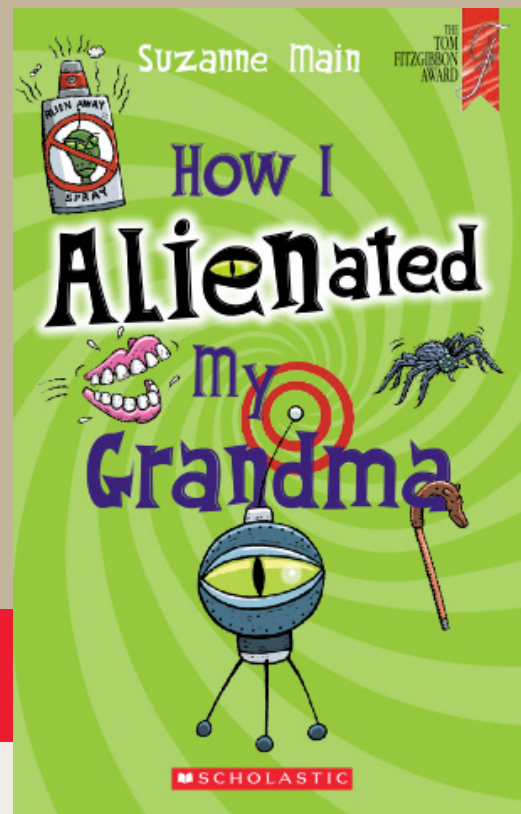


How I Alienated My Grandma

Text by Suzanne Main

Illustrations by Fraser Williamson

- Reading • Writing • Science
- Research Skills



About the Book

How I Alienated My Grandma is a humorous novel for children aged between nine and eleven years old. At the start of the story, Michael, the central character, is an ordinary schoolboy in the midst of a long, boring summer. One day, he is playing around in his back garden with a metal detector, when he finds a strange, banana-shaped object that almost immediately propels him into a terrifying adventure. Just for fun, he points the mysterious object – later named the alienator – at his grandmother, only to have her transform into an evil, lizard-like alien. The alien quickly resumes Grandma’s form and proceeds to make preparations for the invasion of Earth by his people. The only people who know about the problem are Michael and his nerdy best-friend, Elvis. Using Elvis’s technical genius, they are able to spy on ‘Grandma’ and so discover the true extent of the problem. The fate of the world is in their hands. Grandma, however, is after Michael. She wants the alienator back and doesn’t care what she has to do to get it. Michael and Elvis end up recruiting the town crazy man, Mad Bill, to help them. It turns out he’s not quite as crazy as people think. He knows where the alien spacecraft landed many years before and can lead the boys to the scene. Many close calls and action-packed scenes lead up to the grand finale when the planet is saved with only minutes to spare.

About the Author and Illustrator

Suzanne Main spent the first twenty years of her career working as an accountant both in her hometown of Wellington and overseas. In 2011, she studied creative writing with the New Zealand Writers’ College. She then attended a weekend novel-writing workshop, where the idea for this, her first book, was hatched. The story *How I Alienated My Grandma* was the winner of the 2014 Storylines Tom Fitzgibbon Award.

Fraser Williamson grew up on Auckland’s North Shore, and describes his childhood as dominated by the beach, surfing and the sea. He studied graphic design at Auckland University of Technology before beginning a successful career illustrating books. He lives with his wife, Loisi, and divides his time between New Zealand, Spain and Tonga.

Writing Style

How I Alienated My Grandma is written in the first person. It is told through the voice of schoolboy Michael, the story’s central character and unlikely hero. Michael retells the story in the past tense. There is a short prologue that sets the tone for the book. It ends with: *At precisely 4.23 in the afternoon, I turned my grandma into an alien. I was not having a good day.* This understated humour continues through the book. There are plenty of scary (but not too scary) scenes and some disgusting ones, too, such as when Grandma picks up and eats a massive spider. Michael and his best friend Elvis are likeable characters who get into plenty of trouble but mean well. They live in small town New Zealand and, apart from the adventure with aliens described in the book, lead ordinary lives. *How I Alienated My Grandma* is 280 pages long and will appeal to most boys and many girls, especially those who enjoy humour and adventure. It would also make a good choice for reading to a classroom.



