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# SOLOMON MACARONI AND THE COUSIN CATASTROPHE

## Ashleigh Barton



### Teachers' Notes

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**SYNOPSIS**

Things have changed for vampires now that magical species have all but lost their abilities. For Solomon, this suits him just fine. He is content ironing the creases from his cape, preparing his favourite vegetarian dish and keeping things neat and tidy. But when his parents take their dream holiday, Solomon is sent to live with his Uncle Dracula for the next 100 years – after all, vampires live for an extraordinarily long time! Luckily, his cousin Lucy isn't half as naughty as her unruly siblings, who delight in preying on Solomon's gullibility.

Things take a turn for the worse when the cousins venture into Wildwood, one of the few places where magic – and werewolves, imps and ghosts – still exist. When Lucy decides she must rescue them, Solomon reluctantly agrees to join her – along with his tiny but very cool spider friend, Fred.

*Solomon Macaroni and the Cousin Catastrophe* is a hilarious, quirky, and highly original novel which at its heart is a story about belonging, family and love.

**THEMES**

- Courage
- Family
- Love
- Vampires
- Magic
- Greed
- Humour

**WRITING STYLE**

*Solomon Macaroni and the Cousin Catastrophe* is a vampire comedy written in third person, past tense. Solomon's world is hilarious, and Ashleigh Barton has created a fabulous setting in which wild inventions, idiosyncratic uncles and rather crafty spiders thrive. There are several laugh-out-loud moments in this original and very quirky tale. It should be noted that the cousins' mother has died, and their venture into Wildwood is in hopes of a spell being cast to enable her resurrection. This spell requires something precious to be sacrificed, which initially looks to be one of the children. This is thankfully averted by Solomon's quick thinking. For sensitive readers, however, this content may raise concerns. That said, the perils of messing with the natural order are dealt with appropriately. It is suitable for middle readers.

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**STUDY NOTES**

- Discuss the opening sentence of chapter 1. How does it help to instantly engage the reader? How has the problem been introduced so quickly in the first chapter? Why is this important?
- How and why does magic manage 'to bring out the very worst in most people' (p. 2)? What evidence is there of this later in the text?
- Using the description on p. 7, sketch Mamma Macaroni. Discuss the language features that allow readers to visualise her so well.
- In the role of Solomon, write a journal entry upon discovering your parents are going on a 100-year-long holiday. How are you feeling about going to Uncle Dracula's for this amount of time?
- Throughout the text, Solomon is reminded of his father's words of wisdom. How does his father influence Solomon's actions throughout the story?
  - 'Family is family, and there is nothing more important than that' (p. 7)
  - 'Your dad is always talking about how important it is to help others' (p. 150)
  - Knowledge is power (p. 157)
  - Persistence, his dad always said, was the key to success (p. 206)
  - His dad always said to never ignore an instinct (p. 211)
- Make predictions about Fred's whereabouts when Solomon goes to say goodbye to him.
- Compare the images of the cousins on the front cover with their descriptions throughout the text. Who is your favourite cousin? Why?
- In the role of Solomon, write a reflection about your first day living with Uncle Dracula. How does it feel to be all alone in your new bedroom? How does it feel once when you discover Fred has joined you?
- What role does Lucy play in *Solomon Macaroni and the Cousin Catastrophe*? Why is she needed in the text?
- Why is Solomon so cross about the food fight?
- Create some props that share your understanding of Solomon's character. Ideas include his cape, his Wipe-Off-Anything wipes or the PowerSteam Iron 4500.
- Create a Character Iceberg of Solomon. Above the surface, note what we are literally told about him. Beneath the surface, add what readers must infer. Why is it important that readers have both literal and inferential information about characters?
- What are the differences and similarities between Solomon and Bruno? What would they admire about one another? What might frustrate them?
- Solomon often has one-way conversations with Fred. Try creating your own conversation with Fred using this same writing style (see ch 6).

