

**Notes for teachers and librarians on**  
**The Boy at the Back of the Class**  
**by Onjali Q. Raúf**

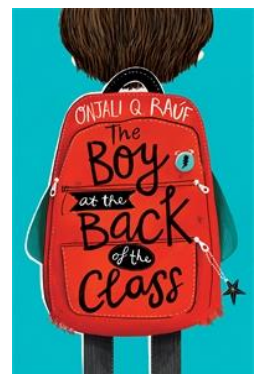
**BEFORE READING**

Share the front cover, title and chapter titles with the pupils. Discuss and predict what the story might be about.

**WHILE READING – *Ongoing Activities***

- Keep a reading journal to record thoughts, ideas, viewpoints, examples of author's style/technique, literary devices used, dialogue etc.
- How does the author integrate dialogue to explore the characters and advance the action? What does the dialogue spoken tell you about a character?
- *'Mum says that the best books leave you with more questions than answers and that's the fun part – you have to try and find the answers for yourself somewhere else.'* (p47)  
Ask questions and explore the answers through reading, research and discussion. Make a note of your questions and answers in your reading journal.
- Collect and explore the meaning of unfamiliar words by finding the words in context or through the use of a dictionary.
- Create a glossary of unfamiliar words.
- Collect words and phrases used by the author to describe emotions, mood and atmosphere. Write sentences or descriptions in the style of the author and use them in future writing.
- Make regular predictions about what might happen next from the details stated and implied.
- The story is narrated in the first person.
  - How does the author give the narrator a distinctive voice?
  - How does the author show characters' emotions through their descriptions?
  - Give two reasons why the author has written the story from this character's point of view.
  - How would the story change if the story was written from the perspective of Ahmet?
- Visualisation
  - At various points of the story, use the author's description to create illustrations for the book.
  - Discuss the importance of the author's language to create a vivid picture for the reader.
- Illustrations
  - Discuss the style of the illustrations. Do they add extra meaning to the text?
  - Where would you include an illustration? Explain reasons why.
  - Create your own illustrations using a technique of your choice or in the style of the illustrator.

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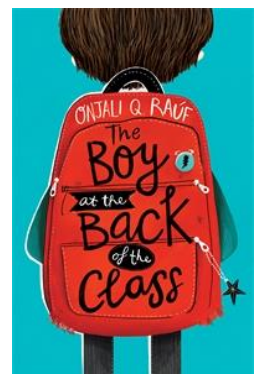


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**CHAPTERS 1-3**

1. How does the author create suspense in the first paragraph?
2. What is '*usually the best thing about starting a brand new term*' (p1)? Is it the same for you? What do you look forward to?
3. How does the author show the feelings of the narrator through their actions on page 1?
4. What does the narrator want to be when they are older? What would you like to be?
5. What are '*Blistering Barnacles*'?
6. Why is the narrator embarrassed in maths? Is it all right to learn by our mistakes?
7. What are your first impressions of the narrator?
8. What does the narrator think of Tom, Josie and Michael? Create a character portrait of each character using the information shared by the narrator.
9. Discuss the characteristics of a good friend.
10. Why is everyone scared of Mrs Sanders?
11. Why is the chair at the back of the class empty?
12. Why does the narrator make a secret promise to be friends with the new boy?
13. Do you agree that '*it must be one of the worst things in the world to be new to a place*' (p11)? Discuss.
14. How do you think Ahmet must be feeling when he walks into the classroom for the first time? Summarise in five words.
15. How do you think it would feel to move to a new place where you don't know anyone, or know where anything is?
16. How would you welcome someone new to your class?
17. Why is Chapter 2 called 'The Boy with the Lion Eyes'?
18. How does the narrator describe Ahmet's eyes? Find the words used by the author.
19. Is it right to make up stories about people and start rumours? Discuss.
20. What are your first impressions of Ahmet?
21. What does Mum mean when she says that everyone needs 'forty winks a day'?
22. What's a tattle-tale? Is 'tattle-tale' a real word? What is the narrator trying to say?
23. Why do you think the new boy is in 'seclusion'?

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**CHAPTER 1-3 CONTINUED**

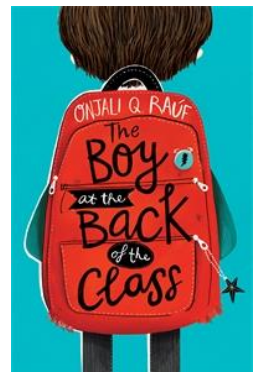
**Writing Opportunity:**

- The narrator enjoys reading comics. Look at some different comics, study the features and create your own adventure/mystery story in the form of a comic strip.
- Write an explanation of the process of photosynthesis.
- *'They reminded me of a programme I saw about lions once.'* (p13)  
Use the above as a starting point to research information about lions. Record facts learned in an information book or as a digital presentation.

