



# Sarah and the Steep Slope

## TEACHERS NOTES

Written by Danny Parker and illustrated by Matt Ottley

Published by Little Hare in August 2017

### SYNOPSIS

**When everything feels like an uphill battle, your friends will get you through.**

Sarah wakes to find a steep slope has sprung up around the house overnight, preventing her from leaving. No matter what she tries, the slope won't budge. When the slope doctor suggests she gets in touch with her friends, Sarah discovers how the healing power of friendship can transform the steepest slope.

### THEMES

The story of *Sarah and the Steep Slope* is a metaphor for the struggles – both large and small – that we face in our daily lives. These struggles are represented by the insurmountably steep slope of the title, and their solutions are suggested as lying in the power of friendship and community, which help to lessen the burden. The eponymous character Sarah's inability to see past her troubles is humorously demonstrated by a spoof of the Rorschach test, a psychological test in which subjects are asked to interpret inkblots, and in which Sarah can see nothing but steep slopes. Sarah, however, is not a passive recipient of friendly assistance: she struggles to overcome the slope on her own, and even when she admits to needing help by calling the slope doctor, she must bravely reach out to her friends to invite them in to her troubled world. The assistance of her friends is metaphorically symbolised by imaginative games the children play together, and these games represent the turning point of the narrative.

### WRITING STYLE

Danny Parker's writing style is often understated and rich with symbolism, and this is especially true of *Sarah and the Steep Slope*, where not a word is wasted. The textual narrative begins in media res, with no preamble or easing of the reader into Sarah's world; rather, we are confronted with the frightening existence of the strange steep slope outside Sarah's front door, much in the same shocking way Sarah experiences this herself. The reader is dropped into the centre of the problem with an immediacy of emotional impact that is likely to simmer beneath the reader's responses to the remainder of the story. The opening sentences that describe Sarah's first interactions with the slope are punchy and short, sometimes fragments of sentences, sometimes without verbs, sometimes without nouns, sometimes without subjects. This choppy expression contributes a jarring effect to the storytelling, which adds to the reader's sense of all not being right with the world. After the doctor's visit, the sentences become longer and more rhythmic, reflecting Sarah's change of mood and outlook.



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### ILLUSTRATION STYLE

Matt Ottley uses a range of media in his illustrations, from digitally created art to pencil drawings to oil paintings. Even so, Matt's style is highly recognisable, and not just for his trademark twig-limbed characters. Certain visual strategies and motifs are common to all his illustrations; these include extreme points of view, skewed perspectives and exaggerated proportions. Matt employs these strategies not just for visual effect but also for narrative effect and emotional effect, as all fictional narrative is fundamentally driven by the emotional journey of its characters. In *Sarah and the Steep Slope*, Matt employs his signature style to convey Sarah's mental distress, and adds a wild distorted pattern as a texture for the slope itself, amplifying the jarring effect of the sometimes surreal illustrations, and intensifying the emotional impact of the story.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Danny Parker** was born in the UK. He has been a nurse, an undertaker and an actor. He is now a teacher in Perth, Western Australia, and is married with two children.

### ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Matt Ottley** is a multi-award winning picture-book writer and illustrator. He grew up in the highlands of Papua New Guinea and has worked as a stockman, a landscape gardener and a performing musician. He is now a full-time writer, illustrator and composer.



Danny Parker and Matt Ottley



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### STUDY NOTES

1. The theme of *Sarah and the Steep Slope* is expressed in both text and images. Sometimes text and image appear to contradict each other, with the text saying one thing and the pictures showing the opposite. One key place where this happens is on the second-last spread, where Sarah meets up with her friends. How do text and image contradict each other? What is the thematic effect of this seeming contradiction? What is the illustrator seeming to tell us here?
2. Sometimes text is most effective when it says nothing. The second spread of the narrative pages has no text. How does the 'silence' of this spread enhance the combined effects of the text of the preceding and following spreads?
3. *Sarah and the Steep Slope* portrays an intensely emotional situation, but never mentions emotion directly. Readers are left to guess, intuit, ascertain and experience the emotions of the story for themselves. Which are the key emotions that appear to be alluded to in the narrative? How do we know which emotions to identify?
4. Matt Ottley uses a number of visual devices to illustrate the feelings of the story. One of these devices is distorted perspective. Another is extreme points of view (such as close-ups, bird's-eye view, worm's-eye view). Find an instance where Matt has distorted the perspective and describe the narrative purposes of this distortion. Find where he has shown a similar or identical scene later in the story, where the distortion has been removed. What narrative effect does this have?
5. How does Matt's portrayal of Sarah's house change throughout the story? What are the narrative effects of these changes?





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### ACTIVITIES

1. The story of *Sarah and the Steep Slope* is a metaphor for the struggles – both large and small – that we face in our daily lives, and it is suggested that the solution lies in the power of friendship and community. Talk to your class about a problem you have faced and how asking for help from others helped, and encourage your class to share their own stories of overcoming adversity.
2. Author Danny Parker begins the story by dropping readers straight in the action: Sarah is confronted by a seemingly insurmountable steep slope right outside her door. Have your class write their own story where the main character is immediately faced with a problem. What is their character faced with? What do they do? Some examples could be where the world is suddenly upside-down; where they can only talk underwater; or where the sky is green.
3. Illustrator Matt Ottley has used wild distorted patterns to give the story texture. Talk to your class about surrealism in art and encourage them to draw their own exaggerated pictures.
4. Take your class outside and have them re-enact the story on a hill. Who is the slope doctor and what advice does she or he have? How do Sarah and her friends overcome the slope?

