



ONLY A MONSTER

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Recommended for: 13+

Themes: Fantasy, romance, heroes, time-travel, ethics and morality.

Applicable to learning areas: English language and literature

Summary

Only a monster would kill a hero. Right?

Every family has its secrets, but the summer Joan Chang-Hunt goes to stay with her gran in London, she learns hers is bigger than most. The Hunts are one of twelve families in London with terrifying, hidden powers.

Joan is half-monster. And what's more, her summer crush Nick isn't just a cute boy – he's hiding a secret as well; a secret that places Joan in terrible danger.

When the monsters of London are attacked, Joan is forced on the run with the ruthless Aaron Oliver, heir to a monster family who are sworn enemies of her own. Joan is drawn deeper into a world that simmers with hostilities, alliances and secrets. And her rare and dangerous power means she's being hunted. She'll have to embrace her own monstrosity if she is to save herself, and her family. Because in this story . . .

. . . she is not the hero.

About the Author

Vanessa Len is an Australian author of Chinese-Malaysian and Maltese heritage. An educational editor, she has worked on everything from language learning programs to STEM resources, to professional learning for teachers. Vanessa is a graduate of the Clarion Workshop in San Diego, and she lives in Melbourne.

Suggestions for Classroom Discussion and Application

Prologue

- Read the prologue of *Only a Monster* and consider the following questions: a) What did the prologue tell you about the sort of people Joan and Gran are? b) How did the prologue help you understand the world in which the events of the story take place? c) What mood was established here and what sort of book do you think this will be? d) Were you hooked to continue reading the story?
- Consider this excerpt:

'Monsters are the bad guys,' Joan said sceptically. In cartoons, monsters lurked under your bed. They had scary laughs that went on too long. They ate people. (page 2)

How does the author subvert the *stereotype* of what a monster should be like in the prologue and Chapter 1?

Character and nuance

- Define the term *nuanced character*.
- In your opinion are Gran and Ruth nuanced characters? Consider this question in light of what you know about them *before* and *after* Joan discovers monsters travel through time by stealing life from humans.
- Compare and contrast the scene involving Gran's death with the one involving a 25-year-old Gran in 1993.
- Which other characters in the novel would you describe as *nuanced* as the novel progresses?

Language

Nick tilted his hand sharply, and Lucien's sword fell. Nick caught the hilt before it could hit the floor. Then, in one smooth movement, he thrust the sword into Lucien's chest, matter-of-fact.

Lucien's eyes went wide with disbelief. Blood bloomed across his shirt. Nick withdrew the sword and plunged it again, and Lucien slumped to the floor, very still. Nick wrenched the sword out again.' (page 52)

- What is the impact of the words *matter-of-fact*, *plunged* and *wrenched* in this extract? Try removing *matter-of-fact* from the first paragraph and see if it changes your interpretation of the scene? Replace the words *plunged* and *wrenched* with less vivid words like *pushed* and *pulled*. What effect does it have on your reading of the scene?

The hero

'Once upon a time,' Gran murmured, 'there was a boy who was born to kill monsters. A hero.' (page 65)

- How has the author challenged your idea of the 'hero' in Chapters Four and Five?

Diversity in Literature

Vanessa Len is an Australian of Chinese-Malaysian and Maltese heritage, who says she was inspired to write *Only a Monster* because she grew up at a time when there wasn't a lot of representation of people who looked like her on film and TV.

'I didn't see myself represented in the heroes, but I did sometimes see myself represented in "bad guys" – nameless Asian characters who would show up for fight scenes, only to get killed by the hero.'

- Do you think it is important that contemporary popular culture features a diverse range of cultural and racial characters?
- Support your argument with examples from *Only a Monster* and two other sources from contemporary film and/or TV.

Bi-racial Protagonist

- Do you think it is relevant that Joan is from a mixed racial background (Chinese-Malaysian and English) and is half human/half monster?
- How is the theme of living in a culture but not necessarily being entirely 'of' a culture explored in the novel?

The Hero's Journey

- Does *Only a Monster* follow the typical 'Hero's Journey', as defined by American scholar Joseph Campbell? Watch the following video and match as many of the steps shown to the characters and events in the novel as you can.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGV1BvnyvGo>

Genre

- According to Wikipedia, fantasy novels share five key tropes (commonly recurring literary devices, motifs or clichés). These tropes are good versus evil, quest, magic, medievalism and races or species. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fantasy_tropes.

Find examples of each in *Only a Monster*.

- Author CS Pacat says that fantasy novels are the place that modern myth-making happens and that, 'We have exchanged Hercules for Harry Potter'. In a whole-class discussion consider this statement and talk about how *Only a Monster's* depiction of good versus evil creates a new way of thinking about who gets to be labelled 'hero' or 'villain'.

Time Travel

- If 'the Rachel haircut is a time marker' (page 121), what markers would you suggest for the present day?
- Consider this extract:

'The world felt infinite. She could go anywhere. Anywhen. She could travel back to the Regency. To the Restoration. To the Roman Empire. She could see Pompeii before it fell...' (page 114)

Where would you travel if you could choose anywhere and *anywhen*? What is it about that place/time that made you choose it?

Predicting What Will Happen Next

- *Only a Monster* is the first book in a trilogy. Can you predict what might happen after Joan changed the timeline to unmake Nick?

Before you answer consider these questions:

- What happened to Aaron's mother and why is he the 'black sheep' of his family?
- Who owned the safe house that Aaron led Joan, Ruth and Tom to?
- Who killed Nick's family and turned him into the Hero? And why did they do it?
- Do you think Joan will end up with Nick or Aaron?

Title

- Why do you think Vanessa Len called the novel *Only a Monster*?

In the Author's Own Words

'In *Only A Monster*, my main character Joan discovers that she isn't the hero of the story – she's a monster.

'The premise was inspired by that feeling when the hero of the story isn't the hero of *your* story. When I was growing up, there wasn't a lot of representation of people who looked like me on film and TV.

'I didn't see myself represented in the heroes, but I did sometimes see myself represented in 'bad guys' – nameless Asian characters who would show up for fight scenes, only to get killed by the hero.

'I have a line in the book about how in movies, the camera follows the hero after the bad guys have been killed. But I know that in my own experience, I find myself very aware of the few people who look like me in books and onscreen, which often means being very aware of people lying dead on the ground as the focus of the narrative moves away from them. I really wanted to write a story about how it feels when the hero isn't on your side. How it feels when the hero kills people who look like you and your family.

'I was also really interested in exploring a diaspora, biracial experience like my own. My main character Joan is biracial – half-English and half-Chinese, as well as being half-monster and half-human. I wanted to depict the experience of being immersed in cultures, while also being removed from the original contexts of those cultures.'

– Vanessa Len