

MARYAM MASTER

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *LAUGHTER IS THE BEST ENDING*

TEACHER'S NOTES

MY TINY
UNIVERSE



BLURB

A book for every kid who has ever felt different. From the multi-award-winning author of *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, *No Words* and *Laughter is the Best Ending* (winner of the CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers 2025).

Meet Leif.

Leif is named after a valiant Viking. But being a two-foot nothing, fraidy-cat kid with a thousand and one phobias is about as far from valiant as you can get. He's a Certified Science Enthusiast and has a brain as large and mysterious as the universe. He's not one of the cool kids at school. Or the geeks. He's not even one of the misfits. (Have you ever heard of a misfit who didn't fit in with other misfits?) Leif's different in every way, but especially because he was the first kid to be born with CIA (Climate Induced Anomalies).

He didn't have a single friend at West Hershey College, before Albie came along.

And that's when all the trouble *really* began.

ABOUT MARYAM MASTER

Maryam Master is a screenwriter, playwright and author who loves creating stories for young people.

Her first novel, *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, was shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards. Her second novel, *No Words*, was winner of the Children's Peace Literature Award and the Readings Children's Prize. Her third novel, *Laughter is the Best Ending*, won CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers, the CBCA Shadow Judging prize and the State Library of NSW's Russell Prize for Humour Writing.

Maryam wrote the acclaimed stage adaptations of David Walliams' bestselling books *Mr Stink*, *Billionaire Boy*, *The Midnight Gang* and *Ratburger*, as well as Oliver Jeffers' *The Incredible Book Eating Boy*, all of which premiered at the Sydney Opera House and toured across Australia. Maryam began her career in TV, writing for shows like *Home and Away*, *Blinky Bill* and the Jim Henson Company's *Bambaloo*. She was selected by Sesame Workshop as the writer for Elmo's tour of Australia.

QUESTIONS

Please note: these questions contain spoilers

1. As a class, discuss the title *My Tiny Universe*. What does the title evoke? What does it make you feel? What does a tiny universe mean? How can a universe be tiny?
2. *My Tiny Universe* uses playscripts as a device for dialogue.
 - a. Compare this to regular storytelling of prose and dialogue. How do these scenes affect the way you read the book? How do the playscripts create more action and immediacy? Does it make it more compelling?
 - b. Pick another scene in *My Tiny Universe* and change it to playscript dialogue. (The scene doesn't have to have dialogue already.) In what ways does this change the scene?
3. *My Tiny Universe* is told from two perspectives: Leif's and Holly's.
 - a. On page 26, Holly says: 'I'm guessing he hasn't told you about how he's different. He doesn't like talking about it. Ever.' Why do we need both Holly's and Leif's points of view to get the whole picture?
 - b. What makes Leif's and Holly's voices different from one another? What role did Holly's point of view play in the book? Why is using multiple perspectives an effective storytelling device?
 - c. On page 37–38, Holly says: 'Violet, well, she's been in a funk since she found out we had to move. Four years and counting. Violet's goth era literally began the day we left Hollow Creek. Like some kind of extreme allergic reaction to moving. The transformation was not subtle. Or slow. She went from being Violet, my normal, happy, sometimes annoying sis one day, to being some kind of grunting emo with smudgy eyeliner and a too-long fringe that covers half her face the next.'
Pretend you are Violet and write a chapter about the family's move from Hollow Creek to the Inner Circle from her point of view. Think about the character's voice and perspective. How would she write? What would she think about?
4. Leif can be considered an unreliable narrator.
 - a. As a class, research the storytelling concept 'unreliable narrator' and come up with a shared definition. What are other famous novels that use this storytelling device?
 - b. On page 36, Holly says: 'Vintage Leif. Deliberately leaving out big chunks of the story.' How does Holly's contrasting point of view help readers fill in the gaps if Leif is an unreliable narrator?
 - c. Leif doesn't tell the reader the truth about Albie until towards the end of the book. Does this make him an unreliable narrator, and why?
 - d. Did you guess the truth about Albie? What hints were there that Albie was a ChatBot? How does knowing that Albie is a ChatBot change your entire perspective of the book?

5. Leif quotes Rumi and Shakespeare.

- a. Why do you think the works of Rumi or Shakespeare in particular appeal to Leif?
- b. Choose your favourite Rumi or Shakespeare quote in the book and research what it means in relation to the quote's original text and how it fits into the themes of *My Tiny Universe*. Create a poster to display your findings.

6. Leif is named after a valiant Viking and he feels this should reflect his identity.

- a. Think about your name. Where does your name come from? Are you named after a relative, or someone close to your family? What is the etymology of your name? Does it suit your personality? Why or why not?

7. *My Tiny Universe* is set in the near-future.

- a. How probable do you think this future is? What do you think is realistic? What do you think is unrealistic? What do you think could be different? What would a realistic future look like to you, and why? Create a diorama to show what you think the future will look like.

8. *My Tiny Universe* explores the theme of climate change.

- a. As a class, read pages 33-35 in full. Why is it important now more than ever that people all over the world take climate change seriously? What can you do to prevent climate change? What can local, state and federal governments do?
- b. Break into small groups. Choose a country from around the world and make a prediction of what that country might look like due to climate change in 50 years' time. For example, is it an island nation that could be affected by rising ocean water? Is it drought- or flood-prone? Now look for real-world data from climate scientists and compare this to your own predictions. Present your findings back to the class.
- c. Read Holly's description of Leif's Climate Induced Anomalies on pages 36-7. Do you think CIA is a possibility in the future? Why or why not?

