

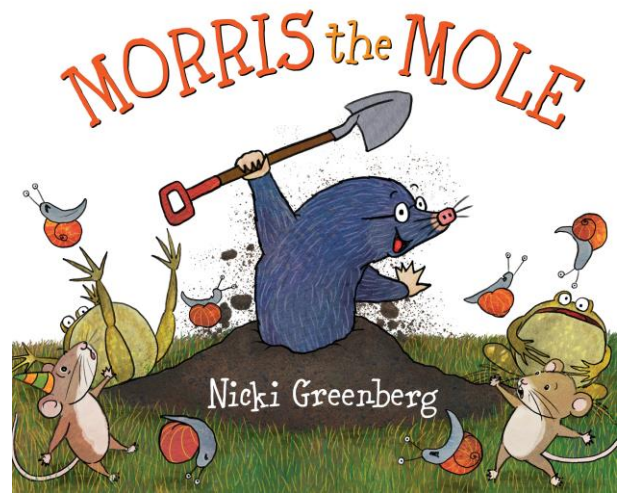
Morris the Mole

By Nicki Greenberg

September 2018 ISBN 9781760630829

Hardback Picture Book

Recommended for 3-6-year-old readers



Summary

Introducing Morris the mole!

He's furry, he's funny, he's enthusiastic about all his activities, he really, REALLY loves to dig...and his single-minded dedication to the task causes all kinds of mischief—and mayhem!



This is the story of 'pioneer' and 'trailblazer' Morris, a mole whose adventures are told in simple rhyming verse and enlivened by strongly lined illustrations that capture the darkness of underground and the huge contrast of the bright world aloft. This second realm is where the cheerful, optimistic Morris constantly pops out in all the wrong places. The narrative is a call and response between Morris and the animals above ground and is extremely amusing because no matter how insistent the animals are that Morris change his ways, the mighty mole keeps repeating his mantra, 'down and be digging'.

Although the language is generally simple, words such as 'thwarted' and 'obstructed' creep in, but in such clear and humorous context they are likely to stick in students' vocabulary. The climax is enhanced by a clever illustration that captures both the under and above ground worlds to explain just how much hilarious havoc Morris's digging has brought about.

Author's inspiration

'Morris came to me as an irresistible character, full of energy and enthusiasm. He was a joy to write: the diggity-dig rhythm of the verse suited him down to the ground, and beyond!

'I love the exultant way Morris hurls himself into a task – it really resonates with me because, like most scribblers, I love to throw myself into my work, too. This is especially true when I'm writing in verse. I rewrite stanzas over and over, bringing the verse into shape bit by bit. This usually involves filling at least fifty sheets of scrap paper with attempts and experiments and lots of crossing-out.

'Creating the illustrations for *Morris the Mole* was a lot of fun. I like to use a combination of old and new technology, always starting with rough pencil drawings in my sketchbook. This is where I try to capture the movement and expression of the characters. I then scan my drawings into the computer and use them as a guide to

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'ink' the line-work with a digital stylus in Photoshop. For the colouring, I paint on paper using acrylics, watercolours and inks, and then bring these painted colours into Photoshop to make a digital collage.'

— Nicki Greenberg

Themes

- animal character
- playfulness
- determination
- enthusiasm
- underground and overground
- in the air

Discussion questions and activities

- Before opening *Morris the Mole*, look at the title and cover design. Discuss what students think the story might be about and the clues in the picture that make them think that. Ask questions such as:
 - Will this story be funny or sad?
 - What clues in the illustration tell you it will be funny?
 - What sort of creatures are moles?
 - How many things can you find in the illustration that point to this story involving digging?
 - How many animals can you count on the cover?
 - Look carefully at the animals—other than Morris—in the illustration and describe how you think they feel about seeing Morris. What, in the picture, told you that?
- Read the story through once and ask students the following questions to help them explore the story:
 - The book describes Morris as a *pioneer*, which means someone who is the first to explore and settle a new place or the first to do something new.
 - What things can you find in the story that tell us he is a true pioneer?
 - The other word the book uses to describe Morris is trailblazer.
 - What do you think this word might mean and do you think it is a good word to describe him?
 - What are some of the things that Morris loves about digging?
 - How do you think Morris's friends feel about Morris popping up unexpectedly?
 - What sort of word or words describe a character that just doesn't give up?
 - Why might these words describe Morris?
 - What do you think Morris has learned by the end of the book?
 - Do you think this is a happy ending for Morris?
 - Do you think this is a happy ending for the birds in the sky?

