



# THE HOUSE ON PLEASANT STREET

Sofie Laguna *and* Marc McBride

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**Format:** Hardback

**Recommended for:** 4-8 years

**Themes:** Halloween, trick-or-treating, family, friendship, fitting in, humour

**Applicable to learning areas:** English language, literacy and literature, visual literacy

## Summary

Alby and his family are new on Pleasant Street. Their house is perfect, with a great tree to climb, and a pool. Their pet Delia is still in training, but she's settling in just fine.

And tonight is Halloween – Alby's favourite night of the year – so ANYTHING could happen...

A hilarious story about family and friendship, and what happens when trick-or-treating doesn't go to plan.

## Author's background

Sofie Laguna's many books for young people have been published in the US, the UK and in translation throughout Europe and Asia. She has been shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Awards, and two of her books been awarded as Honour Books by the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA). She is also a highly acclaimed author for adults. Sofie lives in Melbourne with her husband, Marc McBride, and their two young sons.

## Illustrator's background

Marc McBride is the illustrator of Emily Rodda's *New York Times* bestselling Deltora Quest series, which has sold over 18 million copies worldwide and has become an anime TV show. He has illustrated more than 200 book covers and 10 picture books, including writing and illustrating *World of Monsters*. Marc has exhibited with the New York Society of Illustrators' international show, been shortlisted for the CBCA Awards and Aurealis Awards, and has won the Aurealis Awards twice.

# Suggestions for Classroom Discussion and Application

## Cover

- Before opening the book, show the cover illustration and run your fingers over the title as you read it out loud. Explain that a book's cover tells us a lot about the story if you look closely for clues and ask a few simple questions, such as:
  - What sort of a story do you think this will be?
    - Do the colours and the lettering in the title (the font) help you guess what sort of story this will be? What is it about the colours or type that made you guess the type of story?
    - Does the illustration make you think the story will be a *scary* or *funny* story? Why?
    - Describe the sort of people who live in the 'unusual' house: what do they look like and what is each person doing around the house?
    - Where do you think the story will be set? Will it be a real or fantasy world? Or could it be a bit of both?
  - Turn the book over to show the back cover and point out the dragon, walking tree, vampire and boy.
  - Read out loud the words on the back cover and ask students if they might be able to guess which character will be Alby and Delia and what night of the year the story will be set.

## Endpapers

- Open the book to the front endpapers (the first two pages of the book, consisting of a double-sized, folded sheet of paper, with one half pasted against the back of the front cover) and explain that this section often sets a mood for the story ahead. Allow plenty of time for students to come up with words to describe how the endpapers make them feel and write the words on the whiteboard. (Expect words such as creepy, old, frayed, dark, or dangerous.) Turn the page and look at the image of Alby and Delia and ask students if they think the words on the whiteboard apply to these characters.

## Comprehension

- Read the story through once, allowing plenty of time for students to find the real and fantastic elements on each page. After finishing, ask the following questions:
  - How are Alby's house and family different to the rest of Pleasant Street?
  - Why is Alby finding it hard to make new friends?
  - Why did the kids run away from Alby's front door on Halloween?
  - What trick is Alby teaching Delia to do?
  - Who accompanies Alby as he sets out to trick-or-treat on Pleasant Street?
  - What trick does Alby perform at the last house on Pleasant Street?
  - Are people frightened by Alby's trick?
  - What 'trick' do the kids of Pleasant Street play on Alby and his family?
  - Are Alby's parents angry about the trick?
  - How do Alby and the other kids of Pleasant street *feel* about each other at the end of the story?

## Visual Literacy

### **Contrast**

- Turn to the first double-page spread showing Pleasant Street and make a list of the things that students might describe as 'normal' about the image. (Hint: The homes on the left-side of the spread are very neat and suburban, the people are interesting but unremarkable, everyone is behaving as you might expect in such a setting – walking a dog, watering flowers, jumping on a trampoline.)
- Now find as many unusual things as possible on the right-side of the spread. Ask students if these unusual things seem even weirder, funnier and more out-of-place because they are next to normal things? Explain that the illustrator has done this deliberately for exactly that reason and it is called the 'contrast' effect.

NB: Older / more advanced students might notice that some images are almost photographic (the rock staircase, the trees on the street), creating even more contrast with the highly stylised and colour saturated animation images.

Furthermore, the name 'Pleasant Street' and Alby's comment, '*The house is perfect,*' contrasts with everything we can see about the house.

### **Image and text**

Picture books often tell two stories at once: one through illustrations and the other through text. And sometimes the two stories can be quite contradictory. Look at the image of Alby sitting around a table eating with other children. The text suggests Alby's a friendly child who is keen to make new friends and that he's a little puzzled by why he is struggling. The picture, however, tells us exactly why.

