

Teachers' Notes
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Doubting Thomas by Morris Gleitzman

Thomas is very concerned; his nipples itch uncontrollably for no apparent reason – what could possibly be happening to him? After several embarrassing incidents, Thomas realizes that his nipples respond to lies being told around him. Meanwhile, problems concerning Thomas's parents are beginning to unfold creating all kinds of stress for the family.

Thomas may be a human lie detector but it appears that this skill comes at a cost. Research reveals to him and his friends that his 'talent' may doom him to an early death unless they find out how to cure him. The key appears to be a woman in Paris, France who has somehow beaten the curse that has afflicted all others with similar talent.

A stint on the game show *Liar Liar* enables Thomas to raise the money to fly himself, his parents and his friends to Paris in an attempt to uncover the information that he needs. The answer ends up being in the hands of Thomas and those around him – if the lying stops so will the itching.

Structure and Style

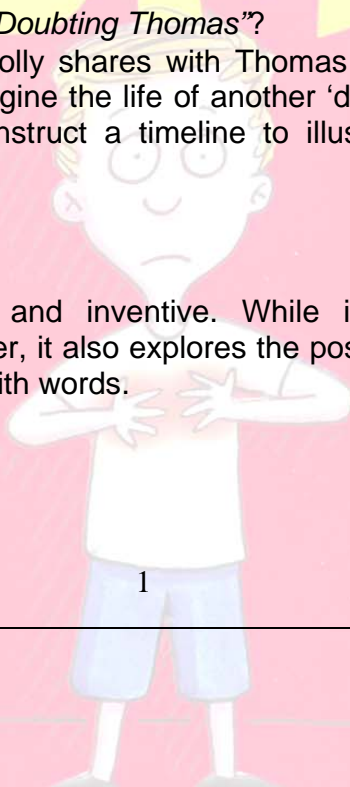
Title

Consider the meaning of the title.

- Who was the original "*Doubting Thomas*"?
- On pages 83 to 86 Holly shares with Thomas what she has found out about 'doubters' – Imagine the life of another 'doubter' in history. Write a brief biography or construct a timeline to illustrate what happened to them.

Writing Style

Gleitzman's style is clever and inventive. While it remains relevant and entertaining for the child reader, it also explores the possibilities of language and the enjoyment of having fun with words.



When Thomas's nipples itch, Gleitzman enjoys the words used to describe this rather unusual event. The feeling is variously described as like being:

- 'tickled by a million ants wearing fluffy slippers' (p. 36)
 - 'spring cleaned with a feather duster' (p. 49) this becomes 'nipples gone feather duster' (p. 62)
 - 'nipples went garlic prawn' (p. 81)
- Have fun with words in a similar fashion. Have the students, in small groups, make up descriptive phrases for what it would feel like to have incredibly itchy nipples. Or perhaps work at describing a different affliction affecting another body part.

From pages 73 to 76 Thomas keeps a mission log as he trails his father, trying to discover why he is not at work. The entries are short and listed under specific times, with brief stilted, sentences, almost list-like in style. Discuss with students the necessity of ensuring that the style of writing used for any project suits the need of the creator and what they are trying to convey.

- Analyse this style –what does it conjure in the reader's mind? Discuss the effect. Replicate the style in a short writing exercise.

Gleitzman is interviewed about writing *Doubting Thomas* in an issue of *Mania*. As part of this article, his story-writing checklist is featured in a break-out box. He suggests that writers:

"Ask yourself:

'What is the biggest problem in my main character's life?'

'What can they do to try and solve that problem?'

'What is stopping them solving that problem?'

'Will they solve the problem in the end or not?'" (Mania, December, 2006, p. 90)

- Use this approach as a stimulus for a writing activity. Brainstorm 'problems' to enthuse students about the creative possibilities.

