

My Brother Otto

INGRID LAGUNA

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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 8+

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CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.



Credit: Carmen Zammit

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ingrid Laguna is an award-winning author and educator. Her books include *Songbird*, *Sunflower*, *Serenade for a Small Family*, *Edie Tells a Lie*, *Bailey Finch Takes a Stand*, which was awarded best chapter book and overall primary resource winner in the 2022 Educational Publishing Awards, and *Kit and Arlo Find a Way*, which won the same awards in 2023. Her writing has featured in various publications, including the *Monthly*, the *Age* and *AEU Magazine*. She regularly presents to teachers and students at schools, libraries, festivals and conferences.

SYNOPSIS

Quinn is about to become a big sister, and she isn't happy about it. All her mum and stepdad, Alex, seem to care about lately is the new baby. Even worse, when the baby comes Quinn will have to share her room. Quinn has the perfect setup: a desk to write her stories and a space for her pet rabbit, Disco. Having a baby brother will wreck everything.

Then baby Otto is born three months early, and everyone is worried. Otto is too small to come home, so Quinn visits him in hospital. He is tiny and brave and when he grips Quinn's finger she doesn't want to let him go. She feels bad for not wanting a baby brother, and wonders if Otto being born too early is her fault.

Otto is doing better, and Mum and Alex start preparing to bring him home. Quinn is excited, but then Mum and Alex tell her that to protect Otto from germs they will need to find a new home for Disco. They have spoken to Quinn's friend Raf, who lives across the road, and his family have agreed to take Disco. Quinn feels angry and left out. She tries to convince Raf that Disco is a terrible pet, but it doesn't work, and Quinn doesn't know what to do.

At four weeks old, Otto takes a turn for the worse, and needs to have an operation. He makes it through, but he will have an oxygen tank when he finally comes home, which means he will need to sleep in Mum and Alex's room, not Quinn's. Quinn is upset. She never wanted Otto to come home, but now she has been helping to care for him things have changed. Quinn wants more than anything for Quinn to be part of her family, and for him to stay in her room.

Quinn feels awful when she remembers not wanting Otto, and for caring more about her pet rabbit than her baby brother. She decides she needs to do something, and she packs Disco up and takes him across the road to Raf's. Now, Quinn thinks, Otto can come home. But Quinn misses Disco desperately, and Otto is still in the hospital. Will Quinn's family ever get off the rollercoaster they've been on since Otto was born?



My Brother Otto is a heartfelt story about family, grief, and how love can make our lives so much larger than we can imagine.

BEFORE READING

1. Look at the front cover. What clues does it give you about the story? What predictions can you make?
2. Do you have a brother or a sister? What is your relationship like with them? What do you love about them? What do they do that annoys you?
3. Have you ever been in hospital? What was it like? What details can you remember about it?
4. Think about a pet you have (or, if you don't have a pet, a pet you would like to have). What is special about this pet? How do you spend time together? How does being with your pet make you feel?

WHILE READING

1. What does the title of Chapter 1 refer to? What's 'not forever'?
2. What does Quinn say when she looks at the scan on the fridge? Why does it feel good?
3. What does Quinn write on the desk at school? Why do you think she does this?
4. What is Quinn's plan to convince her mum and Alex that Otto shouldn't share her room? What are some of her arguments?
5. In Quinn's first story for the competition, where does the invisible girl's new kind of bravery come from?
6. Why is everyone worried when Otto is born?
7. What does NICU stand for? Why is it so important that people wash and sanitise their hands before going into the NICU?
8. Why does Quinn find it hard to write in Chapter 11?
9. Why do Quinn's mum and Alex decide they need to find a new home for Disco? How does Quinn feel about this? Where does Quinn's mum suggest they take him?
10. What is Quinn's plan for Disco when she goes to talk to Raf? What does she tell Raf about Disco? How true are the things she says?
11. What is Quinn's second story, 'The Runaway', about? Why do you think this story comes to Quinn so quickly?
12. Why does Quinn make a promise to herself not to talk about Disco when she's around Otto? Why doesn't she tell her mum about the promise?
13. What does nurse Lani mean when she says, 'It's good for you and it's good for Otto too' (p. 121) about Quinn helping Otto? Why do you think helping Otto might be good for Quinn?

