

'SUSIN NIELSEN IS SIMPLY WONDERFUL' SARAH CROSSAN

SOMETIMES THE ONLY THING
STANDING IN YOUR WAY
IS YOU

TREMENDOUS THINGS

SUSIN NIELSEN
AUTHOR OF WE ARE ALL MADE OF MOLECULES

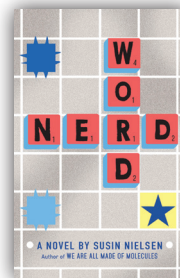
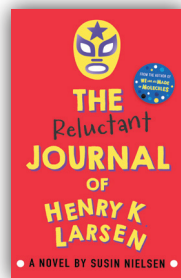
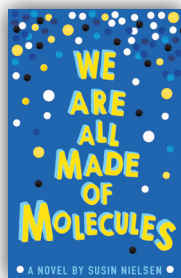
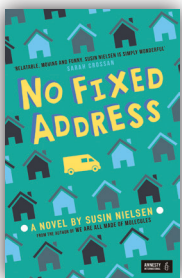
DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

Full of charm, humour and authenticity, *Tremendous Things* is a joyful slice of the trials and tribulations of adolescence. Wilbur is fourteen, shy, body-conscious, and lacking in confidence. His best friend is 85-year-old Sal, who lives next door, the school bully has been torturing him since the first day of seventh grade, his mums are struggling to make ends meet, and his one friend his own age is busy with his new boyfriend. But when a simple misunderstanding means Charlie, the French exchange student he's hosting, is a girl and not a boy, he instantly falls for her and everything changes. A modern-day *Adrian Mole*, *Tremendous Things* follows Wilbur through the discoveries of first love as he navigates school, romance, loss, self-esteem, and his place in the world.

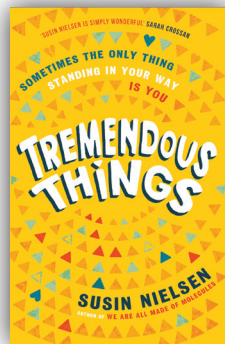
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susin Nielsen got her start writing for popular television series, *Degrassi Junior High*. Since then, she's written for many Canadian TV shows and her young adult novels have received considerable critical acclaim. *Word Nerd* and *My Messed-Up Life* won multiple Young Readers' Choice Awards. *The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen* won the UKLA Award, the prestigious Governor General's Literary Award, the Canadian Library Association's Children's Book of the Year and many Young Readers' Choice Awards, while *We Are All Made of Molecules* was longlisted for the Carnegie Medal. Susin lives in Vancouver with her family and two extremely destructive cats.



GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Tremendous Things sits in that glorious space between middle grade and YA, perfect for older readers transitioning to that Young Adult category. It's full of bittersweet humour, affection and intrigue, and is marked by a real authenticity of voice that is sure to resonate with readers. It brings something new to the genre typified by *The Diary of Adrian Mole*, reflecting a more modern world and audience. There are many areas for discussion, and a range of themes and ideas beyond just the angst of teenagerdom, but it is important to ensure that adequate support and signposting is in place or ready, should anything discussed reflect the lived experience or difficulties faced by group members. This could include mental health, sexual health, loss, loneliness, body image, sexual and gender identity, bullying, isolation, poverty or more. You may also like to check the group's knowledge of the story of *Charlotte's Web* before beginning, too.



DISCUSSION GUIDE

GETTING STARTED:

Ask for the group's thoughts on the book. What did anyone like most about it? Why? Did it remind anyone of anything else they've read or seen? How would anyone describe the book – what genre is it? What responses did it provoke? Encourage members to expand on their answers and use specific examples.



1. WILBUR

'He's making himself a secondary character in his own life.' p.77

What is Wilbur like? What characteristics does he have? Is he the 'loser' he thinks he is? Explore some of these characteristics together – what are his best qualities? What do his friends like about him? Is Wilbur a positive person? Revisit p.77 together - what does Wilbur's decision to change his name to that of the pig in *Charlotte's Web* suggest to the reader – is he really making himself a secondary character in his own life?

2. CHARLIE

'She moved like a cat. Like the Pink Panther. Which is a kind of cat.' p.45

Ask the group to list out all of Charlie's features that wouldn't be considered classically attractive. Why does Wilbur like her so much? Compare Charlie to Wilbur – are they opposites of one another? If so, how? If not, why not? Why does the author choose to give Charlie the same name as Wilbur's favourite book? Are there any similarities between Charlotte the spider, and Charlie the girl?

3. NARRATIVE VOICE

'It did look rather good on me, if I do say so myself.' p.204

How is the story told? What is the 'narrative voice' of the novel? What effect does this have? How would the book be different if it wasn't told from Wilbur's perspective? Unlike some other books, this isn't a diary-format, but it does include transcripts of letters, for example, that Wilbur 'shares' with the reader. Why does the author choose this way of writing? Does the reader ever understand more than Wilbur does? (Consider, for example, the French sentences Wilbur faithfully recounts, but doesn't necessarily understand.)

4. SAL

'...he's just a spectacular human being.' p.24

Why does Wilbur consider Sal his best friend? What does it say about Wilbur that his best friend is his 85-year-old neighbour? What does Sal offer to Wilbur, and to the reader? Why is his character so important?



5. THE MUMPS

'...but right now, I've had it up to my eyeballs with the matriarchy.' p.79

How does Wilbur's upbringing affect him at the time the book is set in? How would anyone in the group describe Wilbur's family dynamic? In what ways are the Mumps good parents? Despite their best intentions, are there any ways in which they haven't helped Wilbur?

6. PARIS

'I was walking along the Seine, in Paris!' p.227

What does Paris represent in the book? What does Wilbur do to make sure he can enjoy the trip? Who feels they would be able to do the same? What help does he need? Why does the author choose Paris, particularly, as the destination?

7. TEMPLETON

'Nothing fazes you,' she says. By *nothing* I am pretty sure she means sick and poo.' p.257

How does Templeton reflect elements of Wilbur's personality? What, if anything, does Templeton represent in the book? Why is Wilbur so happy to share all the horrible details of looking after Templeton? (Revisit p.52, for an example.) Explore how the way Wilbur talks about Templeton allows the reader to get to know him better.

8. TYLER KERTZ

'Wilbur, I've known guys like this all my life. He's a putz.' p.175

How just is Tyler's punishment at the start of the novel, for sharing Wilbur's letter? Discuss what punishment he should have received. What power does Tyler Kertz have over Wilbur? What changes by the end of the novel? We learn almost nothing about Tyler – why does the author keep him at arm's length? Consider the quotation from p.175 – what does this tell you about Tyler? What function does he serve?



9. FULTON

'Just go lie down under Fulton again if you don't believe me.' p.254

Is it comforting to think of yourself as a 'blip'? Why? Why is it significant to Wilbur and Sal? Discuss the perspective that is created by comparing Wilbur and his classmates with Sal, and then Wilbur and Sal with Fulton. What does anyone think of the end of the novel, and Wilbur meeting Mitzi again, underneath Fulton. Why does the author choose this place for that meeting?

10. TREMENDOUS THINGS

'You have been my friend, Wilbur. And that in itself is a tremendous thing.' p.254

Why is the novel called 'Tremendous Things'? Is it a fitting title? Consider the word 'tremendous' together. Is it commonly used? What effect does it have on the reader? Does it say anything about Wilbur? Or another character? What does the author suggest these 'tremendous things' are? What makes them tremendous?

