

# Munmun

by Jesse Andrews

April 2018 ISBN 9781760523596 paperback  
 Recommended for readers 14 years and older

## Summary

From the bestselling author of *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* comes a brilliant, warm, skewering social novel for our times in the tradition of *Great Expectations*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Invisible Man*.

In an alternate reality a lot like our world, every person's physical size is directly proportional to their wealth. The poorest of the poor are the size of rats, and billionaires are the size of skyscrapers. Warner and his sister Prayer are destitute – and tiny. Their size is not just demeaning, but dangerous: day and night they face mortal dangers that bigger, richer people don't ever have to think about—from being mauled by cats to their house getting stepped on. There are no cars or phones built small enough for them, or schools or hospitals, for that matter – there's no point, when no one that little has any purchasing power, and when salaried doctors and teachers would never fit in buildings so small.

Warner and Prayer know their only hope is to scale up, but how can two littlepoors survive in a world built against them?

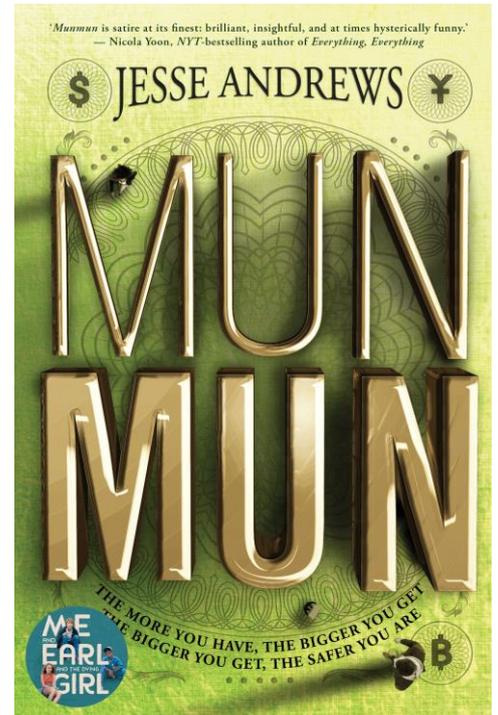
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Told in the first person, past tense, by the destitute Warner, *Munmun* revels in its own singular turn of phrase and is packed with clever portmanteaus and composite words. Some of these have passed into the language of the Swiftian world Andrews has built up; others spring from the inventive minds of smart but unschooled characters. The main characters, who are 'littlepoors', aspire to be 'bigriches' but are missing the vital ingredient of 'munmun' – the medium of exchange that can achieve physically what in our world is merely metaphorical: the ability of the wealthy to tower above the poor.

One of the many strengths of this text is that it leaves so much for the reader to do (in a good way), often eschewing a literal or filmic quality and instead filtering things through the strange poetry of Warner: 'I opened a door and fell down in the sky because out poured a voice like the richest drink.' (p. 16) In the same spirit, it forces the reader to conjure in his or her mind the outrageously satirical state of affairs where humanity itself is all a question of scale.

## Themes

- inequality
- social justice
- humour
- family
- power
- anger



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## Use in the curriculum

*Munmun* is an initially demanding read and requires the ability to use abstract thinking and explore complex concepts. It is sure to spark thoughtful and intelligent discussions and debates in many classrooms. The narrator's voice and the 'newspeak' invented for the world of the book provides a lot of fun once the reader has adapted to the book's style and themes. The story's ending also poses a lot of questions for readers.

It is suitable for Years 10 to 12 and for mature Year 9 classes.

*Munmun* could be used in the following areas:

### English

- As a study of the construction of a fantasy/dystopian world
- As a study of the construction of alternate realities
- As a study of the use of language
- As a study of the craft of writing

### SOSE

- As a study of protest, rebellion and revolution
- As a study of wealth disparity

### Psychology

- As a study of the corrosive effects of anger and inequality

## Discussion questions

### 1. Before opening the novel, examine its cover.

- Name the symbols for currencies represented. Why do you think the artist chose to include the symbol for Bitcoin?
- What role does perspective play to define the relative relationship between people and money?
- What does the shadowing on the cover achieve?
- Are there any other visual techniques being used here?
- What genre of book do you expect with such a cover?