- Ask students why they think the children might be wary about making friends with him. Try the same exercise later in the story when Alby says he showed the kids his grandparents' workshop but we see so much more in the image – for instance, a child and dog have the sheet they're wearing blown clean off when they are hit by a bolt of electricity created by the grandparents' weird machine.

### **Colour**

- Colour also influences how we read a story and think about its characters. Point out to students that our eye is drawn to Alby's father's cape in the opening spread and ask them what they associate with the colour red. (Hint: expect words such as danger, blood – he is a vampire, after all – and anger.) Explain that without even thinking about it we start to associate these attributes to his father. Similarly, Alby and his parents' white faces and dark eye sockets suggest death and decay but as the story progresses, we find the family fun-loving, friendly and generous.
- Now turn to the image of Alby's grandparents in their workshop and ask students how the choice of colour here makes them feel about the grandparents. Turn the page and talk about the colours that make up Delia's scales. Are they cold and scary colours or warm and friendly ones?
- Compare the colours of the night's sky in the final image of the story with the rest of the book and see if students can come up with ideas why they are softer and more muted here.

## Body Language/Gaze

- Compare three images of Alby: (1) sitting on top of his tree outside the neighbour's house, (2) encouraging Delia to 'flash', (3) welcoming the neighbourhood kids who return to his house after see Delia's trick. Point out to students that our face and body tell a lot about what we are feeling and encourage students to guess Alby's emotions in each of these images.
- Make a list of features and the emotions they relate to – for instance: wide eyes + open mouth = surprise, pouting mouth or jutting jaw = frustration, wide and toothy smile = happy.

## Theme

- The book's illustrator Marc McBride says *The House on Pleasant Street* is 'about the fact that we are all different on the outside but inside we are all the same'. Ask students to make a list of things Alby and his family have in common with everyone else on Pleasant Street. After completion, talk about how people around the world share many of these attributes irrespective of what they look like and where or how they live.

## A Word from the Author, Sofie Laguna

In 2019, days before the pandemic broke out across the world, my husband and I decided to go on a cruise. It was my idea, although I had never been on a cruise before; the kids would have water slides, whirlpools and basketball, and we would have a cabin with a view of the ocean.

It turned out to be the most challenging holiday of my life; the weather was stormy and I was relentlessly ill. In the days leading up to our holiday, my husband (the book's illustrator) Marc had been chanting poetry he had written about various ghoulish characters that might fit inside a picture book. As the enormous cruise ship rocked and swayed on the waves, winds blasting hard enough to close the pool, and with Marc's permission, I decided to work with his poetry. I soon entered a world of ghouls, vampires and witches and trees that could uproot and walk.

The more the winds blew, the more the crowds of the ship pressed around us, unable to go on deck, the more intensely involved I became with the characters. A story soon took hold with a young protagonist, Alby, who needed me. Alby felt isolated. Like he didn't belong.

I became immersed in a cast of unexpected characters: a disobedient baby dragon, an embarrassing vampiric dad, a generous mother with snakes for hair. As guests lined up for free ice cream and fish and chips and beer, gripping the handrails as the boat rocked, I searched for a way to give Alby friends.

As I watched my sons play basketball, or swim around the whirlpool in the rain on deck, I imagined what risks Alby could take, how he might extend himself. Tree helped. Tree with hands made from branches, growing in the garden of Alby's new home. The young dragon helped Alby too, breathing flames across the sky. The writing was satisfying, joyful and full of surprises. *The House on Pleasant Street* provided shelter on a stormy sea. I am so grateful.



## A Word from the Illustrator, Marc McBride

*King Kong* was the first monster movie I ever watched. I was seven years old and from that day I loved monsters! But to me King Kong wasn't a monster; he was the hero. Like many people, I was on his side when the planes attacked during the movie's climax.

I remember how I felt about King Kong whenever I create a 'monster'. I don't want it to be a monster but rather a character. I haven't always been successful but in *The House on Pleasant Street* I feel I have achieved this. Dad is a vampire and mum is a Medusa; yet in the book, they are just Alby's parents. Tree and Delia are full of warmth and humour rather than anything monstrous!

I've heard it said that there are only seven basic plots but perhaps there's only one. We all want to fit in and have friends. King Kong was seen by everyone as a monster yet he was protecting Fay Ray and only wanted her to like him. It's the same for most monsters. Frankenstein wants to find his place in the world and in *Bride of Frankenstein* begs his creator to make him a friend. Alby wants to belong, and he desperately wants to make friends in his new neighbourhood. *The House on Pleasant Street* is about the fact that we are all different on the outside, but inside we are all the same.