- Explain to students that the story is told using rhyme, that is key words (often at the end of a line) are emphasised because they share the same sound-endings. Give a few examples of rhyme from the story and see if students can come up with their own rhymes for simple words such as: smock, get, meet, orange (note: the last word here is a famous example of a word in the English language that does not have a rhyme).
- Ask students to describe what Morris looks like. Encourage them to notice that Morris is wearing glasses, has a very prominent pink nose and very sharp looking paws. Once finished, ask students why poor eyesight but a powerful nose and sharp nails might help digging underground.
- Turn to the two double-page spreads where water is flooding Morris' tunnel and then spurting so hard that he is flung in the air. Point out that there are no complete words on these pages and yet we can work out for ourselves what is happening: then encourage children to explain exactly what has happened to Morris; where the water has come from; how the other animals feel this time about Morris' tunnelling; and why he is in the air.
- Turn to the book's endpapers and ask students what they think the image shows. Once they recognise that it is one of Morris' tunnels ask them how the artist has used colour and shapes to capture the sense of being underground.
- Ask students to find three interesting facts about moles and put them on a cardboard poster. A good starting point for this exercise is a wonderful BBC video at www.bbc.co.uk/nature/life/European_Mole#p01f9lwf

The author



Nicki Greenberg is a writer and illustrator based in Melbourne, Australia. Her first picture books, *The Digits* series, were published when she was fifteen years old. She later spent ten years disguised as a lawyer, while maintaining a not-so-secret Other Life as a comics artist and children's book author. Nicki is the creator of the award-winning 'staged-on-the-page' adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and of the graphic adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Inspired by her own young children, Nicki has written and illustrated a range of delightful picture books for younger readers including *The Naughtiest Reindeer* series, *Meerkat Choir* and *Teddy Took the Train*. In her *Zelda Stitch* novels, Nicki has come a step closer to realising her childhood dream of being a witch.

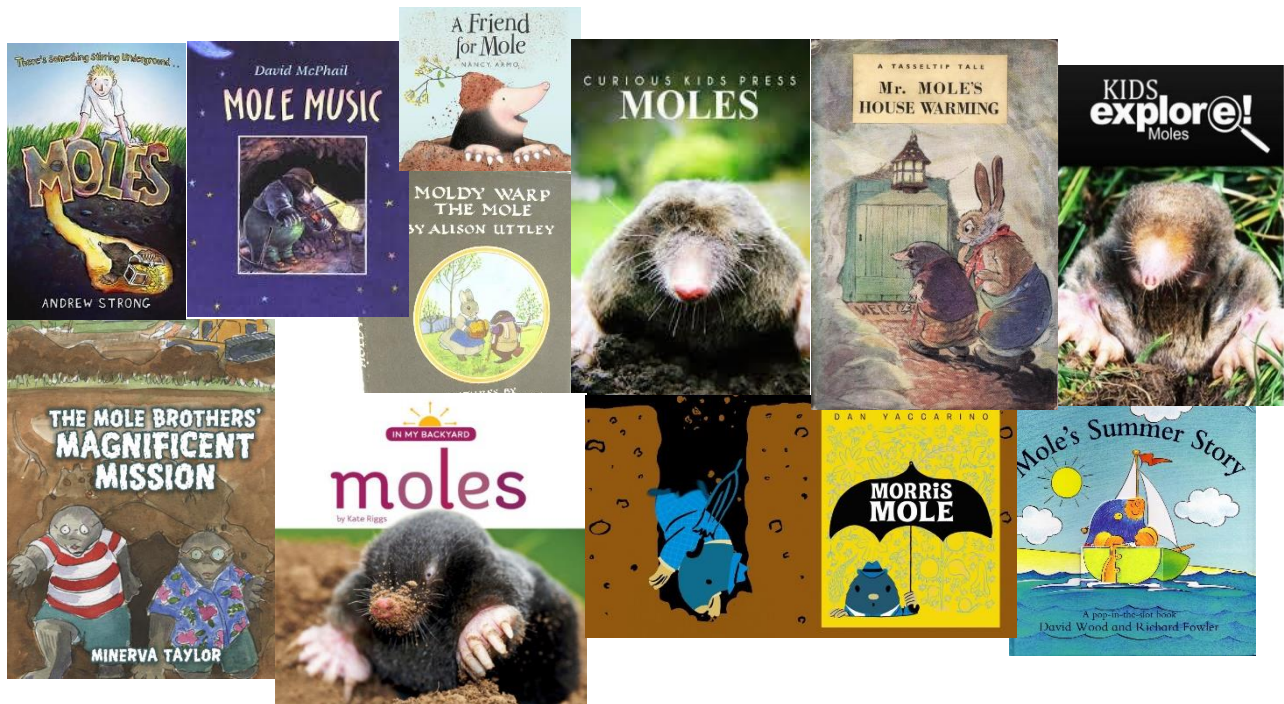
Visit Nicki's website at www.nickigreenberg.com.

Related texts/Further reading

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Related texts/Further reading

Moles have been a popular subject for children's books. Search online for 'picture books about moles' to see cover images of some of these books. [Check the page beforehand, as some spurious pictures can find their way into these image searches.]



Students should be able to note the identifying characteristics of moles that illustrators often use.

Nicki Greenberg is not the first author to call her mole 'Morris'. Why might this be a popular name for a mole character? (Alliteration)

Can students distinguish between 'story books' and 'information books'? What are some distinguishing features of 'information books'?

The Wind in the Willows

The most famous literary mole is probably the character from Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*.

In addition to introducing students to a classic, reading this book together introduces children to some British animals which commonly occur in traditional English children's books, songs and folklore.

Students might also be interested to know that the original illustrator of *The Wind in the Willows*, E.H. Shepard, was also the original illustrator of *Winnie-the-Pooh*.

