

TEACHING RESOURCES

This is a fruitful text for exploring various ideas with KS3, including:

- Identity, difference and uniqueness
- Fear and bravery
- Disability and invisible disabilities
- Bullying

It could be used in either an English or PSHE/PDC setting, and activities are offered here which support both curricula. It could also be used as a DEAR form-time novel, with only occasional activities, or use of a couple of whole-text tasks at the end as consolidation.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ENGLISH LESSONS:

- 1) Use the tension tracker (see p.3 of these notes) to plot the novel's high and low points whilst reading – read a few chapters at a time and enter key points onto graph in each reading session. This activity can be enriched by discussing the purpose and impact of the dual narrative, if desired. Students could also be asked to record tension in relation to Parker and Sven in different colours, tracing how readers' emotions are affected in relation to the two main characters.
- 2) Explore the metaphor of living on Mars, using the handout provided (see p.4 of these notes).
 - This handout identifies three key places in the novel where the metaphor is discussed, so it could be used at each of those times, or introduced at the end of reading, with each passage re-visited at this point.
 - The task could alternatively be split, with students working in pairs on one of the three points, and then teaming up in a six to compare notes and explore the metaphor across the novel. This also allows for differentiation, as the language-focused task could be allocated to more able students.
- 3) Explore the theme of appearance and reality by collecting relevant incidents and events on sticky notes after a whole text readthrough.
 - This could be effectively introduced by asking at which points in the novel things are not as they appear, or characters do not have all the information they would need to make good judgments.

4) Creative writing inspired by the text:

- Describe your dream (or current, or past) pet. (After p.47 would be a good place.)
- Dual narration task – write parent/child, two siblings or teacher/student confrontation from both sides. Aim to make reader sympathise with each speaker! (After p.78 is a good spot for this.)

5) Use passages from the text to practise and develop GCSE skills of analysis and evaluation:

- Using pp.1–3: Choose 2 to 3 phrases, sentences or features that you feel effectively introduce each narrator. Why do they work? How do they show the narrator's personality and voice?
- Using pp.53–54: Analyse the ways in which the writer structures the text to create meanings and interest.
- Using pp.104–5: Analyse the ways in which the writer uses language to show Parker's feelings.
- Using pp.133–5: Analyse the ways in which the writer uses language and structure to create drama and excitement.

AS SOURCE FOR PHSE/PDC:

1) Pause when reading through to explore how/why the characters are feeling or the choices they make. (Take the opportunities for 'what would you do' type discussions, or 'why does Parker/Sven...?')

- Pre-reading: If you were starting a new school, what you want to be known or noticed for? (E.g. the ____ kid, or the one who____.)
- pp.34–5: What do we learn about Sven in this chapter?
- p.74: Why does Parker do this with her brother? Do you think she's right? Why?
- p.112: Why does Sven decide not to go back to school? If this happened in your school, how could you encourage him to return? What could help him?

2) It is worth exploring the discussion questions at the back of the book (pp. 173–5). These are suitable for exploration post-reading. Here are some suggestions for how to use these questions with a class:

- Students could select the 3, 4 or 5 they find most interesting to discuss in a pair before engaging in a whole class discussion. (Hopefully, all questions will have been explored somewhere in the room.)
- A question can be allocated to each student pair/group for discussion. In addition, they can be asked to select two more for discussion, so that all questions are covered and students also have some agency.
- Students can work on questions 5, 6 or 9 in more depth, as many different ideas are valid in response. To get more out of students, try one of the following:
 - Trading ideas. Students note down everything relevant they can think of (e.g. on sticky notes) and then can 'trade' one or two ideas with other students to improve their overall bank of ideas.

- Answering using 'yes, because' and 'no, because'.
- Aiming for a set number of points (questions 3, 5 or 7 are useful).
- Producing a target diagram. This is like a bullseye with rings, in which the strongest and best ideas can be placed in the centre, with weaker ones radiating outwards. This works well in groups and with sticky notes, with students negotiating to evaluate and rearrange ideas.
- A silent debate. Students do not speak, but must develop each other's ideas in writing. This works best on rolls of drawing paper, the back of wallpaper, or on desks with dry-wipe pens. Connected ideas should be visually linked together for clarity.