Humour

The humour in *Doubting Thomas* is constructed in a variety of different ways. It is both broad and in-your-face as well as subtle. Writing clever humorous narrative is not easy but Gleitzman is a master at his chosen style. He often has his characters in absurd situations, making crazy plans, or responding to unusual situations and the action that unfolds often leads to very funny episodes (eg. *Misery Guts* or *Blabbermouth*). In others of his works, his characters find themselves in very serious, even life-threatening situations in which their naïve approach leads to humorous moments (eg. *Boy Overboard* or *Once*). As well as this big picture approach to humour, Gleitzman also has fun with words and

imagery, creating funny situations and ideas often through a close analysis of the humour which may be found in everyday situations.

Alisha is a great source of everyday observational humour in *Doubting Thomas*. Thomas says of her: 'Alisha thought about this, chewing her lip. Thomas knew that meant she was concerned. When she was relaxed she just chewed gum.' (p. 59) and later on the same page when Alisha invites him to sit down, Thomas reflects: 'Now Thomas knew she was really concerned. She hadn't invited him to sit next to her for about eight years.' In describing the millions of bones in the catacombs below Paris Thomas reflects that there were: 'Millions of them. And not just kid millions, thought Thomas, stunned. Real millions.' (p. 136)

These kind of humorous asides are clever. They are based on careful observation by Gleitzman of how normal people behave and relate. This is part of Gleitzman's appeal as he creates families and individuals that, on one level, have strange and extraordinary things happen to them but, on another, are recognisable as very ordinary.

- Compare *Doubting Thomas* to one of Gleitzman's other works. Consider elements that both stories share, paying particular attention to style and the devices utilised by Gleitzman to create humour.
- Look for other examples of humorous comments or descriptions within *Doubting Thomas*. List these as a group and then try and write a brief piece of your own that employs similar funny observations to create humour out of an ordinary situation.
- When Thomas tries to do an internet search to find out about itchy nipples, he finds a page discussing grease nipples in engineering applications (p. 33). Brainstorm other possibilities for how words can have other meanings (try to keep it clean!). Have fun using one from your list in an embarrassing story or in a script for a brief comedy sketch.
- Look again at the opening page of the novel. Gleitzman cleverly sets up a humorous situation while creating a mystery to make the reader curious. Why does Thomas have jam on his arm? Why is he in a doctor's surgery? Set students the task of writing an equally inviting, interesting first page/introduction to a story.
- When Holly translates a document from the internet from its original French into English many of the words don't come out exactly right (p. 84). Set the students to rewrite a passage from *Doubting Thomas* as if it has been through an equally inefficient translator. Students must aim to retain meaning but make the piece funny.

Themes

Lying

Unlike Alisha, who is an expert, Thomas is not a talented liar (p. 17). Perhaps if he had been more skilful at it his life may have been easier for him. Alisha believes that *'everybody lies'*, that this is just *'how the world is'* (p. 60).

- Do you think that this is true?

Despite this rather cynical view, at the close of the story Alisha is hoping that *'one day I'll meet a boy who doesn't make things up'* (p. 178). Though she recognises that lying is a big part of the real world, at the same time she hopes for someone who will be genuinely honest with her.

- Are there different degrees of lying? Are there occasions when lying is appropriate? What are white lies?

Thomas is surrounded by people telling all kinds of lies. His father has lost his job but has not told anyone at home (p. 71), his mother's business is not going as well as expected (p. 56) and she is also selling lotion that is not exactly what the label makes it out to be (p. 52).

- Do you think behaviour, or environment, can affect our lives, or our health, in the same manner as Thomas is affected by what is occurring around him?

Thomas being honest with everyone and telling the truth (p. 166) about his misuse of the television program *Liar Liar* is also part of Thomas's cure.

- Do you think that lying can manifest itself as a physical complaint?
- Can we sometimes underestimate the power of our own subconscious?
- What does the word "psychosomatic" mean?

Discuss the following quotes in relation to the action in the text and what Thomas discovers about his ailment and its ultimate cure.

