

Stuck in the Middle

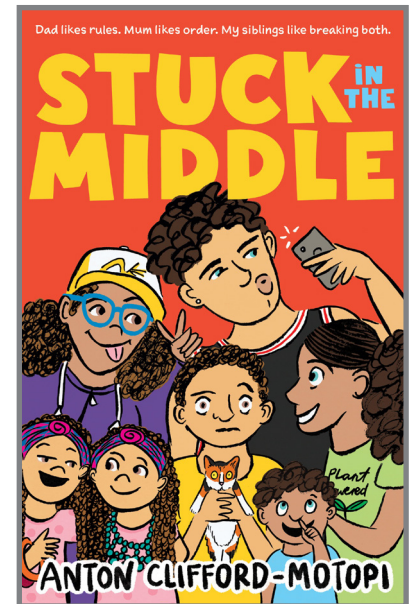
AUTHOR

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Mid Primary



SYNOPSIS

Leon is having a bad time: his best friend Jacob has moved to Alaska, he's not allowed to look after Jacob's cat, he has to be a buddy to the weird new kid, and no one in his family listens to him. The only place he feels calm is under his bed, listening to cat-themed songs.

When Leon encourages his parents to help out the new kid, his problems get worse. Everyone in Leon's family seems to like Victor better than him. He tries to tell them how he's feeling, but how can a quiet person like Leon make himself heard in such a loud family?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anton Clifford-Motopi's passion is writing funny and thought-provoking stories for children. His stories explore themes of self-identity, family relationships and friendship, drawing from his experiences of being black with light skin, growing up in a large adoptive family and raising four children. Anton's debut novel, *To and Fro*, was shortlisted for the CBCA Book of the Year Awards and the Readings Children's Prize. He lives in Brisbane with his family.

STUDY NOTES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- If you had to describe Leon in just three words, what would they be? Did you immediately like him? Why/why not? What was it about him that made you want to keep reading the story?
- "... I feel too old for my younger siblings, too young for my older ones. Too different from everyone" (p 34). Leon is stuck in the middle in more ways than one in the story. What are some of the ways you think he is stuck in the middle? Have you ever felt caught in the middle of something - between friends or siblings, or even just feeling too old for one thing but too young for another?
- "Cats are like me. Quiet. Calm. Independent" (p 3). Leon loves cats so much that he has cat playlists, cat-ear headphones and dreams of having a cat of his own. Why do you think cats are so important to him? Why do you think Anton Clifford-Motopi decided to give him the name Leon?
- "I can't picture a life without all of my siblings. No matter how much they get on my nerves" (p 138). Imagine living in Leon's family with six siblings! Would you love it, or would it drive you completely bonkers? Which member of Leon's family would you most like to spend a day with, and who would you avoid?
- Leon's family has some weird traditions: the family voting system, highs and lows at dinner, and the toilet queue are pretty memorable! Which family tradition would you happily borrow for your own family, and which one would you

definitely skip?

- Leon calms himself by crawling into a small space and listening to his favourite songs through headphones. What are the things that help you feel calm when life gets noisy, stressful or overwhelming?
- Let's talk about Victor: What was your first impression of him? Did that change as you got to know him? At what point, if any, did your opinion of him change?
- "We outnumber Jackson and Sasha, simply because Victor and I got to know Grace better and let her in. Or Grace got to know herself better and let us in. I don't know" (p 161).
 - Throughout the book, Leon, Victor and Grace all try to fit in: Leon with his family, Victor at school, and Grace with Sasha and Jackson. What do they each do to fit in? When it comes to fitting in, which character is most like you: Leon, Victor or Grace?
 - Do you think Leon's attitudes about friendship have changed by the end of the story? What do you think he has learned from his friendship with Victor and Grace?
- This book is packed with hilarious moments (Cockymonster, PHLEGM sandwiches, cheese gas). Which scene made you laugh the hardest, and why do you think that Anton Clifford-Motopi mixed humour into a story that also has a lot of emotional moments?
- "...in my big family I hardly ever get what I want, or get my own way. So it's a big, bad deal for me" (p 12). The family vote about Sable seems fair because everyone gets a say, but was it actually fair? If you were sitting at the table, how would you have voted, and why?
- Leon's parents aren't perfect, but they really care about him. Name a time when they made things better for Leon, and a time when they made things worse. Is there anything you wish his mum and dad had understood better?
- The book shows that families can be loud, messy, annoying and loving all at the same time. Which moment best captured what family life is really like for you?
- "My gut twists into a knot that my family voted for Wilfred and not Sable. That they voted for Victor and not me. Sad feelings slither inside me like snakes" (p 186). This story has plenty of laughs, but it also explores loneliness, belonging and finding your people. Which emotion do you think sits at the heart of the book, and why?
- If there was one thing you could ask Leon after finishing the book, what would it be? Or, if Leon joined your reading group, what advice would you give him for the next chapter of his life?