

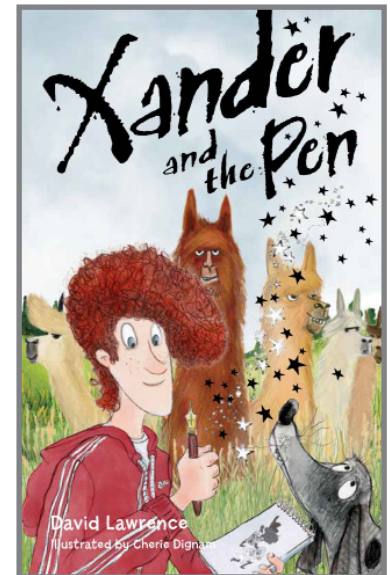
Xander and the Pen

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Mid Primary

SYNOPSIS

Xander and the Pen is the story of a boy who loves to draw superheroes, and the pen he buys from a mysterious market stall. He soon learns that the pen has a magical power: whatever he draws, happens! At first the pen helps Xander improve his family's fortunes, but there are many unintended consequences and soon everybody is angry at Xander. With problems galore, Xander has one big decision to make—should he use the pen to draw one more picture?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Lawrence was once a financial analyst. But that wasn't much fun so he quit and started performing standup comedy and TV writing, before penning his first book in 2007. Since then he has written another 12 fun-filled children's books, and has never, ever missed being a financial analyst. David is passionate about children's literacy and is a proud Ambassador of the Indigenous Literacy Foundation.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Cherie Dignam has always loved drawing and works in a variety of mediums. Like these characters, she is always happiest with pen and ink in her hand, sketching new worlds for her characters.

THEMES

- Fantasy—Magic Realism
- Bullying/Friendship
- Teamwork
- Environment/Community
- Humour
- Family Relationships
- Disability
- Selfishness vs Selflessness

STUDY NOTES

- Discuss and write down the meanings of the following words, then use them in your own sentences:
 - rivulets
 - luminous
 - mangiest

- recoiled
- boisterous

BEFORE READING

- Look at the cover of *Xander and the Pen*. What do you notice? What does it make you wonder? How do you think the character is feeling? What do you think this story is about?
- Read the blurb. Discuss.
- What ideas about Xander come to mind with a nickname like 'The Beast'?
- Considering what you know about Xander from the blurb, what do you think he is aiming to achieve in this story?
- If you could make a drawing become reality with a magic pen, what would you draw? Why?
- If you've read *Ruby and the Pen* (Book 1), use prior knowledge to predict some of the themes in this story.

WHILE READING

CHAPTER 1

- 'The sound of the creaky classroom door being opened made Xander spin around.' (p 2) How does the opening line hook you in? What question/s does it leave you wondering about this character and the setting he is in? How does it implore you to find out more?
- What impression does the closing paragraph leave the reader? In what ways does it encourage the reader to keep reading?
- 'The bald-headed teacher with a heavily waxed moustache narrowed his eyes and folded his arms.' (p 2)
'The cartoon drawing was of a musclebound Timmy wearing a fluttering superhero cape.' (p 6) Read the above quotes and consider and discuss the language used to create a visual image and impression in the reader's mind. What impression do you get of each of the characters? Circle the adjectives in each of the sentences.
- Discuss the literary technique of alliteration and how the author has used this as a form of humour and for a memorable impact. Refer to the illustrations to identify the reference to the names Bruise Brothers and Xander 'The Beast' Beeston. Students can brainstorm some other possible funny alliterated names for these characters and draw pictures to match.

Discussion Questions and Comprehension

- What do you think happened to Timmy?
- What kind of personality does Mr Steele have? In what ways does he treat his students? Give evidence.
- Who are the 'Bruise Brothers'? What impression of them do you get from their title?
- Without looking at Xander's cartoon drawing, listen to the description and draw the picture using your own imagination. Compare yours with the one in the book.
- Why does Xander say, 'They don't call me "The Beast" for nothing?' What do his friends think about this label for Xander?
- How does Xander see himself? Do you think he is happy with the way he is? Why or why not?
- What do you think will happen next?