### 2. Read the first chapter to discuss the following:

- The effect of Warner speaking directly to you (the reader) in a conversational tone (made even more so when Warner asks questions of you and seemingly has them answered. 'Did you blurt a little giggly laugh? No you didn't, okay good, ofcourse thanks for not laughing.' (p. 5)
- What does the story of Warner's father's death and the callous response the family received when they sought compensation tell you about the world you are about to enter and what you should expect to happen next?
- Jesse Andrews's use of language helps him build a world that feels similar to our own yet *not* our own. Consider the effect of the first line of the novel, *Being littlepoor is notso good* and later examples of unusual compound words, such as *littlebit*, *catcrippled*, *sewerdrowned*, *mudburied* in creating this 'other' world.



## In the classroom...

- What does the dialogue between Warner, Prayer and their mother tell us about each of these characters and their relationship to each other?

**3.** Jesse Andrews said of *Munmun*, 'The book aims to provide a compelling metaphor for wealth inequality, and then make it alive and breathing and real—to let us viscerally feel what it's like to be as poor and small as Warner and Prayer.'

- What insights did reading *Munmun* give you about money and power in our own society? Did it help you understand the consequences of inequality better?
- Did the scenes involving Grant filming Warner and Prayer make you 'viscerally feel what it's like to be as poor and small...'? How did you feel when you read this scene? What other scenes in the novel had a similar effect and why?

**4.** Warner and Prayer's mother is eager for her children to get themselves out of their dangerous, disadvantaged life, but she doesn't aspire to a bigger life herself.

- Why do you think this is? Why might she actively resist her children's attempts to enlarge her?

**5.** 'Hue, Tony, Everyone, let me explain with a mental picture.... I'll challenge myself, I know you will too, just give me the right stairs.' (p 177)

*Track System means when you show up, they figure out what you do the best, then they put you on a track where you only keep doing that thing.* (p179)

- How accurately do these two extracts reflect the experience of students in the Australian education system?

**6.** Just how close to your own experience of high school is Eat Votech's Mathy, Wordy, Busy, Handy, Drivy, Lifty, Cleany and Servy Tracks?

**7.** Read the scene where the Empowerist gives a guest lecture to the Lifty Track students. (p. 187-9). What point do you think Jesse Andrews is making about modern business practices, marketing/advertising and branding?

**8.** Does Warner's character substantially change or grow in the course of the novel in the same way as his body? Did you feel sympathy for him by the end of the novel? Why or why not?

**9.** In what ways are Warner and Prayer held responsible for their own betterment by more advantaged people like Hue and Kitty? Is there an attitude that the only reason their lives have been difficult is because of a lack of effort to improve?

- What is flawed about this way of thinking about disadvantaged people?
- What examples of it can you find in our own reality, and who are the kinds of people who most often use this sort of rhetoric?

**10.** "Wewantyoutoknow, firstofall, that we take a lot of pride in your incredible achievements, I mean you're a selfmade bigrich, born littlepoor, it's a true ragstoriches story, and on top of that Prayer has told me you've been expressing a desire to donate some of your fortune to Lossy Indica Minmun, if this is true I want to tell you how much I admire your generosity and citizenship." (p. 388)

As a class, discuss the mythology around 'self-made' people and rags-to-riches stories.

- Are these particularly accurate or helpful ways to think about how people improve their situations in life? Why/why not?
- Why do you think we persist in subscribing to these mythical narratives in the face of inequality?
- What does Warner's journey suggest about the ugly reality of self-improvement?

**11.** What role does anger play in Warner and Prayer's journey?

- Is anger a fuel or a paralytic for them?
- How does playing by the rules and submitting to the powerful progress their lives? How does breaking those rules and getting angry progress their lives?
- Is one approach more effective than the other? Why/why not?