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- How does Solomon feel when he learns his mother had a mischievous streak? Why might this surprise him?
- What does Solomon mean when he says to Fred, 'You of all people should know that little doesn't mean *not big*' (p. 66)?
- Why do the cousins get annoyed with Solomon for being homesick and missing his mother?
- Discuss Ashleigh Barton's use of figurative language in *Solomon Macaroni and the Cousin Catastrophe*. Some examples include:
  - Every magical species [was] losing their abilities ... one after the other like lights blinking off across the city skyline at night-time (p. 1)
  - He hurried towards Solomon like a duck rushing on an urgent errand (p. 8)
  - 'It's heavier than a hippopotamus' (p. 9)
  - His cape was always as smooth as a crushed-up paper bag (p. 10)
  - His stomach was full of moths. They were bouncing around like they were having a dance party in there. (p. 11)
  - Solomon was often reminded of a praying mantis whenever he saw Bruno (p. 30)
  - Maude and Claudette waded in beside him, their dark hair floating around them like octopus tentacles (p. 33)
  - The water became so deep Solomon had to kick his legs like an egg beater just to keep his head above it (p. 34)
  - Their voices were so loud and high-pitched they pierced through Solomon's ears and straight into his brain like it was being attacked by a jackhammer (p. 35)
  - Bruno, Maude, Claudette, Thyme and Elvis stared at Lucy like she had confessed to enjoying earwax sandwiches (p. 48)
  - Uncle Dracula seemed to be boiling like a kettle that was about to blow its lid (p. 109)
  - Lucy took a deep breath. She let it out again slowly, like a balloon deflating through a tiny piercing (p. 162)
  - Solomon and Lucy walked beneath an almost-full moon that seemed three times its usual size, as though someone had pulled it closer to earth (p. 163)
  - Lucy ran a few paces forwards and then stopped suddenly as though she'd made a false start in a running race (p. 167)
  - The whole place smelt musty, like a cupboard that hadn't been opened in centuries (p. 168)
  - He hoped that Fred... wasn't suffering from the pain that zipped through Solomon's body like an out-of-control race car that had been lit on fire and set loose in his veins (p. 169)

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- A gusty wind blew, whipping up and down around Lucy and Solomon like their own personal tornado (p. 173)
- The wind stopped, leaving him and Lucy looking like a pair of stunned scarecrows (p. 173)
- Her hair was sticking out at every angle like it had been charged with static electricity (p. 174)
- Solomon squeezed his hands into white-knuckled balls at his sides (p. 186)
- 'I continue to age like a fine cheese' (p. 237)
- Discuss Solomon's realisation that, 'sometimes things were about creating a little bit of joy' (p. 117).
- Why, when they're upset about their mother, do the cousins take it out on their father?
- How was life different for Solomon's parents when they were young and vampire magic still existed?
- Discuss the popular culture references that make *Solomon Macaroni and the Cousin Catastrophe* so engaging for readers, such as:
  - *Transylvania's Got Talent*
  - Cereal eg Dragon Drops and Poison Puffs
  - Harry Potter/Twilight references
 Brainstorm others that could be included.
- Why, when Solomon's parents call, does he hide his true feelings from them? What does this tell us about Solomon's strength of character?
- Write the letter that Solomon sends to Fred's family (see p. 141).
- Why does Lucy say that his parents would understand him 'doing something for the greater good' (p. 149)? From what you know about his parents, do you agree with her? Discuss.
- Before reading beyond chapter 12, make predictions about what may happen in Wildwood.
- Solomon does not believe he has the skills to be of any assistance in Wildwood. How does this prove to be wrong?
- What small details in *Solomon Macaroni and the Cousin Catastrophe* make it especially funny and engaging? Add to the list below:
  - Solomon's pyjamas, his dressing cape, Uncle Dracula sliding around in his red pyjamas, the Vampolice etc
- Why does Uncle Dracula spend so much time trying to make other people happy? How would Solomon's dad explain this (see p. 86)?
- Discuss how time is used humorously in *Solomon Macaroni and the Cousin Catastrophe*.
- What is the role of books and reading in *Solomon Macaroni and the Cousin Catastrophe*? Why does Lucy offer her library as a safe place for Solomon?

