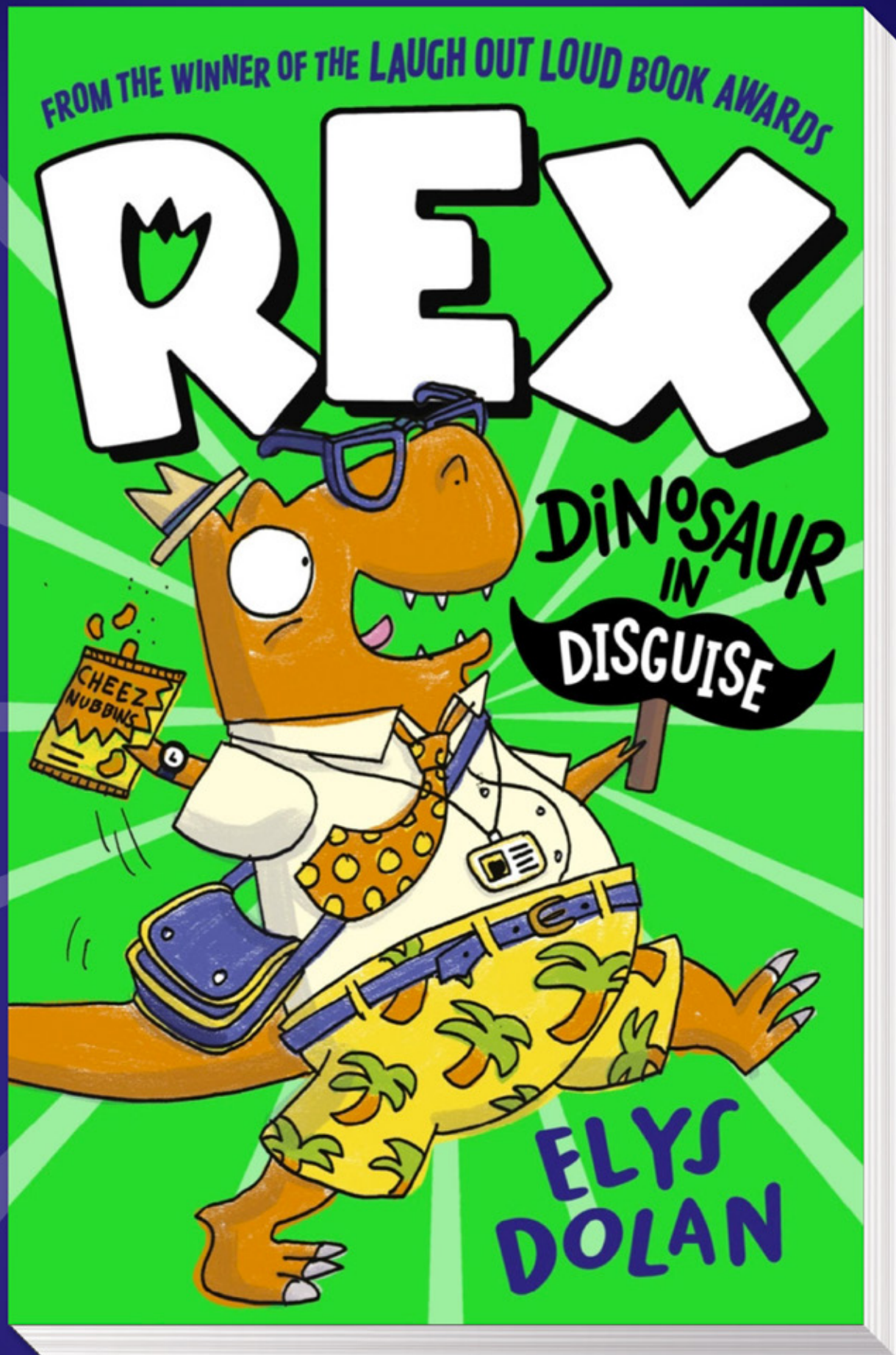


DISCUSSION GUIDE



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REX DINOSAUR IN DISGUISE

ELYS DOLAN

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR WALKER BOOKS

ABOUT THE BOOK

Rex: Dinosaur in Disguise is a delightfully engaging book, full of humour and charm, undercut with a philosophical questioning perfect for younger readers. Using text and illustrations that play off one another for comedic value and a punchy pace of narrative, Dolan nonetheless refuses to patronize her readers, asking them to interrogate, to question, and work out answers for themselves, as the story romps along to its conclusion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elys Dolan makes picture books about everything from seagull detectives to capitalist bunny rabbits and weasels plotting world domination. She was shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book Prize for *Weasels* and the Branford Boase for *Knighthood for Beginners*, and won the inaugural STEAM Children's Book Prize for *How the Borks Became* and the prestigious Lollies Prize for *Mr Bunny's Chocolate Factory*. She is also a lecturer on the MA in Children's Book Illustration at the Cambridge School of Art.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION:

Rex: Dinosaur in Disguise contains far more to explore than might first be assumed. First, there is the immediacy of the story: the slapstick, the preposterous set-up, the wit and humour that carry the narrative. But beyond this there are serious questions to be explored about human nature: what it is to be human, and our relationship with the planet and other animals, not to mention changing friendships, bullying, family structures, the concept of immigration and integration, etc. The book also offers hugely creative launch pads for children to explore similar themes, write and draw their own ideas, develop critical understanding and have fun.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Getting started:

This guide assumes a level of independent reading has taken place, rather than the book being read as a group, or in class. If the latter is true, then slight adjustments might need to be made, as understanding of the text is more likely to be shared.