**EXPLORE THE LANGUAGE USED**

expensive, gangly, ingenious, insightful, gadgets, imagination, memorise, ordinary, sneaking glances, specks, operator, photosynthesis, rascal, rumours, contagious, divider, infectious disease, seclusion

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**CHAPTERS 4-8**

1. Do you agree that if you really want something you should keep on trying? Discuss the importance of developing a 'growth mindset'.
2. Why does Ahmet not acknowledge the narrator when they give him sweets?
3. What do you think has happened to Ahmet?
4. What is a refugee?
5. Is there a time when someone would want to leave their country and home to start a new life somewhere else? Can you be forced to leave your country and home? Discuss.
6. Why does Mr Brown frown and move away from Mrs Grimsby?
7. Try to answer the eleven questions on page 48. You might need to make some predictions.
8. Why is the narrator worried at the end of Chapter 6? What would you do in this situation?
9. Why does everyone crowd round when Ahmet plays football at breaktime?
10. In Chapter 7, find examples of how the characters show their emotions through their actions.
11. What does Mrs Khan mean when she says '*some people just can't see past the end of their own nose!*' (p68)?
12. What is the unexpected adventure?
13. What is a 'floor manager' of a supermarket?

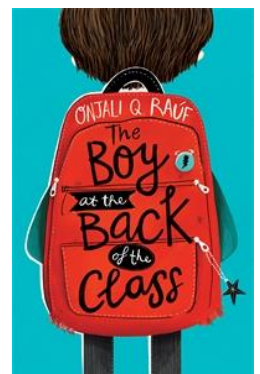
***Writing Opportunity:***

- What questions would you like to ask Ahmet? Write them in your reading journal and answer them as you progress through the book.
- Write a description of the market. Make sure the mood and atmosphere is created through the use of the senses. What can the narrator see, feel, smell, hear and taste?

**EXPLORE THE LANGUAGE USED**

encouraged, allergic, refugee, record player, apparently, munchkin, ruffled, criminal, immediately, nervously, interrupt, confiscating, ridiculous, patient, dimples, economy, pomegranate

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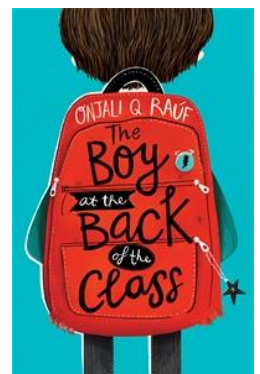
**CHAPTER 9-15**

1. Why did Ahmet become the most popular boy in school?
2. Is it right to fight back? Discuss.
3. At the end of Chapter 9, the narrator gives the reader a clue to what might happen in the rest of the story. Predict what the newspapers might have written to make Ahmet 'The Most Famous Refugee Boy in the Whole Wide World'.
4. What is a scaredy-cat?
5. What do we learn about Ahmet during Chapter 10?
6. Why does the narrator think Ahmet is the bravest person they know?
7. What is kibbeh?
8. Why does the narrator compare life to a jigsaw? Do you agree with this description? Discuss.
9. What questions would you ask Ahmet if you were in his class?
10. Why does the narrator dislike the holidays?
11. What does the narrator learn about Grandma Jo?
12. What does the author mean by the description '*Sometimes words hang around longer than people, even when you don't want them to*' (p135)?
13. How does the author create suspense at the end of page 40?
14. Why is Chapter 13 called 'The Something that Changed Everything'?
15. What is their First Ever Top Secret Mission? Predict what the characters might do next to help Ahmet.
16. Why does Mum call sunset the 'Magic Hour'?
17. How do you know what the 'Greatest Idea in the World' is?

**EXPLORE THE LANGUAGE USED**

unexpected, confused, squashed, plucking, jewels, lunged, watery, famous, announcement, applause, signalled, kibbeh, grocery, matter-of-factly, poor tyke, downcast faces

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**CHAPTER 16-20**

1. Why did the afternoon feel like the longest afternoon any of the characters had ever had?
2. Do you think they have devised a good plan? Discuss the positives and negatives.
3. What is meant by the term 'state secret'?
4. How does the author describe the narrator's excitement at the beginning of Chapter 17?
5. What is the emergency plan? Why do the others believe the plan will not work?
6. Should the children go all by themselves to Buckingham Palace? Discuss.
7. Using the author's description at the end of Chapter 19, describe what has happened to the narrator as they try to enter the palace. How must they have been feeling at this moment in time?
8. Has your opinion of the narrator changed? Describe them in ten words.