14. What does Quinn decide she might be when she grows up—as well as a writer—after becoming more confident helping with Otto's cares?
15. Why do you think Quinn returns the coins she stole after giving up Disco?
16. Why does Quinn think she's a terrible person? Do you think she is?
17. How do Quinn and her family spend their last days with Otto?
18. What does Quinn's mum mean when she says, 'Grief needs room.'? (p. 172)
19. What things do Quinn and her family do in Chapter 27 to make room for their grief?
20. What is Quinn's third story about?

AFTER READING

Character

1. 'Her [Quinn's] friendship with Raf was hot and cold. Sometimes he was just nosy. He was up in everyone's business and he couldn't keep a secret. But he was kind.' (p. 78) Do you have friendships like this? Make character profiles for Quinn's friends, Mem and Raf. How does Quinn's friendship differ with each of these characters? How is it the same?
2. There are a lot of characters that help Quinn's family in this story, like Lani, Otto's nurse in the NICU. Make a list of all the characters in the book and the ways in which they help.
3. Quinn's mum and her stepdad Alex both love and worry about Otto, but they show it in different ways. What are some of these ways? What does this tell the reader about their characters?
4. Why does Mem call her little brother 'Jed the wrecker'? (p. 34) What annoying things does Jed do? How does Mem feel about Jed?
5. Reread page 57. How can Quinn tell that grandma Sadie is flustered? Write a list of things you or someone you know might do when they're flustered, then turn it into a short paragraph. Practise 'showing, not telling' in your writing.
6. What differences does Quinn notice about baby Otto, compared to Mem's baby brother Jed? Make lists to compare these two characters.

Style and structure

1. Her worry felt like moths fluttering in her chest.' (p. 123) Quinn uses a simile about moths to describe how she's feeling. Another simile writers often use to describe the feeling of worry is 'like butterflies in your stomach'. Come up with some similes of your own to describe different feelings, such as worry, sadness, joy and anger.
2. 'Mum wore the same T-shirt for three days in a row.' (p. 164) How does this sentence show you how Quinn's mum is feeling? Can you think of some



other details from the story that show you (rather than tell you) how the characters feel?

3. 'She put tealight candles on each side of the photo of Otto. The flames were dancing and blinking the way Otto lived inside Quinn'. (p. 178) Sometimes writers use metaphors to explain things that cannot be easily described. What metaphor is being used in these two sentences? Can you think of another metaphor to describe what it might be like to hold onto the memory of someone you love?
4. Quinn writes three stories for the Grade 5 competition. How does each story reflect what is going on in Quinn's real life at the time she writes them?
5. What are some of the things Quinn observes while she's waiting in the cafeteria for Otto to have his surgery? Have you ever been in a situation where it feels strange to see normal life going on around you in this way? Try writing a scene where a character is waiting for big news. Where are they waiting? What details do they notice around them?
6. What does Alex mean when he says 'It's been a rollercoaster'? (p. 162) Think of some other metaphors to describe what Quinn's family goes through in this story.

THEMES

Love

1. 'Love makes us bigger.' (p. 6) What does Quinn's mum mean by this? In what ways are Quinn and her family bigger at the end of the story? In what ways does love make your life bigger?
2. 'Babies are miracles!' Nadia from next door had said. 'You're going to love him more than you can imagine!' (p. 20) What does Quinn think about Nadia's comment at the start of the story? How does this change by the end? Is there someone in your life you love more than you imagined you could?
3. Quinn's mum says at Otto's funeral: 'Our little boy has filled so many hearts.' (p. 171) Apart from Quinn and her family, what other characters in the story are touched by Otto?
4. What does grandma Sadie mean when she says, 'I see you, Quinn...And I'll never stop seeing you'? (p. 55)
5. What things does Quinn do for Otto to get ready for him coming home? What does this tell you about how she's feeling now about having a baby brother? How is it different from the way she was feeling at the beginning of the book? Why do you think her feelings have changed? Make a list of actions people do for others that show love?