- *'Advertising is legalized lying.'* H. G. Wells
- *'He who has not a good memory should never take upon himself the trade of lying.'* Michel de Montaigne 1533-1592
- *'Truth is beautiful, without doubt, but so are lies.'* Ralph Waldo Emerson 1803-1882



- *'Everybody lies, but it doesn't matter because nobody listens.'* Nick Diamos
- *'There are a terrible lot of lies going around the world, and the worst of it is half of them are true.'* Sir Winston Churchill
- *'Those that think it permissible to tell white lies soon go colour blind.'* Austin O'Malley
- *'A truth that's told with bad intent,
Beats all the lies you can invent'* William Blake
- *'Truth may be out there, but the lies are inside your head.'* Terry Pratchett

Honesty

Holly is portrayed in the text as the one character who is unfailingly honest. When she first accosts Thomas, as he is searching for information on the internet in the school library, she is described as:

'Holly Maxwell, the best behaved and least popular and most dobbing kid in the whole year.' (p. 31)

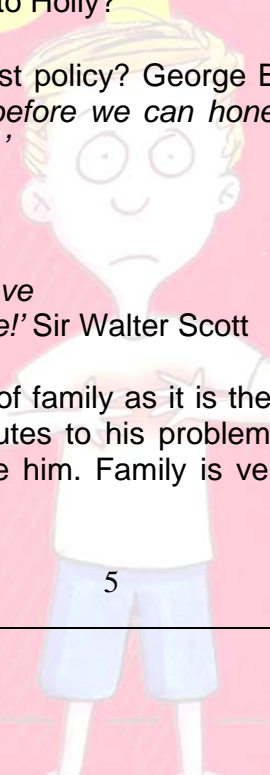
It is Holly's ability to work hard, tell the truth and remain steadfast that ultimately helps Thomas but in the school situation it appears these same characteristics do her no good. Why?

- What do you think? Discuss in relation to the text and the actions of the various characters.
- Thomas Jefferson once said *'Honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom.'* Does this apply to Holly?
- Is honesty always the best policy? George Bernard Shaw said *'We must make the world honest before we can honestly say to our children that honesty is the best policy.'*

Family

*'Oh, what a tangled web we weave
When first we practice to deceive!'* Sir Walter Scott

Gleitzman shows us the power of family as it is the lying behaviour of members of Thomas's family that contributes to his problem and it is their behaviour, in telling the truth, which can save him. Family is very important to Thomas in a



normal sense as well. When he contemplates what he would miss if he was dead it is family that he lists first (p. 115).

- Why are families so important to us? Is it merely biology or is there something else to it. Consider Thomas's relationships to his parents and the strong bonds he shares with his sister Alisha and his Nan.

Families come in all different sizes and styles. Consider Kevin's large family and the very funny scene in which Thomas and Holly find Kevin's parents under a bush in the front yard having some quiet time (p. 90).

Families are an endless source of humourous material for many comedians; most television situation comedies are based around either a biological family group or a constructed version of family.

- Brainstorm strange things that have happened in families, holidays are often a great source (encourage students to be nice!). Start with a couple of examples of your own if you can. Use this as stimulus for a writing activity, in prose, verse or lyrics.

Siblings

Thomas's sister Alisha is a wonderfully modern, technologically and socially savvy young woman. Unlike Thomas, she has reasonable control of the world around her. Alisha, at the opening of the story, tries to help Thomas with his problem (pages 2 onwards). She shows a genuine interest in him and a compassion for what she imagines he might be going through. She also stands up for him when he is bullied at school (p. 6).

Thomas notes that a good thing about big sisters is that '*They only notice their mobiles.*' (p.1)

- Make a list of the good things about siblings, aim to be equally creative.

Friendship

At the beginning of the book Thomas finds that confiding in his fellow classmates indiscriminately is not a good idea. Alisha informs him '*Never tell cretins anything personal*' (p. 5). This is a lesson hard-learned for Thomas as the boys he has confided in are now teasing him. Despite this rather dismal beginning in trying to gain help and support from friends, Thomas does eventually attain staunch and helpful support from his two friends Holly and Kevin, though both children react somewhat differently to his problem.

Kevin, when told of Thomas's affliction, instantly considers how money can be made by using this 'gift' (p. 38 – 39). Holly, on the other hand, once she believes

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GLEITZMAN

that he is telling the truth, is more concerned about Thomas's well-being and about finding out more about his problem (p. 85). Though their reactions are different, Holly and Kevin collectively possess the skills needed to help Thomas and it is their very real efforts to help that contribute to a solution.