CHAPTER 2

- What is a simile? What is a metaphor? Explain the difference. Write your own similes and metaphors to describe the bullies being 'toast' (or, in trouble), or other 'toast'-related sayings.

Discussion Questions and Comprehension

- What do you infer from when Xander describes his sister having speed . . . before her accident?
- What happened when Xander and the bullies reached the market?
- Discuss the magical realism that is happening in this chapter. In which part do you realise the reality is becoming skewed?
- Discuss the extent of bullying in this chapter. List the behaviours of the Bruise Brothers that make them bullies. Could Xander have done anything differently?
- Jeff confused the word 'coast' to think it meant 'the beach coast' (p 22). What did Tony actually mean?
- Here, 'coast' is a homonym. Can you find more in the text?

- What is the meaning of ‘manibus futuri’? Why do you think the mysterious market man wants Xander to have the pen?
- How does the illustration make you feel? What techniques has the illustrator used to show different emotions and mood?
- What do you think will become of the pen and ink after it was flushed in the toilet?

CHAPTER 3

- The author has used puns for comedic effect. ‘Stop Squid-dling Around’ refers to the action and the noun/name of the creature (squid). ‘Your crime spree has come to a sticky end!’ refers to both the describing action and the physical object (the stick) in the scene. Brainstorm more words relative to ‘squids’ or ‘sticks’ and write an alternative phrase.
- “Right, I’m going around to the Claggs’ place to sort this out.” (p 36) What does this line tell you about Mr Beeston’s role and commitment as a father? What is his relationship with Mr Clagg?
 - What kind of physical and personality traits does Mr Clagg possess?
- What can you infer about the family dynamics of the Beestons? How might the loss of their jobs affect their lifestyle?

Discussion Questions and Comprehension

- How does Xander feel about his interactions with the Bruise Brothers at the start of the chapter and then at the end of the chapter? What words can you use to describe these feelings?
- In your own words, how would you describe Xander’s drawing of ‘Lighthouse Girl’?
- Why do you think Xander likes to draw these imagined ‘superhero’ characters?
- What do you think is the significance of Shiver? How do you think he might be important in this story?

CHAPTER 4

- ““Argh!” he cried. Xander quickly threw the water bottle into his pack and raced through the scrub. Eventually he burst out of the bush and saw Cat and Tee-Jay standing next to the dam.” (p 56) How does the language used here ‘show’ the reader how the character is feeling or his response to seeing a deadly snake? How is this more effective than writing, ‘Xander was scared of the snake.’? Write another sentence ‘showing’ a scared character.

Discussion Questions and Comprehension

- What did you find out about Phoebe?
- What did you find out about Xander’s feelings about his sister?
- What patterns have you noticed with regards to Phoebe and snakes in this chapter?
- What happened to the alpacas on the Cruzes’ farm? Can you predict several possibilities for what might have caused this?
- How do you think the pen and ink returned? What affect has the pen’s return had on Xander?

CHAPTER 5

Discussion Questions and Comprehension

- Why doesn’t Xander want Phoebe to know about his ‘superhero’ sketch of her?
- What is your opinion on how Xander handled the bullies?
- How do the author and illustrator use humour when it comes to the bullies?
- What consequences do you think might occur for Xander using the pen in this way?
- Why do you think Shiver doesn’t like the pen?

CHAPTER 6

- Imagine the ‘David versus Goliath’ scene between Mr Beeston and Mr Clagg in your mind. Highlight the specific parts of the language that show the reader the intent (or unintended consequence) of each character. What do you think Xander’s picture of this scene would have looked like? Draw it with a clever caption or heading.

Discussion Questions and Comprehension

- What kind of humour did the author use in this chapter? What were some of the ‘oneliners’ that the neighbours used? Do you think it was fair or right of them to tease Mr Clagg?
- Are you familiar with the ‘Harry Potter’ references? How does the author use allusion to connect this story with other familiar texts? Is this an effective strategy for hooking in the reader?
- What is the unintended consequence of Xander’s actions with the pen? Why is he not sure if it is still a lucky pen?

