

# Midnight Feast

## KEY QUESTIONS AND CLOSE READING NOTES

### THUMBNAILS



### NOTES

This splash page features chopsticks because Japanese inspired pageantry makes an appearance in this story. (*The Artifacts'* splash page showed a picture of a hand swiping everything away, because Asaf lost all of his worldly possessions, and had to start with a clean slate.)

### Pre-reading Questions:

1. Have you ever stayed up for a Midnight Feast?
2. What do you call the meals you eat in your house? (Dinner/supper/brunch/morning tea etc.)
3. Do you eat a snack after dinner?
4. Can you think of any other stories in which unusual things happen at midnight?

In built-up areas, it's often difficult for consumers to find vegetables fresh enough to enjoy in salads. This story is about food, and its main character is a young gourmand. The main menu is brightly coloured and so it represents Roya's imaginary world.

At first glance, the slightly burnt chips on the main menu may look appealing to a younger audience. But what if that's all you had to eat? In my mind, this story takes place in the future, in an over-populated earth. There are significant food shortages, and only the richest are able to afford meat. The rest are left to eat starchy carbs, as is the case in many poor countries now. These chips are fried in cheap, man-made fats, and their only real flavour comes from highly-processed sauces made from high fructose corn syrup and a long list of additives: a modern form of malnutrition.

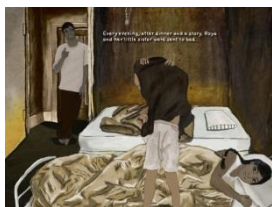
### Key Questions:

1. What can you tell about the setting of this story?
2. What did you see through the window?

...

The transition page gives an idea of the milieu of this story. The characters live in apartments in an urban area. The buildings are slightly run-down. There is not much money. Through the window, Afya jumps on Roya's bed.

1A



Every evening, after dinner and a story, Roya and her little sister were sent to bed.

### Key Questions:

1. Do you have a regular bedtime? What time is it?
2. Is it fair that Roya has to go to bed at the same time as her little sister?
3. How are Roya and her little sister different?
4. Do you think children need to be told when to go to bed?
5. Why do parents so often want their children to go to bed earlier than the children would like?

...

Roya's little sister is full of the joys of life, and is even excited to go to bed. But Roya is about five years older than Afya, and has learnt enough about the world to know that apartment life in a poor neighbourhood has its drawbacks. Roya is stuck sharing a bedroom, but would like her own space. The only space of her own is the dreamworld inside her head. She faces away from her little sister, well-practised at blocking out the world. Unfortunately for Roya, by turning away she can see right out the window.

Roya and Afya are allegorical names. [Roya means](#) 'Dream, premonition, vision' and 'Afya' is a girl's name which [in Muslim means 'Shadows'](#). Afya will spend much of the time in the 'shadows'. The story is about Roya.

1B



But Roya couldn't sleep. It's not that she was scared of the dark, exactly. Things were slightly more complicated than that.

### Key Questions:

1. Do you ever have trouble falling asleep? Do you have nightmares?
2. Do you mind the dark?
3. This is the same bedroom, but why is the colour scheme different?
4. What can you tell about these girls from their bedroom?
5. What might butterflies symbolise?

...

Is the 'real' bedroom brown, or is it greenish-blue? It doesn't matter. Either way, Roya's bedroom is shabby, and she wishes she were somewhere else. The curtains do a poor job of blocking out the light.

The room looks a different colour to Roya because she is progressively retreating into her imagination, where she can choose any colours she wants to.

The reality-to-imaginary, reality-to-imaginary structure of this story app aims to make the most of the recto and verso co-operation that happens in many printed children's books. ('Home page' for verso; 'away page' for recto is a fairly standard picturebook convention in which the verso page depicts safety while the recto page depicts adventure.) Related: Safe home-coming is often depicted from a right to left movement, from adventure back to safety.)

Apart from the hues, the art style itself differs between the 'a' and 'b' pages (verso/recto versions) of each scene. Objects and characters in the 'a' pages are more likely to be outlined in black, which looks slightly more illustrative and less photorealistic than the 'b-side' paintings, in which shapes are mostly delineated by hue and tone, without the outlines and sketchy, cross-hatch shading. (This pattern is broken by the final few pages, after which Roya's reality has come 'face-to-face' with her imagination.)

Notice the posters behind the girls' beds. Roya is an artist as well as a food-lover. She has painted a roasted chicken. Her younger sister, emulating her big sister, perhaps, has taped her own masterpiece to the wall. She looks up to her big sister.