- Move through the book scene by scene and list the ways Thomas's friends help him reach his goal.
- Discuss the importance of friends in our lives. Work in groups and try and list the characteristics that make a good friend. Are any of these characteristics to be found in any of the characters in *Doubling Thomas*?

Bullying / Peer Pressure

Doubling
THOMAS

There are a number of occasions in the text where we see someone bullied or pressured physically and verbally by others. Thomas is made fun of by Rocco and his mates while in the doctor's surgery (p. 4), Rocco tries to blame someone else for his graffiti and then ensure that no one tells on him (p. 42 – 45) and Rocco tries to intimidate Thomas when he thinks he is to blame for something that happens to him (p. 68). Rocco is at the centre of each of these incidents.

- Create a profile of the character Rocco from what you know of him from the text. List physical characteristics, personality traits, abilities and attitudes.
- Look at episodes of bullying in other texts - books, films or television shows. What characteristics do bullies appear to share in the way they are represented?

Suggestions:

Bauer, Michael Gerard (2006) *Don't Call Me Ishamel!*, Omnibus.

Bowles, Colin (1997) *Surfing Mister Petrovic*, Penguin.

Gervay, Susanne (2000) *I am Jack*, Harper Collins.

Jennings, Paul (2005) *How Hedley Hopkins Did a Dare....*, Penguin.

Jennings, Paul (1995) *The Gizmo Again*, Penguin.

Moloney, James (1995) *Swashbuckler*, UQP. And the sequel *Buzzard Breath and Brains* (1998).

Monagle, Bernie (2001) *Monstered*, Lothian.

Roy, James (1995) *Captain Mack*, UQP.

Singer, Nicky (2002) *Feather Boy*, Collins.

Activities

- Recreate the game show *Liar Liar* as described in the book within your own classroom (p. 96 onwards). Students can participate as contestants, liars and game show hosts and should write their own scripts and perhaps video the results.
- Write a story that demonstrates the dangers of lying. Consider famous examples like *Pinocchio* or *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*. Be creative, have fun with the crazy possibilities.

Tall tales are a form of 'lying' or at least a stretching of the truth for entertainment. They are often used to explain a natural phenomena or a change of some kind. The American tales *Johnny Appleseed* or *Paul Bunyan* are good examples; the exaggeration is part of the fun. Those listening to them, though, do not consider the tale a lie – they recognise the tale as fiction to be enjoyed.

- Create your own tall tales.
- Research liars throughout history and literature. For example:
 - Benedict Arnold
 - Politicians – Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton

At one point in the story Thomas feels that his affliction may be a super power that he has been given to help people. He attempts to do this (p. 64 onwards) with mixed results.

- Are all 'powers' to some extent a curse?
- What superpower would you like to have? In what way could your chosen power backfire and cause more mayhem than good?

In Media

Liars, or lying as a means to an end, is an oft-used comic element in movies and also the central focus of some effective drama. Consider the messages to be found in one or all of these films:

- *Liar Liar* (1997) Directed by Tom Shadyac
Starring Jim Carey. A compulsive liar finds he cannot tell a lie after his son makes a birthday wish that comes true
- *Big Fat Liar* (2002) Directed by Shawn Levy
Starring Frankie Muniz. A 14 year old who is always avoiding work and responsibility, and often lying to his family, sets out to trick a



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despicable film director who has stolen his homework for his next film script.

GLENN GLENN
➤ Quiz Show (1994) Directed by Robert Redford
Staring Ralph Fiennes (rated M) Explores a true story about a rigged game show.

- Compare and contrast these film stories to *Doubling Thomas*. How important is the visual component in these film texts in conveying the power of their message?
- *Doubling Thomas* has filmic possibilities - recreate one of the scenes as a film script. Act out your scene for the class or maybe film it.

Doubling Thomas
Advertising, in many of its guises, often tells 'lies'. Discuss, or debate:

- The role of the media in telling 'the truth'
- Consider the validity or accuracy of information
 - Accuracy on the internet (Wikipedia is an interesting example)
 - The 'truth' in digitally altered images
- The ability of celebrities to recreate themselves – what is real?