CHAPTER 7**Discussion Questions and Comprehension**

- What did Xander do for his sister, Phoebe? Were Xander's intentions for his sister good or bad? Was the result of his actions good or bad? How do you think things will turn out for his sister after this race?
- Some of the newspaper headlines include, 'Miracle Girl Smashes World Record', 'The Queen of Dukescliff', 'Flying Phoebe on Top of the World', 'Chairway to Heaven' (p 99 – 100). Discuss the literary and engagement techniques used to create these headlines. For example, allusion (to wellknown figures and songs), alliteration (phonemic sounds), sensational wording ('Miracle Girl', 'Queen').
 - Write your own sensational and clever headlines to describe Phoebe's record win in the race.
 - Write your own feature article about Phoebe's race. What kind of 'tone' and language is used in a newspaper article compared to the narrative text? Compare the similarities and differences between formal and informal writing in a Venn Diagram.
- Why do you think Xander's pen energy felt different when he heard the news about the animals at the farm?
- What is Xander planning next?

CHAPTER 8**Discussion Questions and Comprehension**

- Do you think Xander carefully thought through his plan to become invisible and enter Clagg's Cannery? What are some important factors he should have considered?
- What do you think is behind the trapdoor?

CHAPTER 9

- 'His shoulders were slumped, his head was down and Cat was giving him a supportive hug.' (p 130) How does the language used 'show' the reader how the character is feeling? How is this more effective than writing, 'Tee-Jay was sad.'? Write another sentence 'showing' a sad or disappointed character.

Discussion Questions and Comprehension

- What was the action—consequence relationship of the pen in this chapter?
- Do you think Xander should have told/will tell Tee-Jay and Cat about the pen?
- How is Xander taking advantage of his power? Do you think Professor Steele deserves what's coming to him?

CHAPTER 10

- 'Stumped' and 'swamped' are both homonyms (words that share the same spelling and pronunciation but have different meanings). Write both definitions for each word. Can you find more homonyms in the text, or add your own to a list?
 - Create a graphic showing the differences between homonyms, homophones and homographs, and students provide examples of each.
- Saying 'eyes pop out of your head' is a way of describing how someone looks when they are extremely surprised or astonished. Explain how this statement is not meant to be taken literally. How does this language create a greater impact on the reader? Re-write this sentence using more literal terms and compare the 'emotive' effectiveness. For example, 'Xander had a look of surprise on his face.'

Discussion Questions and Comprehension

- What unexpected event happened at the school assembly?
- What was the reaction from the students and from Mr Steele?
- Would you say that Xander cheated in the National Mathematics Accelerator Competition? How do you feel about this?
- What's the most important thing for Mr Whisker, and what is it for Mr Steele? Do you think they are concerned about the 'fairness' of the competition? Give evidence for your reasons.
- What feelings is Xander feeling towards the end of the chapter?

CHAPTER 11

- Through the dialogue between Mr and Mrs Beeston on pp 164–165, identify the parts of their speech that show the reader how each character feels, thinks, their interests, dislikes, sense of humour, way of speaking, impact on the other, and so on. Does the dialogue sound casual or formal? Is the tone light and friendly, or heavy and serious?

- Write a short script with dialogue between two characters from the book, experimenting with tone, expression and feeling. Share with the class.

Discussion Questions and Comprehension:

- What adjectives come to mind to describe how Xander felt about the Bruise Brothers having the cool quad bikes? Do you think his next actions were justified? Did he think this through? How do you know?
- What do you know about the Japanese sea bass? Complete a KWHL chart (What I Know, What I want to learn, How I will find out, what I have Learned).
- How responsibly/sensibly/morally do you think Xander's parents have acted in accordance with their \$10 million win? Justify your thoughts. Write down 10 things you would do for yourself and 10 things you would do for others with that sum of money.
- What words come to mind to describe Mr and Mrs Beeston's behaviour towards each other on their anniversary?
- How do you think their windfall has become problematic for their family?