Courage

1. The topic for Quinn's first story is 'Being Brave'. How does Quinn write about bravery in her story?

2. Courage often involves feeling nervous about something, but doing it anyway. Which characters in *My Brother Otto* show courage? Think of a time when you have shown courage in this way.
3. 'When he [Otto] needed less oxygen, or put on weight, Quinn's mum relaxed and hugged Quinn, and Alex put music on while he made coffee. When the news was not good, her mum and Alex were silent.' (p. 82) How does your behaviour change when you're worried, or when you're feeling relieved? What things do you do that help give you courage?
4. Quinn gives up Disco, who she loves, for her brother. Have you ever voluntarily given up something that was really important to you? How did you make that decision? How did it feel?
5. 'Quinn was not scared when she saw her mum cry.' (p. 171) Mum tells Quinn that grief hurts, but it is safe. It can sometimes feel uncomfortable to grieve, or to be around others who are grieving. In *My Brother Otto*, Quinn and her family don't hide from their grief. Have you experienced grief, or been close to someone who has? How did it feel? In what ways do we try to avoid grief? In what ways do we make space for it?

Change

1. Quinn's teacher Mr Mateo says, 'Change can be scary.' (p. 26) What change is Quinn facing? How is it making her feel? What changes have you experienced in your life? How did those changes make you feel?
2. Read the description of Quinn's bedroom on pages 9 and 10. Make a list or draw a picture of all the things in Quinn's room. What do these details tell you about Quinn? What new furniture is Quinn having to make room for? How does she feel about this? Think about your own room at home. Make a list or draw a picture of your room. How would you feel if you had to give up some of your space to make room for someone else?
3. What were some of the things Quinn and her mum used to do together? Why don't they do them anymore?
4. 'Quinn clenched her jaw. She scooped a handful of gold coins from the dish by the front door on her way out. She had never stolen before. She wanted to do something bad.' (p. 94) How does Quinn's behaviour change throughout the story? Why do you think Quinn wants to 'do something bad' at this point? What changes in her life is she facing at this time?
5. 'It's going to be up and down for a while.' (p. 110) What does nurse Lani mean by this? Have you ever been in a situation where things keep changing quickly? How did you cope?



Writing

1. 'She knew first drafts were sometimes terrible and that you could keep making changes to make the story better. She knew you were supposed to keep going even when it was hard.' (p. 71) Have you ever found it hard to keep going with a creative project? What advice would you give Quinn to help her keep writing?
2. 'Not all stories have happy endings.' (p. 109) How does this foreshadow what happens later in the book? Do you think a story should have a happy ending? Is there hope at the end of *My Brother Otto*? Where does it come from?
3. 'Just write the words on the page and don't worry about everything being perfect.' (p. 52) Have you ever been so worried about making a piece of writing perfect that it stopped you from starting? Write a list of tips for ignoring that little voice in your head that tells you your writing must be perfect.
4. The stories Quinn writes often have a connection to her own life. Do you ever use your own experiences to write a story, or make a piece of art? Do you think this is a good way to create? Why / why not?
5. What do you think of grandma Sadie's advice to let a story 'rest for a day or two'? (p. 102) Have you ever done this? Why do you think it might be helpful?

RESPONDING

1. Write your own story in response to one of the topics: 'Being Brave' or 'A Big Decision'.
2. Quinn makes a slide show to convince her mum and Alex to let her get a pet rabbit, and that Otto shouldn't share her room. Make a slide show to convince a parent or teacher of something you want.

3. Reread Quinn's poem about Disco on page 53. Try writing your own poem from someone else's point of view: a pet, a friend, a parent, a teacher.
4. 'For three days, everyone was waiting for good news. When he [Otto] finally started to get better, Quinn made cream-cheese pancakes and Alex put on music. Mum wore her red dress, the one she saved for celebrations.' (p. 130) Everyone in Quinn's family celebrates good news in a different way. How do you celebrate good news? What about other people in your family? Your friends? Make a list or draw pictures of your favourite ways to celebrate.
5. At Mem's house, Quinn and her friend make different things out of clay. Mem makes a bowl for her jewellery, and Quinn makes a rabbit. Use clay to make something you think was important in *My Brother Otto*, or to make something important in your own life.
6. 'When I think about giving him [Disco] away...' (p. 106) What do you think Quinn was going to say? Finish the sentence for Quinn.
7. Reread pages 165-66. What is Quinn's reaction when Mum and Alex tell Quinn that Otto won't be coming home? How does she feel? What details does she notice? Have you ever had this experience of noticing (and later remembering) really specific things when you've had bad news? Write a paragraph about a character who receives bad news. Instead of describing how they feel, try writing about all the little details they notice around them?