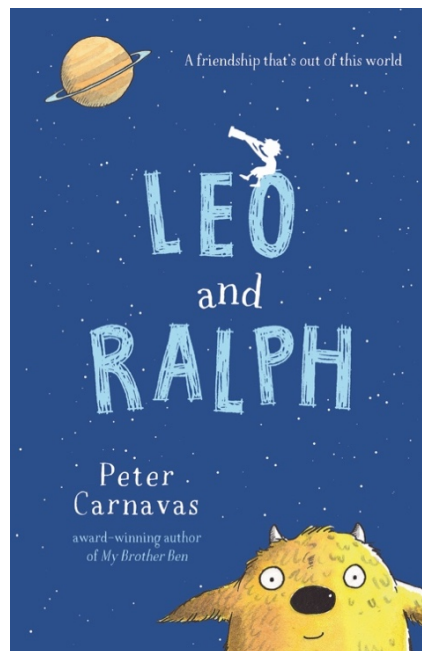


UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

# LEO AND RALPH

## Peter Carnavas



### Teachers' Notes

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**SYNOPSIS**

Leo has no friends. With a head full of questions and big wonderings, his words come out too slowly and no one at school listens to him for long before running off to play. Unable to navigate playtime, Leo retreats to the safety of his imagination and secret place under the stairs. That is until he meets Ralph, a short, furry alien who lights up Leo's world. But Leo's family worry that Ralph may be preventing Leo from making a real friend.

When they move to the country for Mum's new job, Leo must say goodbye to Ralph. It is the hardest thing he has ever had to do.

**THEMES**

- Friendship; Imaginary Friends
- Alienation
- Vulnerability
- Acceptance
- Space

**WRITING STYLE**

With themes of friendship, vulnerability and acceptance, *Leo and Ralph* is an endearing story that shares the unique bond between Leo and his imaginary friend, Ralph. Written in third person, past tense, it traces Leo's journey from Prep through to Year 4, the comfort he finds in Ralph and the wrench of saying goodbye. Insightful characterisation, cleverly crafted symbolism and rich figurative language creates a literary text that is both evocative and engaging. The sensitive way in which Peter Carnavas reveals Leo's feelings of alienation and being misunderstood before developing his friendships with Ralph, and later Gus, will strike an empathetic chord with readers. The illustrations will guide younger readers to make meaningful connections between the characters, settings and events of the story. It is suitable as a read-aloud for younger readers and an independent text for middle readers.

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**STUDY NOTES**

- The story (Prologue) places readers partway through the story before being taken back to the beginning of Leo and Ralph's friendship (Chapter 1 onwards). After finishing *Leo and Ralph*, discuss the effectiveness of structuring the story in this way.
- Like the Grimbles they have invented, Leo and Ralph like to speak in backwards sentences. Try doing this with a friend. As you read, track the recurring line: 'Tomorrow you see'. How does this offer hope for Leo's future?
- Using the illustration on p. 7, write a journal entry in the role of Leo about seeing the white balloon for the first time.
- Why does Leo feel he 'never seemed to fit neatly into the jigsaw puzzle of other kids' (p. 8)? Have you ever felt this way? Share in a reflection.
- Leo's 'head was filled with questions' and he felt that the other kids 'didn't care for the size of his thoughts or the time it took to share them' (p. 9). With a partner, devise other Leo-type questions. Share with another pair, choosing your best three questions. Why are these your best questions?
- Why does Leo become so excited that the sky 'goes on forever' (p. 11)? How is this like his imagination and wonderings? Why does Leo often feel 'the sky filling his chest' (p. 14)?
- At the start of this chapter, we are told that Leo 'looked up' (p. 12), and he continues to do so throughout the story. How is the sky an important motif throughout *Leo and Ralph*?
- Leo's dad explains that Pluto is no longer a planet because it's too small. Why does Leo think 'That's not fair' (p. 14)? How does this connect with Leo's smallness?
- Why do Leo's eyes twinkle when his dad says, 'Just because you can't see something, doesn't mean it's not there' (p. 14)? How is this idea repeated in the book?
- Using the descriptions on p. 18, sketch one of the aliens that Leo draws. Now, draw your own alien. Next, use words to describe it. Swap your description with a friend and sketch one another's. Using your friend's drawing as feedback, revise your writing to be as clear and precise as possible.
- Why does Leo feel it would be 'easier to ... imagine a friend falling from space' than to try to make a friend at school (p. 20)?
- In the role of Leo, write a reflection about one of your days at Prep.
- Discuss the language features used in the 'Saturday morning sounds' on p. 25. What are your family's 'Saturday morning sounds'? Write your own description.
- Using playdough, make the Gronk and other aliens Leo creates on p. 26. Like Leo, take photos of your creations. Consider making a short clay animation/stop motion to show the role of these aliens in Leo's story.