Touch the curtains and butterflies emerge, flying about the bedroom. Butterflies have various symbolic meanings. Here I intend them to symbolise transformation; the butterflies accompany Roya's journey into her own imagination. In Japan, butterflies are thought to be a personification of a person's soul.

2A



Roya counted specks of dirt on the wall. She counted water stains on her ceiling. She counted in hexadecimal. She watched the lights of night flicker across the wall.

**Key Questions:**

1. Do you have any tricks to lull yourself to sleep?
2. Roya must have been learning hexadecimal counting in school. Do you know what it is used for?

...

Even after it has grown dark outside, the lights from the apartments across the alleyway seem preternaturally bright to Roya as she's trying to fall asleep. She tries mundane mental activity as a ploy to lull herself into a deep sleep, but she fails. Outside, dogs howl, wolf-like and ominous.

Hexadecimal counting is important in computing. This story is set in the near-future, in which it's quite possible that programming would be taught to younger students such as Roya, as a compulsory part of any comprehensive mathematics education.

2B



She tried counting sheep. This didn't help.

**Key Questions:**

1. How is this partially imagined bedroom different from the real one?
2. What do you see when you rub the wall away?
3. Picturebooks are often read differently by adults than by children. This picturebook, too, has an objective and a subjective reading. Can you see what these readings might be?

...

Roya's imagination is running away with her -- against her will, for now. She wishes her curtains were less shabby, and so now she 'sees' patterned, opaque drapery even though it wasn't there before. The drapes are patterned with butterflies, which again symbolise the transformation. Her toes are now painted.

Roya will advance further into her imagination as the story progresses, prompted by small details from her real world. This is an objective, adult interpretation of what happens. But a child reader may instead believe that what happens on the 'b pages' really happens inside the world of the story. This would be a naïve, subjective reading.

3A



Sometimes she crept gingerly out of bed, down the hallway, and listened to the sounds coming from the living room.

**Key Questions:**

1. You may pick from the dialogue that Roya has had trouble before, with falling asleep on the school bus and missing her stop. How do you get to and from school? Have you ever missed your stop when riding a bus?
2. How is colour used in this picture?
3. Describe the point-of-view of the illustration.

...

As Roya creeps down the hallway we share the perceptual point of view of Roya; the reader sees what she sees. She thinks there's more excitement further down the hallway. Even though the living areas are depicted in muted shades of orange and browns, those colours are still brighter than the dowdy, muddled colours of Roya and Afya's bedroom, in which the only stripe of real colour (the yellow light) comes from outside their window. So colours represent excitement to Roya. This continues throughout the rest of the story, in which the imaginary pages are more richly coloured than the others.

3B



**Key Questions:**

1. How is the scary version of this page different from the non-scary version?

...

The blue sky of the non-scary version looks less foreboding than the dark, stormy sky of the scary version. There are no birds.

The yellow school bus is perhaps specific to North America and a limited number of other countries. Here in Australia, our school coaches are various colours, depending on the contracted company. Nonetheless, Australasian children watch *Sesame Street* and are exposed to many American books, so the yellow colour of the North American school bus has become an internationally recognised kind.

4A



Roya made her way back to bed but she refused to hurry about it.

**Key Questions:**

1. What does Roya's mother mean when she says she doesn't want any 'fanfare'? What has gone on before?
2. What do you see on the wall?

...  
The hallway again. This time we see Roya *en face*, to show how unhappy she is about going to bed. She looks toward the reader, almost catching your gaze, but not quite. Later in the story she will look straight at you. For now she can't see you. She can't see the outside world, 'beyond the page'.

The mother inadvertently points to Roya's shadow on the wall, diverting the reader's attention toward it. The shadow moves even though the picture of Roya stands still, emphasising her lack of motion.

Doppelgänger -- A ghostly double. Roya sees her shadow on the wall. Trying to discover who she is, Roya sees shadows and reflections of herself in all sorts of places.

Even if Roya understands the word 'fanfare' from context, she is reminded of fans. When she thinks of fans, she thinks also of Japan, famous for its paper fans as part of a kimono ensemble. This single word marks the beginning of the Japanese theme, which continues through the story.

4B



Fanfare...

**Key Questions:**

1. Do you ever imagine yourself on a stage, or does the thought of being the centre of attention seem frightening to you? How common is the 'centre-of-attention' fantasy, do you think? Does it match genuine desire for fame?
2. What does this imaginary scene tell the reader about how Roya feels?

