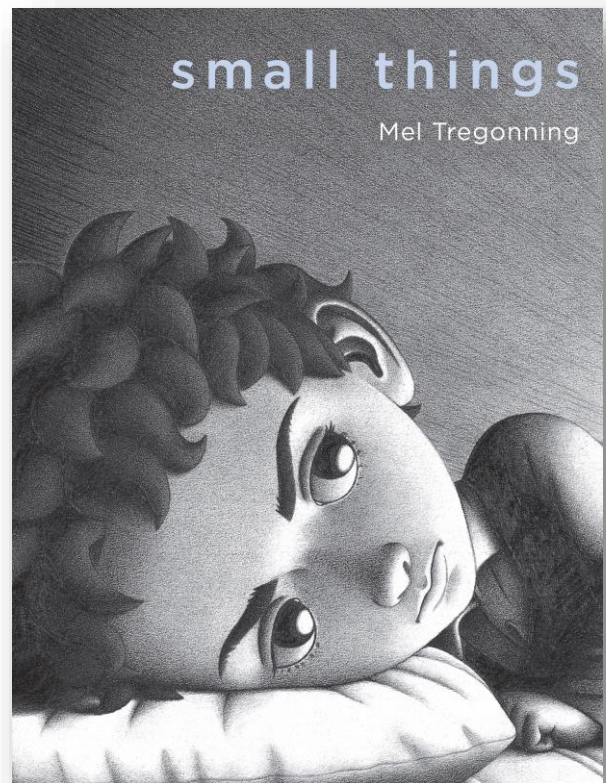


# Small Things

By  
Mel Tregonning



An ordinary boy realises that he's slipping at the one thing he's good at — getting high marks — and the resulting anxiety and depression he experiences make him feel like he's literally cracking up. After much suffering, he confides in his sister. She shows him that he doesn't have to deal with his problems alone and that his struggles to find his place in the world are perfectly common. Her support gives him the strength to face his parents and tell them about his slipping marks. And with his family's support, he finds that everything is suddenly much clearer.

**Note:** *Small Things* deals with themes of anxiety and depression and is an excellent springboard to introduce the challenges of mental illness to readers. Educators are advised to be mindful of students' personal circumstances when embarking on this unit of study, and, where necessary, make use of the variety of resources that can be found on the *Beyond Blue* website <http://bit.ly/2h4pjP8>

RECOMMENDED READING LEVEL: Mid to Upper Primary

## TEACHER NOTES

### Themes

Mel Tregonning was born in Perth, Western Australia in 1983. A published cartoonist since primary school, at age 16 she began a long-running comic strip in a national magazine. Over the decades, Mel's illustration style grew to encompass surrealism, cyberpunk, Art Nouveau, manga, commercial art and photorealism. She obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Graphic Design at Curtin University, during which time her first manga, *Toy*, was serialised in *Xuan Xuan*.

Mel broke a finger on her drawing hand during a real-life game of Quidditch—which stopped nothing, but was scary for a second. She won the international Illustrators of the Future competition in 2006. She was an in-house illustrator for RIC Publications, and her first short story, *Night*, was published by Gestalt in 2009. Initially inspired by Jim Davis, Charles Schulz and Murray Ball, Mel's influences expanded to include her family and friends, Osamu Tezuka, Studio Ghibli, H.R. Geiger, Shaun Tan, *The Matrix*, *Muse* and Yukito Kishiro. She liked laksa, Baskin-Robbins ice-cream, HBO's *Game of Thrones*, *Harry Potter* and really good stand-up comedy.

Sadly, Mel passed away in 2014. She is survived by her sister, brother, mother and father—and an incredible body of work.

- Before reading *Small Things*, examine the front and back cover images of the young boy. What mood is set by these images? Try to pinpoint what it is about one or both images that creates that mood. Now read the back cover blurb and guess what the key themes will be in the story. On a loose piece of paper, write a short description of what you expect the story to be about. Fold the piece of paper and place it in an envelope. Seal the envelope and wait until the end of the unit before you open it to revisit your original expectations and see if they were correct.
- Research the characteristics of manga artwork and discuss how much you think this style has influenced *Small Things*. Some areas you may wish to explore are:
  - characters' eyes and hair

- black and white palette
  - panelling
  - the depiction of intense emotions and thoughts.
- What cinematic technique has Mel Tregonning used on p 7 to emphasise the stress and anxiety felt by the boy during his exams? How effective is this technique in making you feel what the boy is feeling?
  - Look at pp 4-5 and think about what Mel Tregonning is saying about belonging. Does the lack of text make this theme even more powerful? Why?
  - Try creating your own text to accompany key panels. Experiment with first and second person narration, past and present tense, dialogue between characters and the way the boy might speak to himself. Try recreating this scene in front of your class with and without text.
  - Compare the whirling demons surrounding the boy on pp 18-19 and pp 26-27. What do you think the demons represent in both examples? How are these demons representing an 'abstract idea'? Do the demons change from the first night to the next, and if so, what does this change signify? Turn to pp 32-33 and study the images of the boy as he loses his demons. What techniques has Mel Tregonning used in the five panels to convey the boy's mental improvement?
  - What do you think the image on p 36 says about human beings and our ability to truly communicate with one another? Compare and contrast this image with the one on p 38.

**Class Discussion:**

- What insights do you think the boy gains during the course of the story?
- What might have happened to the boy if his sister hadn't shared her experiences with him?

- Do you think this is a story for everyone, or just people who are deeply depressed or anxious?
- Is mental health something that people can talk about openly?
- Do you think the boy is completely cured of all his mental health issues or is he just better able to cope with them in the future?