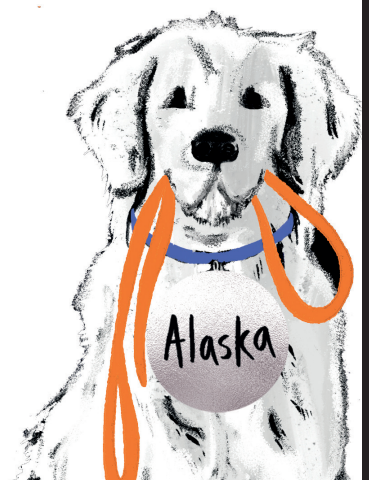
3) Use the emotions tracker (see p.5 of these notes) after reading (otherwise: spoilers!) to plot the characters' emotions at key points. You could ask students to enter a word or phrase to describe each character's feelings, or allow them to select and draw emojis for a simpler version. Students could also discuss how and why Sven and Parker's emotions relate to one another (hopefully noting that they grow more similar as the story – and their friendship – progresses).

4) Ratings and rankings tasks for different points in the book, e.g.:

- Ranking of how relatable different actions or feelings of Sven's and Parker's are:
 - Sven calls Alaska 'beast'
 - Sven says 'why are you allowed to be more scared than anyone else?' (p.95)
 - Parker breaks into Sven's house to see Alaska
 - Parker follows the robber
 - Parker calls the video 'your torture movie' (p.116)
- Choose a comment for specific actions:
 - I do not think they should have done that
 - I understand why they did that, but think it was wrong
 - I don't know why they did that!
 - That was the right or best thing to do in that situation
- Use emojis (e.g. on cards held up) to rate how students feel about characters' actions at different points. This can be done at regular stopping points, or after key events. (See emotions tracker for key moments.)

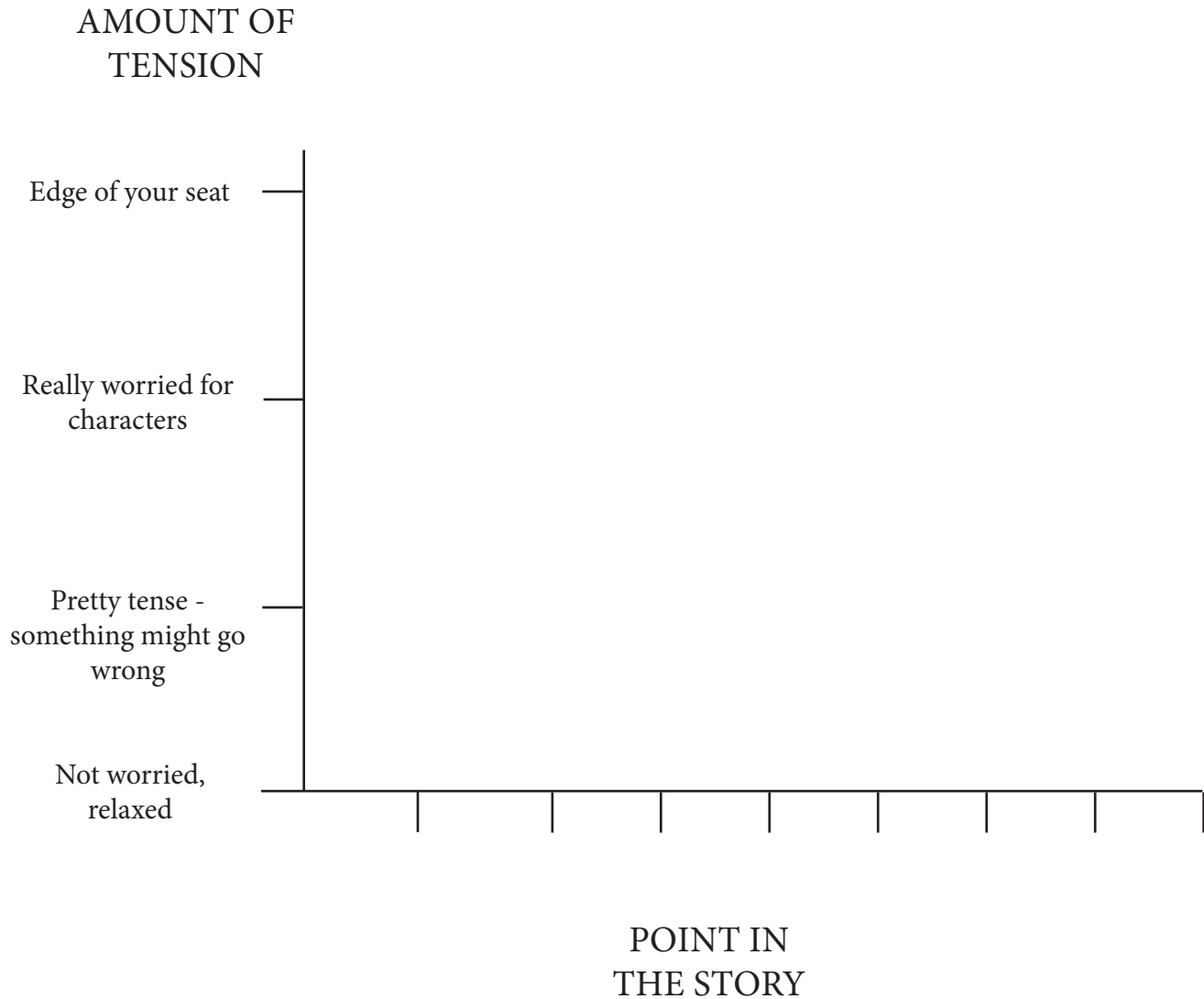
5) Ask students to discuss how Parker and Sven's friendship develops. Prompt them to think about the below and possibly write down ideas (or you could think/pair/share and collect ideas to the front):