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- What tips does Peg give Leo about making friends? What other advice do you have for him about friendship?
- On Family Day, why does Leo '[drag] his feet like they were made of moon rock' (p. 36)?
- Why does Leo feel that the kids at school 'pretend he didn't exist' (p. 36)? Is this true?
- When Leo spends the day at home with his dad, why does he feel that 'Inside his belly, a thick lump of worry [has] washed away like a fistful of sand in the ocean' (p. 40)? Why does the thought of going to school make Leo feel so worried? What strategies could he use to feel less this way?
- Leo is asked which animal he feels like when he's at school and is then asked to draw what he feels like (p. 44). He draws himself as an alien who is on the other side of the page from all the other children. How does this reflect the theme of alienation in the text?
- In the role of Ralph, write a journal entry about your first few days with Leo.
- What makes Ralph such a good friend for Leo? How might he be holding Leo back?
- Why, when he tells his mum about Ralph, does Leo feel like a 'blown-up balloon but one that was ready to pop' (p. 62)?
- Why, when asked if he will stay forever, does Ralph reply, 'As long as you need me' (p. 66)? Make predictions about whether Leo will always need Ralph.
- How do Leo's family make room for Ralph in their lives? Give examples from the text to support your thinking.
- Write instructions for some of Leo and Ralph's made-up games such as Asteroids (pp. 60–61), Bounce the Moon, Moon Walk (pp. 68–69) and Other Worlds (pp. 73–74). Alternatively, write instructions for a game you and a friend have made up.
- How does buying the telescope help Leo? Why, when he leaves for the country, does Leo throw it in the bin?
- Make predictions about the story using the following excerpt:  
Ralph's horns drooped ... 'Because if you ever see a Ralphora ship—' He paused, then shook his head. 'Never mind.' (p. 78)
- Examine the language features used to describe the excursion to the farm (see pp. 86–89). Why, from the moment they arrived, might Leo have been 'lost in the sky' (p. 86)? How is this episode a turning point in the story?
- In the role of Leo, write a journal entry about saying goodbye to Ralph.
- What do you think is Leo and Ralph's 'secret promise' (p. 99)?
- Write a list of all the things on the drive to Dundle that remind Leo of Ralph. What does this tell us about their special friendship?

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- Leo's mum says, 'Everything feels strange when it's new' (p. 107). Write a reflection to share a time when something new felt strange to you.
- How is Leo feeling about the move to Dundle? Why might he have a sense of guilt about this move? Is this justified?
- Make predictions about the fact that the pool is empty. After finishing the text, discuss the use of the pool as a catalyst for Leo's growth.
- How is Leo's new school different from his old one? In the role of Leo, write a journal entry about your first day.
- Why doesn't Leo want The Plan to work?
- Why does Leo ride his bike so fast after the first day of school (p. 128)?
- Make predictions about the importance of the tower to Leo and Ralph.
- How is Gus different from the other children Leo has known? In what ways is he the right 'fit' for Leo?
- How are Gus and his soccer ball like Leo and his imaginary friend?
- Discuss Ms Pengari's statement that 'It won't be long till someone likes the way you don't fit.' (p. 145). Share a circle time that discusses the importance of this idea.
- What does Leo mean when he says, 'It was another lie wrapped in a truth' (p. 152)?
- Why are 'All the days in front of [Leo] ... as blank as an empty sky' when Ralph does not return when expected (p. 154)?
- How does Ralph know about Gus? What do you think might be the real purpose for Ralph's visit?
- Why does Ralph encourage Leo to kick the soccer ball back to Gus?
- Why is Ralph so happy when Leo and Gus play with the old telescope?
- Discuss how the telescope helps connect Gus with his dad:
 

I could look at the moon every night, and Dad could look at it too. We'd be in different places, but we'd be seeing the same thing at the same time. (p. 190)
- Why is Gus keen to teach Leo how to kick the soccer ball? How does Gus use his dad's wisdom to help Leo?
- Why, when Ralph disappears, does Leo tell Gus to go home? Why can't Leo keep both Gus and Ralph as friends?
- Why does Mum encourage Leo to tell Gus the truth about Ralph (pp. 216–218)? How does Leo feel about this? How do we know?
- In what ways is Ms Pengari a 'good fit' as Leo's teacher?
- Why, when Leo shares the truth about Ralph, does he feel 'He had opened the cage that held his secret' (p. 227)? How does Gus react to Leo's secret? Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- Gus eventually shares the truth about his dad. Why do you think this helps Gus to better understand Leo and his need for Ralph?