...  
There is no point putting on a performance because Roya has no real-life audience apart from her mother, who fails to understand her need for more stimulation in the evening. By imagining herself on a stage, Roya feels listened to. She has the attention of an entire imaginary audience.

If you rub away the picture of Roya in a pink dress (inspired by her rather plain night-dress), Roya turns into a butterfly/*geisha*. Again, the butterfly here symbolises transformation, but in the Japanese sense may also symbolise where Roya's heart-and-soul really exists. Not in the real world. (Since butterflies symbolise the soul, in Japan.)

5A



These summer evenings stretched on forever and ever. Outside, the world bustled on as usual.

**Key Questions:**

1. What's going on outside the window?
2. The point of view in this illustration is different from previous pages. How and why?

...  
The lights from apartments across the way show that it is still light inside Roya's room. Those diaphanous curtains are not doing their job. A second reading of this story may lead readers to wonder if these people are on their way home late at night, or if they indeed have a home to go to. These people don't have faces. They are stooped and dark and they are strangers. This is in direct contrast to the word 'bustle'. Roya thinks these strangers have places to go to and things to do.

The point of view is from above. Partly this is a logistical choice: the reader needs to be able to see through the window and down to the people below. Also, the roof of the room has been removed, giving the reader the sense of peeping into someone else's life, or as an omniscient 'fly-on-the-wall'. Roya looks smaller and powerless in this view. Her hands press against the window because she wants to escape from her prison.

Is it really this summer evening *in particular* that is stretching on forever and ever? Perhaps Roya is living in a permanently warmer world, in which even winter feels

like summer. You may have noticed her huge winter-weight duvet on the first few pages, even though Afya makes use of a blanket much smaller and lighter, as if Roya wishes it were cooler.

5B



If only the food market would return, with the right kind of night-time bustle.

**Key Questions:**

1. What do the words on this page tell the reader about the recent past?
2. What does Roya mean by 'strange things on sticks'?

...

Roya has imagined herself out of the window, and the perspective is now from someone standing in the middle of the street, joining in the action. She has imagined a street market selling spices, fruit and other food, or perhaps the street market was there at one time and has since disappeared. This may have been in Roya's lifetime, or it may be something she has heard about. The orangey-retro overlay on this illustration is designed to evoke the past.

By 'strange things on sticks' Roya might be talking about kebabs cooked on skewers or similar, but she's spicing things up for herself by inserting the supernatural – she also means witches on broomsticks.

6A



One by one the lights went out. But some were still not ready for sleep.

**Key Questions:**

1. Is this page Roya's reality or is it her imagination?
2. How do you know?

...

It is getting darker now as lights turn off, but Roya is still at the window, contemplating her own reflection in the glass. A cat appears on the window sill. Also a couple of birds – these are cuckoo chicks. Cuckoos appear in Roya's imagination again later, with the cuckoo clock.

This is Roya's reality – the colour scheme offers a clue. It is getting darker now as lights turn off across the way, but Roya is still at the window, contemplating her own reflection in the glass.

Roya has draped the curtain over her head, partly so she can see out of the window, of course, but perhaps this is part of her imagined pageantry – the curtain almost looks like a kind of headdress. She is toying with her own self-image.

6B



**Key Questions:**

1. Do you think the cat is real within the world of the story, or does Roya imagine this, too?

...

A cat appears on the window sill. But Roya's reflection, visible in the previous page, has gone. Roya has recast her own reflection as a separate entity.

It is likely that stray or pet cats would co-exist in this environment with humans, and there are no doubt cats in Roya's environs. But the outside view of this window (seen in the transition page) allows for no easy way for a cat to appear on a second-storey windowsill. Roya has probably imagined this particular cat, and on the following page, she has definitely imagined its dialogue. She breathes onto the glass and traces words into the condensation with her own finger. The night is colder now, too.

Roya's face is painted geisha style, and the kimono she wears is the same that appeared earlier, when she imagined herself on stage. We tend to look somewhat desaturated when we see our reflections in a pane of glass, which may contribute to Roya imagining herself as a geisha, with traditionally white make-up.

7A



One quarter of a wink and the cat was gone.

**Key Questions:**

1. What do you notice about the colours on this page?

...