- Reasons they end up being friends
- Things that bring them together
- What they do for each other
- What we could learn from their friendship
- Ways in which their friendship is unusual or surprising



TENSION TRACKER

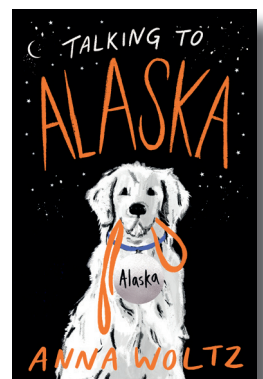
Use this graph to plot how tense Talking to Alaska makes you feel at different points.
Extension version: use different colours to track how tense you feel for Sven and for Parker at those key points.



EXPLORING A KEY METAPHOR

Sven refers to himself as 'living on Mars' at various points in the story. This becomes a key metaphor, used by Woltz to help explain how Sven feels in comparison to other characters. This sheet will help you explore the metaphor at three key points in the text, allowing you to build up an answer to this question.

How does the writer use the metaphor of 'living on Mars' at different points in the novel?



A

On p.60, Sven explains the idea to a masked Parker.

How does Woltz make the metaphor effective for the reader here?

In other words, what does the metaphor help us to understand that we might not grasp otherwise? Do you think this is effective? Why/why not?

B

On p.119, Sven reflects on Parker's description of the video of him.

How is the reference to a 'planet full of crazy people' helpful here to show us how Sven is feeling? How do other language features, such as repetition and emotive vocabulary, help the writer to convey Sven's feelings?

C

On p.164, Sven reminds Parker that he 'live[s] on Mars'.

What is he suggesting about the other students? What could this mean for their relationships? How is this word choice used by the writer to make Sven's feelings clear?

EMOTIONS TRACKER

Use this grid to help you explore the characters' emotions at different points in the story. Don't worry if you don't remember these plot points in detail – the page numbers are here for you to refresh your memory.

