11. What colour scheme does the illustrator mainly use? Why? Does it ever change? If so, why?
12. Do you like the typography? When did the illustrator play with the font, and why?
13. Why do some spreads have no words? What effect does this have?
14. How does the illustrator make use of space throughout the story? Do they use full or empty backgrounds? When do they use framed panels or full bleeds? Why do you think they made these choices?
15. Did you enjoy looking at the pictures alongside the text? If you were to take away the words, would you still be able to understand what was happening in the story? If you were to take away the pictures, would anything be lost?
16. Are there any parts of the story that you think should have been illustrated but were not?
17. What age group do you think this book is intended for and why?
18. In your opinion, is this a picturebook, a chapter book or something else?

ACTIVITIES

- Using the alphabet on pages 110–111 as a guide, try writing your name in the nouka language. Write it out nice and big on an A4 page.
- Imagine a nouka has made its way into your house. What would it see, smell, hear, taste and feel? Try describing things without naming them. Share your descriptions with a classmate, and see if they can guess what sorts of things the nouka came across in your house.
- Draw some pictures of what you think the world looked like in the time of the noukas.
- Ask the oldest person you know to tell you about a local legend from their childhood. Share it with your class. See if there are any similarities between the legends.
- Head into the school yard for your very own wild rumpus. Standing in a circle, ask each student to one by one make a noise and/or movement that is sillier than the last. Finally, ask everyone to perform together for the ultimate wild rumpus!
- With the help of an adult, try the ‘How to Make a Volcano DIY Science Experiment’, as shown on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AqoOOJ3H_I), or the ‘Coke and Mentos Science Experiment for Kids’, also on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRAE1jf_y3s). Just before setting off the explosion, think of a feeling you have been bottling up inside of you. As the explosion kicks off, imagine that feeling is also being released.

ACTIVITIES FOR OLDER READERS

- Using the alphabet on pages 110–111 as a guide, try writing a secret message in the nouka language. Swap with a friend or classmate, and see if they can decode your message.
- Try performing the ‘Song of the Nouka’ as a class. For inspiration, use the lyrics on pages 110–111 and the music notation on page 112, as well as listening to the recording of ‘An Seandúine Dóite’ or ‘The Burnt Old Man’ linked in the Further Resources section below. Some students could sing while others might be able to play instruments.
- Research April Fool’s Day around the world. How do different countries celebrate mischief and mayhem? Using this as inspiration, plan your own prank or trick for April Fool’s Day this year. Try to think of something harmless that will bring a little fun and silliness to someone’s life, just in the style of the nouka!
- ‘Now isn’t that [...] just exactly what makes life interesting – the things that don’t make sense? Wouldn’t life be dull if we understood everything about it?’ As a class, create a Wonder Wall full of mysteries and questions that science doesn’t have the answers for!

FURTHER RESOURCES

- See the Walker Books book trailer for *The Boy Who Lost His Spark* on YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EETEQ0g5SG4>
- Listen to a recording of ‘An Seanduine Dóite’ or ‘The Burnt Old Man’, the old Irish jig which inspired the music notation for ‘Song of the Nouka’: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RN5MmXHSt2g>
- Read about the púca, the creature of Irish folklore that Maggie O’Farrell used as inspiration for her nouka, in ‘Púca Facts for Kids’ on Kiddle:
<https://kids.kiddle.co/P%C3%BAca>
- Find out more about the author’s inspiration for the book by reading this interview with Maggie O’Farrell from the *Irish Examiner*:
<https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/artsandculture/arid-40981718.html>
- Find out more about illustrator Daniela Terrazzini by reading ‘Meet the Artists: Daniela Terrazzini’ on the Artworks website:
<https://www.theartworksinc.com/2020/06/19/meet-the-artists-daniela-terrazzini/>
- Learn about Daniela Terrazzini’s process for making the artwork for *The Boy Who Lost His Spark* on Walker Picture Books’ Instagram page (Big Picture Books):
 - <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cjz3sU3I3gA/>
 - <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cj0bcaUIBvT/>
 - <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cj1YxvuqdcH/>
 - https://www.instagram.com/p/Cj2C_UyIBzI/
 - <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cj2tD4boDiV/>
 - <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cj3NHAnITHC/>
 - <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cj4k5q6ImXI/>
 - <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cj5ob7nogZo/>
 - <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cj6AF-GgKml/>
- Check out these Children’s Books Ireland themed reading lists:
 - Difficult Changes: https://childrensbooksireland.ie/sites/default/files/2021-08/CBI_Book_List_Difficult_Changes.pdf
 - Emotional Well-Being: https://childrensbooksireland.ie/sites/default/files/2021-08/CBI_Book_List_Emotional_Well-being.pdf
 - Folklore, Myth, Legend: https://childrensbooksireland.ie/sites/default/files/2021-08/CBI_Book_List_Folklore_Myth_Legend.pdf
- Check out Children’s Books Ireland’s *Mind Yourself* reading guide:
https://childrensbooksireland.ie/sites/default/files/2021-08/CBI_ReadingGuide_Mind_Yourself_2020.pdf
- Check out Children’s Books Ireland’s *Mind Yourself* videos for creative workshops on sensory storytelling and more:
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-1adldGTpDvnGu7db6-SIAIq-aNgKO5J>