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- How does sharing his love for space with the Dundle community make Leo feel (pp. 240–241)? How do we know?
- Discuss Leo’s revelation that becoming friends with Gus has come from within himself: ‘All Ralph’s thoughts and all his words ... had come from ... Leo’ (p. 247). Why does Leo think ‘In the deepest pocket of his heart, [he] knew all along that this moment would come, because he had designed it himself’ (p. 248)? Discuss the role of planning when writing stories.
- Why, as Ralph enters the spaceship, is his furry foot ‘the colour of a golden sunrise’ (p. 249)?
- Why, although he’ll miss Ralph, is Leo not sad when Ralph finally leaves (p. 251)?
- At the pool, Leo takes photos of his new friends – Rafi, Mia, Nicola and Gus – on his polaroid camera. Take photos of your friends and add to your own small flipbook. Flick through this book whenever you need a friendship boost.
- What is the significance of the rain that makes the town sparkle at the end of *Leo and Ralph*?
- As a class, create a story map of *Leo and Ralph* using the chapter headings as a guide. Consider plotting the graph along a map of outer space.
- Using evidence from the text to support your thinking, create character profiles comparing Leo and Gus. How do they help one another? What does this share about the power of true friendships? Why are they such compatible friends?
- Who is your ‘Gus’? Share in a reflection.
- Why does Leo often feel he has a jellyfish in his stomach? What physical symptoms do you get when you feel worried?
- Keep track of the white balloon motif throughout the text. How does Peter Carnavas use this together with the sky and Gus’s soccer ball to tell this story?
- How do Leo’s family help him throughout the text?
- Peter Carnavas uses descriptive language and figurative language throughout *Leo and Ralph*. Discuss the impact these devices have on the text. Ask students to select descriptive passages to annotate, identifying the language features used to create such vivid depictions. Examples include:
  - A cold feeling seeped into his feet and up through his body, the way a bad memory steps from shadow into light (pp. 2–3)
  - It was like the words had just woken up and were wandering round, trying to find each other (p. 9)
  - They moved smoothly around him, like water rushing past an obstacle, and he wondered if they could see him (p. 32)

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- Kids thundered past like a herd of bulls (p. 34)
- The playground was a battlefield he didn't want to join (p. 35)
- Leo dragged his feet like they were made of moon rock (p. 36)
- The sun hid behind a cloud and the lump of worry reformed in his gut (p. 41)
- The sky had shaken off its grey coat and was bright blue again (p. 50)
- The sun hit his face harder, and everything was itchy. He still felt like a blown-up balloon but one that was ready to pop (p. 62)
- Dad's whispery voice wandered from the other room (p. 81)
- Now Mum had thrown another worry into the air (p. 83)
- the world was a slow-moving blur (p. 89)
- a small weight of worry, the size of a pumpkin seed, sprouted in his chest. It grew like a vine and snaked inside him as Mum spoke again (p. 94)
- The worry vine exploded into a tangled knot of tendrils and thorns, prickling his insides (p. 94)
- Ralph's fur turned deep blue, like the bottom of the ocean (p. 98)
- a huge truck ... roared past them, as loud as a hailstorm, it felt like their car might blow off the road (p. 102)
- The sinking sun spilled apricot and plum into the sky. Silhouettes of sleeping cows rested in paddocks and, out Peg's window, a field of sunflowers caught the last breath of light. The car tyres hummed and the song on the radio dissolved into fuzz (p. 104)
- he felt like a blob of dough crisping into a biscuit. Or a square of chocolate melting into sticky goo (p. 108)
- All the yards were the same, flat brown squares that multiplied to make the town, like a big dusty chessboard (p. 109)
- a concrete skate ramp that looked like a wedge of space junk fallen from the sky (p. 111)
- This place looked like a few boxy buildings had landed on a flat dry paddock. The trees were tall and bony, there was more dirt than grass and he couldn't see any stairs at all (p. 115)
- A jellyfish wobbled in the pit of his stomach (p. 116)
- The wobbly creature squirmed in his gut, and he dug his fingernails into his palms. For a moment, he allowed himself to look up, to take in the wide blue ceiling that had always calmed him (p. 117)
- The secret fizzed inside his chest (p. 126)
- he bounced back short answers, like tapping a ping pong ball over a net (p. 127)
- the hot air hit his face like a hairdryer ... Dead leaves on the path suddenly leapt to life as he whooshed past (p. 128)