Event	Parker's emotions	Sven's emotions	Comments
Parker barking in class (pp.10–11)			
Sven's first fit in class (pp.16–22)			
Parker first visiting Alaska at night (pp.39–46)			
Parker telling Sven about the robbery (pp.64–68)			
Alaska having to choose (pp.99–101)			
The video being shared (pp.110–117)			
Parker following the robber (pp.126–139)			
Alaska predicting Sven's fit (pp.139–149)			
1B's videos (pp.156–160)			

TALKING TO ALASKA

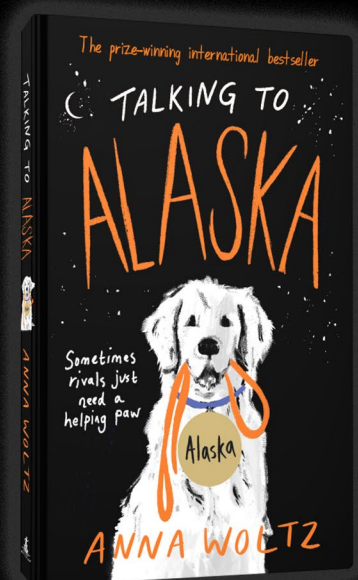
SOMETIMES RIVALS JUST NEED A HELPING PAW...

BY ANNA WOLTZ, A BESTSELLING, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR IN THE NETHERLANDS. TRANSLATED FROM THE DUTCH BY LAURA WATKINSON AS PART OF BOOKTRUST'S IN OTHER WORDS INITIATIVE.

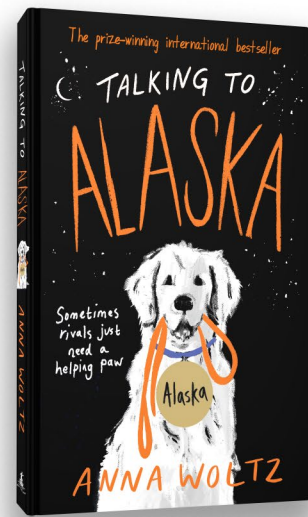
'THIS WILL BE AN UNMISSABLE DEBUT IN THE UK.'
JILL COLEMAN, DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS, BOOKTRUST



FEBRUARY
2021



TALKING TO ALASKA

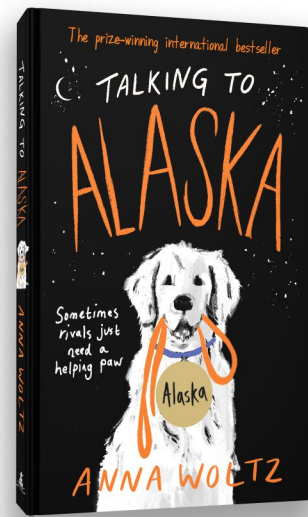


Discussion Questions

1. Sven and Parker become friends while Parker is disguised in a balaclava. Is Parker's mask necessary for their friendship to form? Do they relate to one another differently while Parker's identity is a secret?
2. How does Sven's character develop over the course of the narrative?
3. "Alaska looks back at me, and I know that she doesn't see a vague blob. She doesn't see an alien, or my illness. She sees me." Do you think Alaska understands Sven?
 4. Is there a difference between what the characters say and what they feel? If so, why could this be?
 5. What does *Talking to Alaska* teach us about disabilities? And what do you understand by the term "invisible disability"?



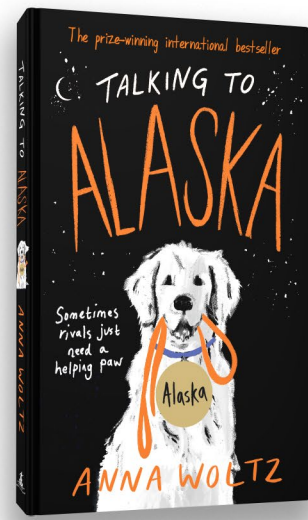
TALKING TO ALASKA



Describe your own dream pet. It can be a pet you've had, or just your ideal animal companion. What are they like? Are they similar to Alaska?



TALKING TO ALASKA



Write a newspaper article about the armed robbery of Montijn Photographic Supplies and how Parker and Sven try to catch the robber. Think about the different language a newspaper report would use, compared to how Parker describes the robbery.