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- Why is Solomon so desperate to find a way to get home? What advice would you give him to help with his homesickness?
- Describe what mealtimes are like in Uncle Dracula's house.
- Which character from *Solomon Macaroni and the Cousin Catastrophe* are you most like? Why?
- Draw a line diagonally on a piece of A3 paper. On opposite sides of the line, create a visual depiction of Solomon's life before and after he goes to live with his cousins.
- In small groups, choose a scene depicted in one of the illustrations to dramatise to your class.
- Perform a read-aloud in the role of Uncle Dracula.
- What is so funny about the novels that Uncle Dracula is writing? Why does he say that the Larry Otter novel is 'like it's writing itself' (p. 148)?
- Before reading further, make predictions about how the things Solomon packs into his cape pockets may come in handy in Wildwood (p. 159).
- Why does Solomon sometimes prefer to worry (p. 164)?
- Discuss the language features used to describe the entry to Wildwood (pp. 165-7). Why is it important that readers can visualise as they read? Sketch a part of this scene.
- How does *Solomon Macaroni and the Cousin Catastrophe* address the importance of breaking stereotypes, such as beliefs about vampires? How does Solomon break this mould?
- Retell part of the story from Fred's point of view.
- When the children argue over who should sacrifice themselves, they each say nice things about one another. What are the qualities of each of the siblings?
- Solomon knows when he needs to 'call in a grown-up' (p. 231). Why is this so important in life? Share a time when you had to call in a grown-up or didn't but wish you had.
- What is the significance of Solomon sacrificing his cape?
- Why does Thyme say Solomon should be honoured that they gave him a nickname? Have you ever been given a nickname you didn't like? Share with a friend.
- Why, now that his cape is gone, does Solomon feel more relaxed? After receiving his new cape, how will Solomon use it differently?
- Remembering their mother is important to the cousins. Why does their father avoid this for so long? How do you think life will improve for the family now that they are able to openly talk about their mother?
- How is Solomon's mother different from his father? Why do they make such a compatible couple? What does Solomon learn from both of his parents?



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- Why is Solomon glad that Lucy lied to him about the forest after all? How would his life be different without that experience?
- Respond to the following realisation by Solomon: ‘Home wasn’t a place. It was people’ (p. 274).
- Why has Arrubakook the Kookaburra been included in the text? How would the story be different without her?
- Find out more about vampire mythology and how Ashleigh Barton has used these details for comedic effect. Examples include:
  - Brams (p. 152)
  - Stoker Boulevard (p. 163)
  - Quadruple-strength Garlic Drops
  - Uncle Dracula sleeping with his hands crossed over his chest as though he were in a coffin
  - Drinking blood (and the fact Solomon is a vegetarian)
  - Brushing their fangs
- Using the chapter headings as a guide, create a story map to capture the main characters, settings and events of the story.
- Create a floorplan of Uncle Dracula’s house and grounds. Create a drawing of your favourite space of his home.
- Discuss the recurring theme in *Solomon Macaroni and the Cousin Catastrophe* that ‘family is family’ (p. 154). Share your own ideas about this in a reflection.

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

Solomon Macaroni is a character I invented when I was about eight years old. Though he is technically a vampire, I’ve never imagined him as a traditional vampire. He isn’t the scary kind, he’s certainly not mean and he has no need (and doesn’t want) to drink blood. When I decided, many years later, to write a story about this friendly and very polite vampire, I knew that I needed to place him in a world where the fact that he is not-quite-a-vampire made sense. And so, I created a world where magic no longer exists in its full capacity. From here, I had so much fun making up the rules and subverting expectations. This was a great reminder that whether you’re eight years old or five-hundred-and-fifty-two or somewhere in between, there’s no limit when it comes to imagination.

In the end, what I hope I have written is a story that makes people smile and maybe even laugh out loud, while also reassuring us that it’s okay to be different. This, of course, means accepting others for their differences too.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Ashleigh Barton is a bestselling children's author from Sydney, Australia. After completing a law degree, Ashleigh decided she preferred books and spent the next six years working in publishing where she ran marketing and publicity campaigns for internationally renowned authors and illustrators. Now she writes books of her own, in between looking after her three small children and freelance copywriting. Her picture book *What Do You Call Your Grandma?* has been shortlisted in the 2022 CBCA Book of the Year Awards.