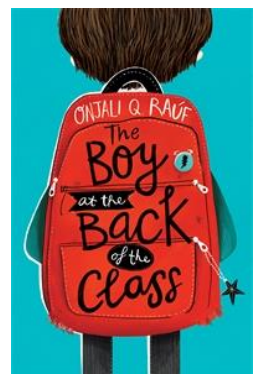
***Writing Opportunity:***

- Study and research various landmarks in London, such as Buckingham Palace. Write a tourist brochure for London.

**EXPLORE THE LANGUAGE USED**

reassuringly, anxiously, frantically, nudging, chauffeuring, swerved, zigzagged, prodding, surged, clamouring, paramedic, concussion, troopers, siren

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**CHAPTER 21-26**

1. Why does the author write some words in capital letters and italics?
2. Why is some of the text in a different font?
3. Is it all right to be different from other people?
4. Why was everyone speechless when they received the letter from the Queen?
5. What is the Home Office? What is its role in the government?
6. What happens when you are granted 'permanent asylum'?
7. What has happened to Ahmet's mum and dad?
8. What have you learned from Alexa's best ever adventure?
9. Until Ms Duncan says '*A very happy birthday, Alexa*' in the last chapter, we don't know the narrator's name or gender. What effect does this have as you're reading? How did you imagine the narrator? Were you surprised when you found out she was a girl? Why do you think the author decided to hide her name and gender until the very end?

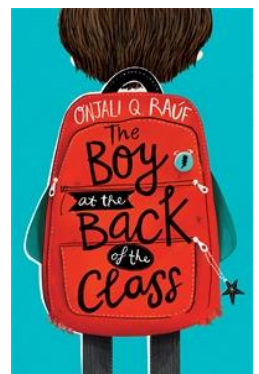
***Writing Opportunity:***

- Write a newspaper report giving details about the events at Buckingham Palace or write the exclusive newspaper article '*Ahmet: The Most Famous Refugee Boy in the World*'.

**EXPLORE THE LANGUAGE USED**

dangly, despicable, neckerchiefs, bigotry, intercepted, transpired, terrorist, no scruples, hounded, harass, murmured, suspension, disarray, radar, expelled, motioning

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**POST READING**

- Take a point in the story and change the narration to the third person.
  - Write an event, passage or chapter from the perspective of another character. Would they see things differently? How would they feel? How would they react? Would they have the same opinions?
- What is life like for a refugee? Why do many people become refugees? Study and research times in history when people have become refugees.
- What happens in the story to give each character hope?
- What message does the novel teach the reader? What is the story about? Explore the themes such as politics, friendship, bereavement, war, death, change, fear, hope, determination, courage, freedom, celebrating differences, diversity, religion, faith and bullying.

**CROSS-CURRICULUM LINKS**

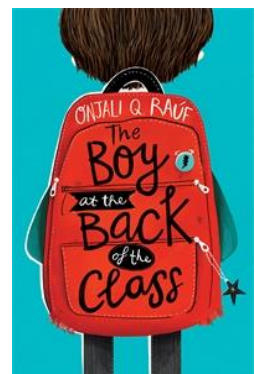
***History***

- The narrator refers to World Wars I and II.
  - Research and study what happened during World Wars I and II.
  - Were there any refugees during these wars? What was life like for the refugees? Why were they forced to leave their countries?
  - What was life like in Britain during World Wars I and II? (*This could include studying the Blitz and life on the Home Front.*)
  - Why is the poppy used as a symbol of remembrance?
  - Discuss the role of propaganda in a world conflict.

***D.T***

- Look at the picture of the shelters in the refugee camp. What materials have been used? How are the shelters constructed? Design and make your own shelter which is strong and stable and will protect the inhabitants from the weather.
- The narrator gives Ahmet a pomegranate.
  - Taste samples of fruit, explore using the senses and investigate where the different fruits come from.
  - Use the author's description of a pomegranate as a model for writing and describe the different fruits in a similar style.

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**CROSS-CURRICULUM LINKS CONTINUED**

**Music**

- “She helped us make musical instruments out of things we found in the school recycling bin.” (p8)
  - Make different instruments using items which can be recycled.

**Science**

- ‘Mrs Khan was teaching us all about photosynthesis.’ (p22)
  - Grow your own plant.
  - Explore what a plant needs to survive (*light, water, right temperature, room to grow, nutrients etc.*). What would be the impact of changing these?
  - What happens during the process of germination?
  - What is photosynthesis?

**Geography/Languages**

- Using a map, plot the journey Ahmet would take from Syria to Great Britain. Be prepared to explain your choices.
- In Chapter 6 we learn that Ahmet is from Syria. What is life like in Syria? Explore the culture, food, buildings, religion and physical geography.
- Ahmet speaks Kurdish and is learning English.
  - Learning a new language: is it easy or hard? How would you feel if you didn’t understand what everyone around you was saying?

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