CHAPTER 12

Discussion Questions and Comprehension

- What can you infer about the pen's impact on the characters? In particular, how has the power of the pen changed Xander? In what ways?
- Discuss the themes and Xander's attitude in relation to:
 - Bullying vs Friendship
 - Greed—Selflessness vs Selfishness
 - Arrogance/Power vs Humility
- How does Xander 'egg on' the brothers, and then Timmy, in this chapter? One is figurative and the other is literal. Discuss.

CHAPTER 13

Discussion Questions and Comprehension

- What makes the scenario of Mr and Mrs Beeston 'conversing' with Phoebe humorous? How is the author portraying the 'adults' in the book?
- What kinds of things has Phoebe noticed that has changed with each of her family members and their dynamic? How do you think she feels about it upon her return? How do you know? How would you feel if you were in Phoebe's position?
- Why do you think Phoebe ripped up Xander's sketches? Do you think she did the right thing? Justify your answer.
- What do you think Xander will do next? Might he re-consider his use of the pen and what's most important (his friends, the Cruzes' farm, family, etc)?

CHAPTER 14

Discussion Questions and Comprehension

- What does the phrase, 'Finders, Keepers' mean? Why did Xander write this?
- What did Xander use The Seeker for? What was in Finito's treasure?
- What has Xander struggled with emotionally in this chapter?

CHAPTER 15

- 'Xander's eyes sparkled as brightly as Finito's treasure.' (p 232) Write your own set of similes to reference Xander's sparkling eyes then illustrate your sentence.

Discussion Questions and Comprehension

- How has Xander's sister's words, 'Harder than being told you'll never walk again?' affected him? Why does he keep replaying these words in his head?
- How did Xander show 'nobility' in this chapter? What has he learnt about himself? How has he begun to turn around the mistakes he has made?
- How is Xander thinking of other people and the community? Why is this more important than the choices he made earlier in the book?
- Brainstorm a plan for Cat, Tee-Jay and Xander to sneak into the cannery.

CHAPTER 16**Discussion Questions and Comprehension**

- How are the friends all working together to achieve a common goal?
- In small groups, brainstorm some ideas for how Xander and his friends can stop Mr Clagg from continuing to contaminate the water in the bushland.

CHAPTER 17

- Onomatopoeia are words that represent and imitate a sound. What is the 'Click, Swoosh' sounds representing in the story? What other things could be represented by a 'click' or a 'swoosh'?
 - List other onomatopoeia words that could represent the sound of Xander's pen in the crushing machine.

Discussion Questions and Comprehension

- Do you think Shiver will be good for the Beeston family? List some benefits of owning a pet.
- Consider Xander's email to Senior Sergeant Dawson (p 253–254). Do you think it is an effective piece? How could he have made it even better? Re-write this persuasive piece using Xander's evidence.
- What is 'crowd-funding'? What did Xander use it for? Do you think his goal (and the outcome) was realistic?
- What is the new name of Clagg's Cannery? What is meant by the term 'Co-op'? How will this work for Xander's parents and the factory workers?
- How is Xander a superhero?
- How does the ending make you feel?

EPILOGUE

- What does the epilogue make you wonder about?
- What predictions can you make for the next instalment in the series?

AFTER READING

- The author repeats the message given from the pen, 'Nothing can harm me.' Do you believe this to be true? Discuss.
- Why was the pen brought to Xander in the first place? What were his 'needs'? (eg. being a brave superhero, improve his family's fortunes)
- The magic pen could be considered as a motif; a recurring element that has a symbolic significance to the story. Discuss what the magic pen represents for Xander.
- Which of Xander's drawings and titles did you like or relate to the most? Why?
- What did you learn about the responsibility of 'power'?
- Who was your favourite character? Why?
- Who was your least favourite character? Why?
- Use the following acronym (STEAL) to identify features of Xander or another chosen character from *Xander and the Pen*. Find parts of the text to show the way they Speak, Think, Effect on others, Act and Look.
 - Speech—what does the character say? How do they speak?
 - Thought—what are the character's thoughts and feelings?
 - Effect on others—how do people react to the character?
 - Actions—what does the character do?
 - Looks—what does the character look like?