Shared Learning and Discussion Points

ASK YOUR STUDENTS:

- Look at the front cover. What does the word 'alienated' usually mean? What might it mean here? What clues are there?
- Read the text on the very first page. What does it tell us about the book? What does it leave us wanting to know?
- What is a prologue? Why do you think this bit of text is placed here? What does it leave you wondering?
- Why does Michael's mum care about the old vase? Why doesn't Michael understand? (pp.9–10)
- What happened to Elvis's remote-controlled helicopter? What are we learning about Michael? What sort of boy is he? (pp.12)
- Michael describes himself as faster than two different things on page 14. What are they? How do they help you understand how he was behaving?
- What is Michael's first thought after watching his grandma change into an alien? Is this really his biggest worry?
- What does Michael mean when he says his mother has a look that could wilt plants? What sort of look would that be? (p.21)
- Why is Michael's mum so angry with him? Does she have good reason? (pp.22–23)
- Why do you think Grandma doesn't tell Mum that Michael locked her in the shed? (pp.24–25)
- Why do you think Grandma looked so startled when she tasted her food? (p.27)
- Can you think of any reasons why Grandma might be feeling cold? (p.29)
- If you were Elvis, would you believe Michael? Why or why not? (pp.30–31)
- What is blackmail? What blackmail does Michael use? (p.31)
- How do you think Michael felt when he realised yesterday's events were not just a bad dream? (pp.32–34)
- Why does Elvis call Michael 'Sherlock'? (p.34)
- Why is Elvis convinced Michael is telling the truth? (p.40)
- Who was the real Houdini, and why was he famous? Why do you think the dog is known as Houdini? (p.42)
- Why do you think such a friendly dog might be growling at Grandma? (p.43)
- Can you find a simile on page 44?
- Why do you think Grandma is wearing gloves and a coat on such a hot day? (pp.44–46)
- What did Grandma do to Houdini? Do you think she would do the same thing to the boys if she saw them spying? (p.50)
- Why did Elvis wave the magnet over the metal object? What did he learn by doing this? (p.56)
- What does Elvis mean by 'a process of elimination'? (p.57)
- How does the sci-fi comic help Michael understand what might have happened to his grandma? (pp.57–59)
- What does an alienator do? (pp.56–63)
- Why do the boys decide not to tell anyone about the alien? Do you think this was the right decision? What would you do? (pp.61–63)
- Why doesn't Elvis's dad want to see his wireless camera ever again? (pp.65–67)
- Why might Grandma have her heating turned up high on a hot summer's day? (p.68)
- What does Michael mean when he says that Elvis was being 'out-geeked' by his grandma? (p.71)
- Did Grandma install a small or a large satellite dish? How do you know? What might she do with it? (p.73)
- What does Xylon mean by a 'geriatric human life form'? (p.79)
- What is the problem with Xylon's home planet? What is his mission on Earth? (pp.80–82)
- Elvis explains what a wormhole is, but Michael doesn't understand? What do you think Elvis means? (pp.86–87)
- Why does Michael think Elvis has 'a loose grip on reality'? What does he mean? (pp.87–88)
- What information does the author give us about Pinehaven, Michael's hometown? (Create a class list or a rough map on the whiteboard and add to it as you learn more later in the book.) (p.89–90)
- How does Elvis work out that the alienator fell to Earth about 30 years ago? (pp.92–93)
- What does Mad Bill tell the people of Pinehaven? In this instance, is he right? (p.97)
- Mad Bill is a cruel name to call someone. What should the townsfolk call him? What is 'Bill' short for? (p.97)
- What sort of person is Miss Pool? Do you think she would be a good librarian? Why or why not? (p.98–99)
- What do the boys learn from the old newspaper? (pp.102–104)
- How do the aliens plan to survive on Earth if the air here is toxic, or poisonous, to them? (pp.109–110)
- Why was Michael's mum staring at him? (p.111)
- Why does Elvis start talk about global warming? He thinks he has said it naturally. Has he really? (p.113)