**12.** There are many examples in our own history of the use of peaceful 'passive resistance' in order to provoke change, but equally, there are many examples of anger and violence being used to drive revolution. As a class, discuss the complexities and limitations of both approaches, using examples from history as case studies.

- How do class, race and gender intersect in each example to add further complexity to the issue of social change? For example, in the women's suffrage movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, violence and aggression were used to overturn traditional notions of submissive, quiet women being unsuited to the political sphere.

**13.** What is the tone of the book's finale, and to what effect is it used?

- Were you expecting a different ending to the book? Why, and what were your expectations?
- Why do you think Andrews chooses to end *Munmun* in this way? What might it suggest about the nature of Warner's (and by extension, other disadvantaged people's) struggle to improve his lot in life?

**14.** What does *Munmun* suggest about our relationship with wealth and privilege?

- How do those at the top stay at the top?
- How do they systemically ensure that the less privileged stay less privileged?
- How might many less privileged be complicit in their own oppression?
- Consider how the pharmlord, Mark, interacts with his underlings and the mothers of his children at his birthday party, and how they in turn pander to him. Compare this to how the bigriches in *Balustrade* react to Warner when he upscales towards the end of the story.

**15.** *Satire is a wrapping of exaggeration around a core of reality.* —Barbara Tuchman.

- Is this an accurate description of *Munmun* and its observations about wealth inequality and lack of social justice in our own society?

## Related texts

### Films

*They Live!* directed by John Carpenter (1988). This cult classic, possibly the most subversive film ever to come out of Hollywood, shares with *Munmun* the use of money as its central metaphor. Aliens are running the world, disguised as the upper class, degrading and impoverishing humans through subliminal marketing messages. The US dollar bill carries the message 'This is your God'. The film shows the development of a resistance movement.

*Metropolis* directed by Fritz Lang, 1927. Restored English language versions have been released (1984, 2010, 2011) with new soundtracks. (It is a silent film.) Regarded as a classic and pioneering sci-fi film, it explores class inequality, but in the context of dystopian technological development.



# In the classroom...

## Books

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell (1949). As an example of a dystopian novel. Also a film—*1984* directed by Michael Radford (1984).

*Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift (1726, 1735 and many modern versions). This could be useful as the first novel-length boisterous political satire, often said to be a precursor to the modern novel, and set in imaginary worlds.

*Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens (1861). A young man pursues wealth and status in a class-ridden society. Like *Munmun*, it is written in the first person.

*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison (1952). A classic of Black American literature, like *Munmun*, it deploys stylistic innovations, rather than traditional polemic. The protagonist is a Black American, rendered invisible by his race. The book explores the theme of reform vs revolution, amongst others.

*The Tortilla Curtain* by T.C. Boyle (1995). Explores the American Dream from the perspectives of the Haves and the Have Nots. A middle-class man injures a Mexican immigrant while driving. He buys the man off with \$20 but then develops a conscience about the incident.

*Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand (1957). Too long (and, in parts, unreadable!), but as the book has become a bible for the right-wing, students could explore it in an abridged version or read about it. It is also set in a dystopian future USA but, unlike *Munmun*, it promotes free enterprise and capitalism as the only basis for a rational society. The enemies of the American Dream are government regulation and the envious looters—those who can't achieve success and just want to steal from those who can.

## The author

Jesse Andrews is a US novelist and screenwriter, His books include *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* (2012) and *The Haters* (2016), and his scripts include the Sundance Grand Jury prize-winning adaptation of *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*

### About *Munmun*, he says:

'The theme of this book is wealth inequality. Specifically, that it's a big problem. The more unequal the distribution of our society's capital, the worse life is for the poorest of us—the more deprived they are of basic services like health care and education.

'I think inequality also leads us to dehumanise each other. We live in a world increasingly stratified by how much we have and we lack meaningful access to the lives of people who aren't like us.

'The book aims to provide a compelling metaphor for wealth inequality, and then make it alive and breathing and real—to let us viscerally feel what it's like to be as poor and small as Warner and Prayer.

'The book is for everyone in the world but especially anyone who wonders about money and what it does to us.'



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