

## **READ AT YOUR OWN RISK**

Written and illustrated by REMY LAI

**RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 8-12 YEARS OLD (UPPER PRIMARY)**

**GENRE:** Supernatural Mystery, Illustrated Fiction

**THEMES:** The power of stories, self-belief, friendship, spooky stories, humour, creativity, curses, supernatural

**CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:**

- English: Literature, literacy and language

**NOTES WRITTEN BY:** Jennifer Asha

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## INTRODUCTION

**'Once upon a time, I skipped assembly, snuck into the attic, awakened an evil and now I'm h(a)unted.'** Lai, Pg. 1.

In *Read At Your Own Risk*, her latest middle grade novel, Remy Lai makes use of the language and layout of a diary with doodled illustrations to recount the events of eight days in which the main character is haunted by a curse. Making use of typographical experimentation, Lai uses different handwriting styles to characterise the protagonist Hannah, the antagonist evil spirit and Hannah's crush Jeremy.

Using the dual colours of black and red, the illustrations of *Read At Your Own Risk* have dramatic impact that add detail to the spooky events that Hannah experiences. Characters are depicted using simple line drawings with stylised facial features. Eyes are a particularly notable feature with Lai representing her characters' eyes using scribbled circles, small dot points or heart shapes to express the characters' feelings and sense of being haunted.

Written in a conversational tone stylistically typical of a diary, Lai uses idiom mixed with sophisticated vocabulary to characterise her quirky main character of Hannah. Using a combination of recounted prose, lists of instructions, letters and dialogue in speech bubbles, the linguistic text of *Read At Your Own Risk* is a hybrid of novel and graphic novel language structures.

*Read At Your Own Risk* is an accessible text for reluctant readers due to its unconventional layout, less dense lexical content and length of the overall book. However, it is a story whose simple illustrations belie a literary complexity. The subtle character development and enigmatic storyline allows for interpretive pleasure for more experienced and confident readers. The mystery/horror genre is likely to entice the reluctant reader while the themes of the story and the personal challenges experienced by the main character are relevant to a broad range of students.

These teachers' notes have been formulated with Years 5 and 6 in mind. However, the suggested activities could be adapted for older year levels to include more extended writing opportunities and wide reading of illustrated novels and graphic novels with more mature content.

## PLOT SUMMARY

Hannah and her friends wag their high school assembly, choosing to miss a talk by an acclaimed horror story author in favour of playing a spooky game of *Spirit of the Coin*. One of the group breaks the rules of the game so the spirit they have called forth stays to haunt Hannah. She records her experiences in her diary, across the eight days of the curse. On Day 3, while visiting the horror author in search of advice on ending the curse, the spirit starts communicating with Hannah via scrawled notes in her diary. Hannah experiences all manner of mishaps with the spirit threatening to 'end' her if she doesn't break the curse. At the 'eleventh hour' Hannah solves the puzzle and breaks the curse, making *Read At Your Own Risk* a gripping story from beginning to end.

## Q&A WITH REMY LAI

### 1. What do you see as the main themes of this book?

'Finishing what you started. Believing in yourself.'

### 2. Can you tell us about your inspiration, how you came to write this book?

'For years, I had this idea of a protagonist who converses with a monster within the pages of a book. I knew that it ends with both the monster and the protagonist "winning", but for the life of me I couldn't figure out how that could be possible. I placed that idea aside to that corner in my mind where a mountain of story ideas percolate, waiting for their turn. I wish I could tell you how or why, but one day years later, when I wasn't consciously thinking about that idea, my brain suddenly figured out the ending. I worked feverishly for a week to create the first draft, a combination of words and pictures.'

### 3. The motif of teeth is used a fair bit in the book. Can you tell us where that idea came from?

'I used to have recurring nightmares of avulsing teeth.'

### 4. *Read At Your Own Risk* is written in the style of a diary. This isn't your first book using this format. Why did you choose it?

'The diary format came naturally as I've kept sketch diaries since I was a kid.'

## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

### BEFORE READING

- **Discuss**

- Talk about the genre conventions of magical realism and horror. Consider the types of characters, settings and storylines that are characteristic of each genre. [AC9E5LE02](#) [AC9E6LE02](#)
  - <https://thedramateacher.com/magical-realism/>
  - <https://iconicpictures.weebly.com/conventions-of-horror.html>
- Explore the key themes of books for students in Years 6 or 7 who are experiencing physical and emotional growth and development and transitioning to high school. Discuss how literature can help students reflect on their own experiences and those of others, and help to vicariously respond to and process challenges before they face them in real life. [AC9E5LE02](#) [AC9E6LE02](#)
- Discuss word associations for 'ghosts' and 'haunted'. Introduce or elicit vocabulary such as spirit, ghou, paranormal, bad luck, tortured, hexed, cursed,

horror, mysterious, poltergeist, etc. Discuss the definitions and connotations of these words. Research their etymological origins. [AC9E6LA04](#)

- **Watch**

- View short multimodal clips that demonstrate the conventions of the horror genre: <https://www.literacyshed.com/the-ghostly-shed.html>
- Discuss ghost story tropes (such as the 'jump scare'), use of symbolism (darkness, old houses, etc.), characterisation (one character more daring versus another character who is risk averse), patterns in storylines ('and they were never seen again'), etc. [AC9E5LE02](#) [AC9E6LE02](#)

- **Listen**

- Tell scary or puzzling stories around a simulated camp fire. [AC9E5LY02](#) [AC9E6LY02](#)
- Share stories from around the world and across history. [AC9E5LY01](#) [AC9E6LY01](#)
  - <https://www.history.com/topics/halloween/historical-ghost-stories>
  - <https://blog.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/2021/10/04/ten-of-the-most-spine-chilling-ghost-stories-from-the-archive/>

- **Read**

- Stock the classroom library with a range of picture books, novels, short stories and graphic novels. Include other publications by Remy Lai and other age-appropriate books in the horror, puzzle or magical realism genres. For example, *Ghost Book* by Remy Lai, *The Ghost of Windy Hollow* by Clyde Robert Bulla, *My Dead Bunny* by Sigi Cohen and James Foley, *I Don't Like Koala* by Sean Ferrell, *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman, *Glasshouse of Stars* by Shirley Marr, the *Goosebumps* series, *39 Clues* series, *Choose Your Own Adventure* series. [AC9E6LE03](#)
- Learn about the conventions of graphic novels [AC9E5LY03](#) [AC9E6LY03](#) [https://www.readwritethink.org/sites/default/files/resources/lesson\\_images/lesson\\_1102/terms.pdf](https://www.readwritethink.org/sites/default/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson_1102/terms.pdf)

## ENGLISH

### LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND LITERACY

- **How does the sequence of images have an impact on meaning?**

[AC9E5LA07](#) [AC9E6LA07](#)

- Examine some of the conventions employed by Remy Lai in *Read At Your Own Risk*. Conduct a close viewing to notice elements such as the wobbly lines of speech bubbles (e.g. pg. 2), the close ups of characters' faces (e.g. pg. 23), the use of repeated visual images to show time passing (e.g. pgs 18 & 19) and the way Lai represents the eyes of her characters (e.g. pg.16). Compare the illustrations in *Read At Your Own Risk* to other books by the same author-illustrator, especially *Ghost Book*. Record observations in a chart that compares *Read At Your Own Risk*, *Ghost Book* and other illustrated novels and graphic novels, and annotate examples of these visual features with the way they help to communicate the meanings of the stories they are part of.

- **Define the author/illustrator's style.**  
[AC9E6LE03](#) [AC9E6LE02](#)
  - Direct students' attention to the notepad visual style and diary entry language of *Read At Your Own Risk*. Ask students to share ideas on why Remy Lai might choose these visual and verbal features. Compare *Read At Your Own Risk* to *Fly On the Wall* by Remy Lai and *Exit Through the Gift Shop* by Maryam Master. Comment on the conventions of graphic novels and draw students to the conclusion that *Read At Your Own Risk* is a hybrid text or illustrated story, a multimodal diary, somewhere between a graphic novel and a prose novel.
- **Experiment with the illustrator's style.**  
[AC9E5LE05](#) [AC9E5LY05](#) [AC9E6LY05](#) [AC9E5LA07](#)
  - After reading each of the eight diary entries/chapters of *Read At Your Own Risk*, ask students to respond through drawing and annotation to what has been read and predict what might come next, mimicking Remy Lai's sketching style.
  - Ask students to storyboard a visual short story idea with themselves as the main character. Students might like to create a story using similar themes as *Read At Your Own Risk*, or about their experiences at school. Encourage them to represent the characters in a way that visually characterises them and applies aspects of Remy Lai's illustrative style, such as the way eyes help to communicate characters' feelings.
- **How do the images and words meet the purpose of the text?**  
[AC9E5LY03](#) [AC9E6LY03](#)
  - *Read At Your Own Risk* makes use of metafictional devices – elements that make it clear to the reader that they are being told a story. Some of the metafictional devices employed by *Read At Your Own Risk* include:
    - Direct address to the reader (implication through use of first person and the positioning of characters through a visual demand)
    - Evident constructedness (diary)
    - Typographic experimentation (different fonts)
    - Multiple genres (recount, diary, letters, etc.)Have students search through the book for examples of these metafictional devices. Encourage them to comment on the impact of each feature in creating vivid characters and making the story engaging for the reader.
- **What does the language of the book tell us about the character and the age of the intended audience?**  
[AC9E5LA02](#) [AC9E6LA02](#)
  - The diary entry style of writing allows for conversational language choices. Hannah narrates the story using idiomatic turns of phrase. Define idioms, expressions that have meanings different from their literal meaning, for students using some examples from the text. Have students search the book for further examples.
  - 'shed some light' (pg. 5)
  - 'out of sorts' (pg. 21)