- What does the baker mean by ‘on the house’? (p.116)
- Why does the baker tell the boys to just drop off the bread and leave? Who is he protecting? (p.117)
- Can you explain the pun, or joke, at the end of page 119?
- Why is Bill cautious about letting the boys into his house? Why do you think he has become this way? (pp.111–112)
- What does Bill spend his money on? Why are his house and garden such a mess? (p.124)
- What leads the boys to decide that Bill is not as mad as he looks? (p.125)
- What do you think Bill looked like before he saw the alien spacecraft? (pp.126–127)
- If Bill has changed over the years, Miss Pool might have, too. What do you think she used to be like? Why might she have changed? (pp.128–129)
- Why does Bill get suspicious when the boys react badly to the Alien Away Spray? What does he think? Why does he make this mistake? (pp.130–134)
- Why did the boys want to avoid being seen? (p.138)
- When Michael says ‘So that went well’ on page 140, does he mean it? What does he mean? How can you tell? What is this type of language called? (sarcasm)
- Why did Elvis’s plan to put off the aliens by mentioning global warming backfire? (pp.139–140)
- If Elvis is so clever, why does he call the gigantic bull a big cow? What are Elvis’s strengths and weaknesses? How do they differ from Michael’s? How do the boys help one another? (pp.146–147)
- What does the saying ‘like a red rag to a bull’ mean? Give some examples. (pp.148–149)
- The incident with the bull helps the boys understand how the alienator works. What do they learn? (pp.155–156)
- What is a cloak? What do the characters mean when they describe the spaceship as being ‘cloaked’? Is it wearing a cloak? (p.161)
- What is the real reason the boys don’t want Bill to touch the alienator? (p.164)
- Why do you think the author ended the chapter with the words: *I didn’t think we had a problem. I couldn’t have been more wrong.* How do these words make you feel?
- Where does Bill think the spaceship is? Why? (pp.172–174)
- Where does Elvis think the spaceship is? Why? (pp.175–176)
- What is an acronym? What mistake did Bill make? (p.179)
- Have you ever heard birds making alarm calls? They sometimes squawk loudly when a cat approaches. Why would it be helpful for someone in hiding to recognise bird alarm calls? (p.180)
- Why is Grandma making crowing and cackling noises? (pp.181–183)
- Can you find an example of sarcasm on page 184? Is sarcasm kind? Why not?
- What does Michael mean when he says that if he had been a dog he would have dragged his tail home? (p.185)
- Why does Grandma want to get Michael alone? How does she get rid of his parents? (pp.187–190)
- How does Grandma find out that the boys know she is an alien? (pp.193–194)
- What does Grandma mean when she says, ‘No more Mrs Nice Guy’? (p.201)
- How does Elvis manage to rescue Michael? Is it luck or skill that leads to success? Why? (p.195–204)
- Why can’t Michael hide anywhere Elvis might guess? (p.207)
- What happened to the alienator? (pp.208–210)
- What has Grandma got, and where is she going with it? Why? (pp.212–215)
- What are Michael and Elvis trying to say on lines 8 and 9 of page 220? Why don’t they just say it properly?
- What is the source of the bright light? (p.222)
- Bill planned to storm the spaceship. What stopped him? Do you think he would have been successful if it wasn’t there? (pp.222–224)
- Whose phone does Elvis use to call the emergency services? Why won’t they help? (pp.226–227)
- What is Xylon’s planet called? Why is this funny? What does Elvis mean by ‘it’s a translation thing’? (p.230)
- What do *immortalised* and *immobilised* mean? (p.230)
- What does ‘rub salt into our wounds’ mean? How does Grandma do this? (p.232)
- On page 233, all hope seems lost. Do you think they are defeated? How could they save themselves now?
- Why didn’t Michael mention the pine cone? (p.234)
- Elvis doesn’t want to abandon his family. Why does Michael think he should do so? (p.236)
- What does the phrase ‘one person at a time’ help Michael work out? How do they get the alienator working? (pp.238–242)
- What is a phobia? (p.242)
- How did Elvis cause Grandma’s car to breakdown? (p.246)
- What does Michael’s grandma mean when she says she doesn’t *believe* in cell phones? (p.246)
- What happens to the alien when Michael pushes the button on the alienator? (p.248)