To start off, ask what everyone thought of the book. *Who would like to say something they liked about it? Why did you like it? How would you describe the book? Why? Does anyone have a favourite character? Why?*

1. Rex

"Millions of years ago, Rex was King of the Dinosaurs." – p.5

How could you describe Rex's character? What is his personality like? Try to think about things that happen in the book to explain your description. (You may like to revisit definitions of character and personality, for example, to check understanding, or to offer up starters, like: Is he angry? Aggressive? Shy? Etc.) Is Rex like other dinosaurs that you can think of? How is he different? How is he similar?

2. Mr Foot

"Bigfoot had lived in the city for years, and worked hard to disguise himself as the most normal, boring human imaginable." – p.14

First things first, what is Bigfoot? Can anyone explain? What other names are mentioned for Bigfoot? (Yeti, Sasquatch, p. 204. You could also show the newspaper illustration on p.29 and then explain the famous hoax footage that this parodies.) How is Bigfoot different from Rex? How would you describe Bigfoot? Why does he act the way he does? Can anyone remember or explain his reasons? Are they good reasons?

3. Humans

"He had seen the other humans do this: they called it 'being in the way'." – p.13

How are humans portrayed in the book? Does this portrayal change as the book goes on? If so, how? Are humans all alike? What are the traits that Bigfoot has noticed humans possess (from p. 13)? What sorts of things do all humans really do? What makes us all different?

4. Perspective

"But, lucky for you, I know a thing or two about 'being human'." – p.17

Check understanding of the word "perspective". How many different perspectives is the story told from? Think about the last question and how Rex and Bigfoot see "humans" in the book. Now imagine the book was told from a human perspective. How would it be different? Why does the author start off by presenting humans from Bigfoot and Rex's perspective?

5. Sandra

"At nine-and-a-third years old, Sandra had grown up in the city and was quite an expert on its strange, and even supernatural, goings-on." – p.37

What makes Sandra different from other humans in the book? What sorts of things does she like to investigate? What does she initially think Rex might be? Why? Who here likes the idea of investigating mysteries? What skills and characteristics do you need to be good at investigating? Does Sandra have all of these?

6. Text vs illustration

"The time had come to put Rex's disguise to the text." – p.33

Read aloud the section from p.28 up to the end of p.33, without showing the illustrations. Ask the group to imagine a really good disguise, or something that looked almost exactly human. They might have examples from other things they've seen, of animals or creatures in human disguise. Now ask the group to imagine that they hadn't read any of the book, and show them the illustration on p.32. What is it a picture of? Could anyone possibly mistake it for a picture of a human? How would the book be different if it didn't have the illustrations? What do the illustrations add? What is the relationship between the illustrations and the text? (This can be a difficult concept to separate out, so it may be worth trying different approaches to encourage understanding that what you see and what you read can have different meanings that work together, or contradict each other, to produce different effects; in this case, comedy.)

7. Martianism

"They're 'money', and you can swap them for things in shops." – p.48

Martianism refers to a style of writing, particularly poetry, in which everyday events are presented as being very strange and unusual. You can choose to use this term or not, but ask the group: What very things that are very normal to us does Rex find very confusing? What does Bigfoot have to explain? Why? Imagine you were an alien who had landed on Earth for the first time – what do you think would be a very strange thing to understand that we all take for granted? Can anyone describe an activity from the point of view of an alien, to see if others can guess what they're describing? This lends itself really well to creative writing exercises – ask children to imagine they were Rex, or an alien, and describe how they would experience something for the first time – going to the library, camping, the post office, a bus journey, etc.

8. Changes

"Why do things change, just like that?" – p.40

How does the author show how Sandra's friendship with Maddie has changed? How do the other characters react to this change? Why does anyone think Maddie behaves the way she does? What else changes in the book? Are all changes sudden, or do some things change gradually? Is change always scary? Can it be good?

9. Try and try again

"'I am trying!' Rex pulled the duvet right up to his face, so only his eyes peeped out." – p.150

Discuss the different jobs that Rex tries, and how Bigfoot, Nessy and Mr Dodo react to what happens. How did anyone feel when Rex made a mess of his jobs, before finding one he was good at? Was he treated fairly? In the end Rex was a great PE teacher – can anyone think of any other jobs that Rex would be really good at? Why? What other jobs would be really bad at?

10. Myth vs history

"A bit of Rex would always miss the forests and swamps and Stegosauruses of prehistoric times." – p.239

Which of the creatures in the book really existed, once upon a time? Who believes in Bigfoot? Nessy? What's the difference between a myth and an extinct species? How do we know which is which? As another creative exercise, group members could write a new adventure for Rex, where he meets other extinct or mythical creatures. Who else could be introduced? What other extinct animals are there? What other mythical creatures? Write or draw a new chapter introducing your chosen creature, where Rex has to explain what it means to "be human".