- 'zip it' (pg. 23)
- 'taste of my (your) own medicine' (pg. 78)
- 'spell the end' (pg. 117)
- 'chew me out' (pg. 127)
- **How does the author use vivid vocabulary?**  
[AC9E5LA08](#) [AC9E6LA08](#) [AC9E5LY09](#) [AC9E6LY09](#)
  - One way Remy Lai uses language to exemplify the puzzle metaphor used across the story is through the use of palindromes (Hannah) and semordinlaps (evil= live, star = rats, leon = noel). Conduct a word study that defines palindromes, semordinlaps and anagrams, for students. Search the story for examples and create lists of other examples known to students.
  - Research the meanings of names such as Leon.
  - Encourage students to add to the lists as they read other texts. Display the list so that students can use it during writing activities.
- **How can the text be re-represented through dramatic reading aloud?**  
[AC9E5LY07](#) [AC9E6LY07](#)
  - In small groups, assign students with sections of the story to read and view closely. Have students perform Readers' Theatre using the recounted text, graphics and speech bubbles. Demonstrate for students how to write a short script using the book's visual and verbal elements. Encourage students to use their voices to effect during the dramatic read aloud. Students could add sound effects to further add atmosphere or mood to the read aloud.
  - Compare student examples with the audio book of *Read At Your Own Risk*, available in August 2024.
- **Use drama to examine and respond to literature.**  
[AC9E5LE02](#)
  - In small groups, again, ask students to create 'freeze frames' that dramatise key points in the story. Using the visual or verbal text, have groups recreate scenes from *Read At Your Own Risk*, posing in 'frozen' tableaux. As each group performs their freeze frame the teacher or another student can 'tap in' or 'thought track' by tapping freeze frame actor on the shoulder, indicating that they should share the thoughts and feelings of their character.
  - After freeze frames have been shared, ask groups of students to explain their choice of scene from the story and why they considered it a key scene.  
<https://dramaresource.com/freeze-frames/>  
<https://dramaresource.com/thought-tracking/>
- **Creating literature.**  
[AC9E5LE05](#) [AC9E6LE05](#)
  - After reading the novel, reflect on the diary entry format of the story. Summarise each chapter in terms of how it contributed to the storyline, the recounting of events, the solving of the puzzle and allowing Hannah to overcome challenges and take responsibility for her actions.

- Reflect on the words of the spirit on page 74 and the role of the curses and the spirit antagonist in creating obstacles that the protagonist has to overcome to show her strength of character.
- Have students respond to the challenge to the reader set by the spirit on the last page of the book: 'Dear Reader.....write a story that keeps at least one reader reading until the eighth day...' (pg 154)
- Help students brainstorm possible story ideas with the puzzle metaphor used by Lai and explained by Hannah on pages 106-109, as the truth of what happened in the attic is gradually revealed.
- Draw on horror/ghost story motifs and tropes as discussed in the prereading activities. Additionally, refer to what has been learned about Remy Lai's language and illustrative choices, particularly idioms and metafictional devices.
- **What does it take to engage a reader?**  
[AC9E5LE02](#) [AC9E6LE02](#)
  - *Read At Your Own Risk* has been recommended for fans of the Wimpy Kid and Goosebumps series. Who would you recommend this book to? Consider the features of other similar books and stories.
  - Ask students to write a review of *Read At Your Own Risk*, sharing their responses to the story. Have students share their reviews and comment on the points of view of their peers. Consider which aspects of the text different readers liked or disliked.