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- The nervous Prep feeling didn't drown him for the rest of the week, but it was always there, lapping at the edges (p. 133)
- On the night he said goodbye, the promise had glimmered like a distant star inside his mind. Now it began to shine brighter, like a burning comet getting closer each day (p. 134)
- His shoes smacked the concrete like claps of thunder and Leo was left alone, like a small tree that had survived a storm (p. 137)
- The streets were wide, like flat grey rivers lined with tired trees. Every surface was sapped by the sun, and even the houses and street signs seemed to lean in the heat (p. 143)
- his chest burned as if he'd swallowed the sun (p. 149)
- Cicadas rattled. A cockatoo screeched. The tree seemed to sway like it wanted to shake him off and the whole town wobbled below (p. 149)
- Gus ... looked lost, a statue in a school shirt, like he was waiting for his ball to fall from the sky (p. 159)
- This huge kid had a way of asking questions that Leo wanted to answer, like he was offering a perfect peach you just had to bite into (p. 167)
- He waited for Gus's curiosity to fade, like sitting out a storm (p. 168)
- He was a scruffy whirlwind of silliness, spinning and twirling until Leo collapsed against the pool fence, out of breath with laughter (pp. 172–173)
- Leo rode his bike like a bullet round the lagoon. The sun was barely awake but already blinding and bright, as if it had never slept. Cockatoos dotted the trees, kangaroos chewed tufts of grass, and clouds of yellow butterflies swept all around (p. 174)
- Ralph's sun-kissed fur danced in the wind and Leo felt the warmth of it against his neck. His big mushroom nose drank in the morning air right next to Leo's face (p. 175)
- Birds wheeled around the roof, clouds floated past, and it seemed everything was moving except the tower, like the whole world was spinning around this bulging metal tank (p. 176)
- They talked at the same time, like overlapping melodies (p. 186)
- It was like being wrapped in a warm blanket of words (p. 187)
- It was a colourful mess, as if someone had thrown everything into the room, shaken it up like a cup of dice, and let each thing find its own place (p. 187)
- The moon had crept into sight. It hung there in the empty blue, like an overnight guest who had forgotten to go home (p. 189)
- He felt a kick-drum in his chest (p. 194)

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- he let go of his legs, dropped his arms by his sides and breathed out slowly, like air escaping a pinhole in a soccer ball (pp. 216–217)
- Leo sweated the whole day, wilting at his desk like a thirsty plant (p. 221)
- He must have been wrestling with his own memories, leafing back through their conversations (p. 228)
- The crowd laughed and then clapped again, as loud as a rocket taking off (p. 239)
- their voices swam together to make one big instrument, happy and loud (p. 242)
- In every direction, the land unrolled like thick rumped carpet in the dark. A cluster of warm lights glinted from the town: bedroom lamps and TV screens, keeping people company (p. 246)
- Gus, who sprang off the block, hugged his knees, and plummeted into the pool like a boulder thrown from the sky (p. 261)
- steam rose from the wet bitumen ... The whole town seemed to sparkle (p. 263)

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

*Leo and Ralph* is a story of friendship – finding, holding onto and saying goodbye to friends. I didn't set out to write about an imaginary friendship but, early in the writing, Ralph fell into the story. Once he was there, wagging his horns and flapping his ears, I couldn't let him go – the same way Leo feels about his furry friend. As I wrote, I considered Ralph to be as real as any of the characters – even though only Leo can see him – because that's how he feels to Leo. Their friendship contains all of the joy and drama we find in our closest relationships: happiness together, loneliness when apart, anticipation, misunderstandings, and the despair of having to say goodbye. I also wanted to create a story about growing up, facing change and living in a small country town. These are all big themes that I have tried to funnel into a narrative that appeals to almost any age. More than anything, I hope this is a story that adults can share as a read-aloud with children.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Peter Carnavas writes and illustrates books for children. His books have been published widely across the world and have won many awards, including a Queensland Literary Award and the Patricia Wrightson Prize for Children's Literature at the NSW Premier's Literary Awards. Peter lives on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, with his wife, two daughters, a dog and a cat.