- When the real Grandma is back in control of her own body she is confused and upset. Why? (pp.248–249)
- What does Michael mean when he says Bill is ‘one ship shy of a star fleet’? (p.252)
- What do you think their plan is? Will it work? (p.257)
- Is Grandma a good actor? How do you know? (p.258–263)
- How does Grandma’s terrible performance help their plan? (p.264–269)
- What is an epilogue? What happens in this epilogue? (p.270–274)

Activities

ACTIVITY 1: WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

Read the epilogue with your students. Discuss how it opens up a whole new adventure. Help your students to plan and write the next instalment in Michael’s adventures.

Model planning a story. Write a bullet-pointed item for each event. Discuss how the plot builds in tension, getting scarier and scarier, until the problem is resolved just before the end.

Tell the students to plan their own stories. Encourage them to discuss their plans with one another, refining them and making sure they follow the shape of a story arc. When you and the students are satisfied with the plans, allow them to write their stories.

ACTIVITY 2: TO TELL OR NOT TO TELL

If Michael and Elvis had told the authorities about the aliens and been believed, the authorities might have decided that the quickest and safest thing to do was to kill Grandma. Grandma would have died in order to save the rest of humanity. Michael loves his Grandma and so decides not to tell. Did he do the right thing?

Discuss this idea with your students. Point out that some problems do not have an obvious right or wrong answer. Then extend the activity with one of the following:

- creating pros and cons lists
- holding a class debate
- setting up a persuasive writing activity. Instruct the students in writing persuasive text, and then ask them to write to Michael either encouraging him to hold firm or telling him to notify the authorities as soon as possible. Ensure they give reasons to support their argument.

ACTIVITY 3: METAL DETECTIVES

In chapter six, Elvis uses his knowledge of the properties of metals and a process of elimination to try to work out what metal the alienator is made of. Discuss how he did this and how different metals have different properties. Then provide the students with a collection of metal objects and ask them to work out which metal each one is made of. Make sure they can work it out using a process of elimination, and give them clues, such as:

- Aluminium is a shiny, silvery grey metal. It bends easily.
- Steel is made from iron and carbon. It is very strong and is also magnetic. (Provide a magnet.)
- Copper is a red-brown colour. It conducts electricity and so is used to make electric wires.

ACTIVITY 4: SIMILES

How I Alienated My Grandma has many similes (comparisons using words such as ‘like’ or ‘as’). Discuss what a simile is and how prose can contain similes as well as poetry. Talk about the simile on page 44 (smeared thin like pancakes).

Ask the students to find the sentences with similes on some of these pages: 11, 14, 17, 18, 33, 39, 48, 50, 53, 55, 65, 71, 73, 80, 88, 94, 97, 98, 132, 133, 135, 136, 143, 161, 187.

Next, ask them to rewrite some sentences inserting a new simile of their own. For example: They could change ‘*My thoughts were slipperier than eels.*’ to ‘*My thoughts were slipperier than a muddy bush track.*’

When they are finished, encourage them to share their sentences with their group or the whole class.

ACTIVITY 5: LIBRARY DETECTIVES

In their search for the spaceship, Michael and Elvis use an old map and old newspapers to find out about Pinehaven in the past. Use a modern and an old map of your town, suburb or region to help your students understand this process and to learn about researching the past. Help the students use the maps to learn about how their neighbourhood has changed. Select landmarks and areas of development for them to identify.

If possible, you could also arrange for a class trip to the local library or to the main branch of the library system in order to find out what resources are available for investigating the past. Allow the students to read through old newspapers and note what is different and what is the same as today.

Written by Mary Atkinson



teacher toolkit

 SCHOLASTIC