### ASSESSMENT IDEAS:

- **Literal Comprehension**
  - Who were the characters in the story and what was their role in the puzzle?
  - Where were parts of the story set and how are they typical of horror stories or coming of age stories?
- **Inferential Comprehension**
  - How did Hannah develop as a character across the eight days in which the story takes place?
- **Interpretive Comprehension**
  - What was the role of language choices (palindromes & semordinals) in aiding the puzzle story line?
  - How can the reader tell the audience age range that Remy Lai is aiming her story at?
- Collect students' writing-composition samples, the eight diary entries and the book review, and assess them for use of the literary features and knowledge of the story telling techniques learned about during the activities. Use or adapt the following rubric to assist with assessment of writing.

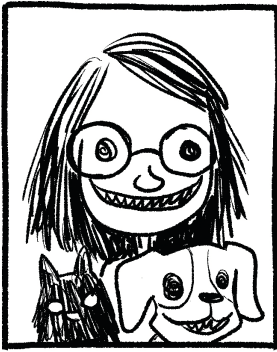
- **Diary entries**

| <b>Visual or verbal feature used</b> | <b>Working towards</b>                                  | <b>Achieving</b>   | <b>Working beyond</b>  |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Idiom                                | Attempt at including idiomatic phrase in diary entries. | A range of idioms used in diary entries to begin to characterise the narrator. | A wide range of appropriate idioms used to characterise the narrator well. |
| Metafictive devices                  | One or two metafictive devices used.                    | Several metafictive devices used to engage the reader-viewer.                  | A range of metafictive devices used to engage the reader-viewer well.      |

- **Book review**

| <b>Demonstrate</b>                              | <b>Working towards</b>                                | <b>Achieving</b>  | <b>Working Beyond</b>  |
|---|---|---|--|
| Ability to express a point of view about a text | Express point of view about key plot elements.        | Express point of view about characterisation.           | Express point of view about language and illustrative choices of the author-illustrator. |
| Knowledge of key aspects of the story           | Some parts of the plot or characterisation recounted. | Key plot points or characterisation features recounted. | Key themes and motifs recounted.   |





### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**REMY LAI** writes and draws for kids. She was born in Indonesia, grew up in Singapore and currently lives in Brisbane, Australia. She lives with her two dogs, who sometimes scare her by barking at nothing in the corners of rooms. Remy is also the award-winning creator of *Pie in the Sky*, *Fly on the Wall*, *Pawcasso*, *Ghost Book* and the *Surviving the Wild* series. [www.remylai.com](http://www.remylai.com)

### ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE NOTES

**Jennifer Asha** is a lover of children's literature. When she is not immersed in a good book, Jennifer is an academic at the Australian Catholic University where she enjoys sharing her passion for literature, language and literacy with her Initial Teacher Education students. Jennifer is also an experienced primary school teacher who has taught in the classroom and in the library, across all grades. Jennifer has conducted classroom-based research and published articles and books that encourage teachers to teach literacy and language using rich literature resources. Her areas of special interest include the teaching of grammar, multimodal texts and visual literacy.

## CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

(In alphabetical order of authors)

*Fly On the Wall* by Remy Lai (2020, Walker Books Australia)

*Ghost Book* by Remy Lai (2023, Allen & Unwin)

*Exit Through the Gift Shop* by Maryam Masters (2021, Pan Macmillan Australia)

## ONLINE LINKS IN FULL

14 Magical Realism Theatre Conventions: <https://thedramateacher.com/magical-realism/>

The Conventions of Horror: <https://iconicpictures.weebly.com/conventions-of-horror.html>

The Ghostly Shed: <https://www.literacyshed.com/the-ghostly-shed.html>

History of Ghost Stories: <https://www.history.com/topics/halloween/historical-ghost-stories>

Ten of the Most Spine-Chilling Ghost Stories from The Archive:

<https://blog.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/2021/10/04/ten-of-the-most-spine-chilling-ghost-stories-from-the-archive/>

Graphic Novel/Comics Terms and Concepts:

[https://www.readwritethink.org/sites/default/files/resources/lesson\\_images/lesson1102/terms.pdf](https://www.readwritethink.org/sites/default/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson1102/terms.pdf)

Freeze Frames: <https://dramaresource.com/freeze-frames/>

Thought Tracking: <https://dramaresource.com/thought-tracking/>