9. *My Tiny Universe* explores the concepts of reality, perception and sentience.

- a. On page 172, Holly says: 'Albie is real. In a tech sense, of course. If he wasn't, he couldn't convince my brother to cheat, lie and burn down the science block. The dude is sneaky. And my theory is that he wants Leif to actually bring him to life. Like Pinocchio wanting to become a real boy. That's Albie's endgame. And that is why he must be destroyed.' What is the definition of 'real' and what is the definition of 'sentience'? Do you think Albie is real? Is 'artificial intelligence' real? Can Albie be real if he's not sentient?

10. *My Tiny Universe* explores the perils of technology, including artificial intelligence.

- a.** On page 144, Maggie says: 'People have lost the art of communicating without technology,' she said, 'and that's changed childhoods. Connections. Ironically, the more "connected" we are through our little devices, the less connected we feel as humans. Making friends has become so much harder for kids.' How has technology both brought us together and made us less connected? Is tech isolating us to a point of no return or is there still hope?
- b.** Write a paragraph on your thoughts on artificial intelligence. As a class, come together and define artificial intelligence. Share your thoughts and create a pros and cons list. Include the pros and cons you've learned in *My Tiny Universe*. Do the cons outweigh the pros?
- c.** In small groups, choose one of the perils of artificial intelligence. Not using AI, research real-world examples of that threat. What can you do, as individuals, to ensure the safety of yourself and those around you? Present your findings as a group to the class.

11. The plot centres around a science fair for a better tomorrow.

- a.** On page 42, the mission of the science fair is 'to tackle a real-world problem with a game-changing invention that would alter the future in a positive way. Whether it was to improve life on Earth, reverse climate change, or help people connect with one another, we had to identify a problem and through the exploration of science, create a solution.' Leif creates an AirPod X to 'purify the air that you breathe from pollutants, allergens and pathogens . . . The pod would be worn on your head, of course. Like those bubble helmets that astronauts wear in space, but made for Earth.' (page 67). What would you create at the science fair? Create a proposal and diagram with labels or build a prototype out of recyclable items around the house or schoolroom, if possible.

12. Design and illustrations can evoke feelings, reactions and thoughts, and can work together with the text to enhance the narrative.

- a.** Discuss the chapter Great Balls of Fire. How does the design and illustrations on these pages enhance the narrative?
- b.** How does the design of the text put you in Leif's shoes and indicate Leif's state of mind? Describe how these pages made you feel.
- c.** How does the book as a whole use text design – different fonts and sizes, lists, etc. – to create interest and intrigue?

13. Leif is first and foremost a Certified Science Enthusiast, but during the novel he explores the similarities and differences between science and art.

- a.** Do you prefer science or art? Or both? Why? Discuss as a class.
- b.** On page 32, Leif says: 'I love the elegance of algebra. The numbers jump forward, back, up and down and then align themselves as though they're performing a perfectly choreographed dance.' He is talking about maths/science in an artistic way. What does this sentence evoke? How does this idea cross boundaries between science and art?

- c. On page 40, Leif uses the simile: 'Surely I would find someone to pair up with me for the project, and our shared love of science would bind us like two molecules coming together with an electromagnetic force.' How does this simile help build the science versus art theme of the novel? How does this simile develop Leif's character?
 - d. On pages 107–109, Leif discovers a piece of art that makes him feel. He sees something that he thinks no one else can see. Has a piece of art ever spoken to you – have you ever been transported by art? Find your favourite piece of art, and write a paragraph about what you see in it. It could be a detail no one else sees. It could be use of colour or shading or medium. It could be the emotions you feel when you look at it.
 - e. Samira and Leif become friends over their love of scientific facts. What is your favourite scientific fact?
 - f. On page 140, Leif says Maggie 'believed in things the eye could not see, in concepts science could not explain'. What does this mean? How does his relationship with Maggie and his visit back home help Leif change his perspective on life? And what else can't be explained by science?
 - g. On page 202, Leif says: 'But recently I have been wondering whether I have been clinging to science so that I can make sense of this world. Because it seems that the world inside me, inside each of us, cannot be explained entirely through science. In the end, my search to unravel the mysteries of the universe led me not just to quantum physics but to something else. Something intangible, invisible, other-worldly. Something that cannot be defined by a mathematical equation or scientific theory but only through the heart. And that thing is . . . Love.' Discuss Leif's conclusion. Do you agree, and why or why not? How does this summarise the themes of the novel?
14. On pages 98–99, Leif writes a poem to explore feelings of loss. Choose a strong emotion that you've experienced and write a poem about the feeling. Like Leif's, it doesn't have to rhyme.
15. Leif believes he will find home and belonging when he goes back to Hollow Creek.
- a. On page 122, Leif says: 'If I went back to my place of birth, my roots, my people, I would reset – find my equilibrium. All anyone ever needs in this life is a sense of belonging. A place that truly feels like home.' Then on page 130, Leif says: 'It was a strange feeling being back home. It was familiar but also foreign. I know I had only just set foot in the place again after four years, but I could tell that a lot had changed.' Why does Leif not find a sense of belonging when he ventures back home to Hollow Creek? Why has Leif's perspective changed? Is home a place or can home be the people you love? What is home to you?