Roya sees bright colours coming from the apartments across the way. But there are no colours coming from Roya's own side of the street. Nothing exciting is happening over here. It's doubtful that anything particularly exciting is coming from other apartments either, but Roya is fascinated by the unknown. She thinks her own existence is far less exciting than that of her neighbours.

7B



Off to dress for Midnight Feast, no doubt.

**Key Questions:**

1. What do you see in the shop window?
2. What else appears?

...

Rub the shop window and you will find a more feline version of the clothing items. Also in the window is a 'manekineko' – a 'beckoning cat'. These are seen in shops all throughout Japan. These ornaments are said to bring good custom into a shop, so shopkeepers tend to display them in their shop windows.

If you touch the blue mat on this page, a photo booth appears out of the ground. At night the very structure of our urban environments changes, with things popping out that are never seen by day – even if it is just neon signage. For Roya, even a doormat might hold some night-time secret. (Photo booths are popular in Japan.)

Why is the cat not dressed in his purple zoot suit in the photos? Because the camera captures who we really are, not who we think we are. (Note the cat's rose tinted glasses in one of the snap shots.) The cat may think he's all dressed up in a purple zoot suit, but like Roya herself, his adventures are purely imaginative. Cats can't dress in clothes, after all... Roya is old enough to know that, deep down. Reflections, mirror images and semi-transparency are themes which run right through this story.

8A



Midnight Feast! That explained the occasional sound of cutlery on crockery coming from the kitchen very late at night.

**Key Questions:**

1. What does the dialogue tell the reader about the family and possibly about the wider world?
2. Why does Roya mishear the words?

...

It is unlikely that Roya's family enjoyed a nutritious and satisfying meal this evening. Her father is still hungry, and looks in the kitchen for something to eat. It is now clear that the family struggles to afford food. There is nothing but scraps left, and a can of mealworms. Her father refers to the worms as 'spaghetti', in a reversal of what often happens today, with children referring to spaghetti as 'worms'.

Roya, listening to her parents' conversation through her bedroom wall (off stage), mishears what they say. This is partly to do with the fact that she hears them only in muffled form, but Roya has an active imagination anyhow, and this interferes with her reality. She has imagined that her parents save the most delicious foods to share between themselves after she and Afya have been sent to bed.

8B



**Key Questions:**

1. Roya has reimagined her family kitchen. Where is her father now, and what is he doing?

...

If only the Spartan family kitchen were a hub of culinary activity, serving all the various dishes of a five star restaurant. Tap the rightmost portion of the screen and you'll see all the menu items that Roya imagines (randomly generated). The words are riffs on frequently appearing words that appear in foodie magazines.

Tap the leftmost portion of the screen and various nutritious whole foods fly out of the pot. Note that Roya craves colourful fruit and vegetables.

The father in this illustration is of slightly different habitus – carrying more weight, as if food were abundant.

The cat makes a cameo appearance in the scary version – here he plays the part of a shadowy waiter, poking his head through the waiters’ window.

9A



In bed and wide awake, Roya listened to the rumbling of her stomach. She tried not to think of the Midnight Feast going on in the kitchen: the one to which she was NOT invited.

### Key Questions:

1. What does the sound of thunder represent?

...

There is a summer storm outside. Maybe not really – maybe the storm is entirely inside Roya’s imagination. There is no rain with this storm. Instead, there is a drought. This has led to a general shortage of food and much of the population is now starving.

Dry thunder emulates the rumbling of Roya’s stomach. It’s not just Roya’s father who is hungry. The hunger is contributing to keeping her wide awake.

The storm is an example of ‘pathetic fallacy’.

The fish-eye distortion of the window/storm scene pre-empts the aquarium page which follows. The windows across the street remind Roya of fish eyes. Her eyes are also growing tired.

9B



So she dreamed instead of the cat and his cronies.

### Key Questions:

1. For those who own cats, what do cats like to eat most of all?
2. Have you ever visited an aquarium?
3. Have you ever eaten caviar? What do you think it would taste like? Its texture?
4. Why do you think Roya imagines an environment heavily featuring water?
5. How is the imaginary cats’ clothing specifically ‘cat like’?
6. The cats eat sardines out of a can. Sardines and cans are so intertwined in Western culture – when most people think of sardines they probably think of the canned kind, and being ‘crammed in’. How is that reflected in idiomatic English, do you think? How does that relate to Roya’s environment?

...

Roya decides to take her mind of her rumbling stomach by imagining unappealing food – the kind cats might like.

Cats I have known have always shown great interest in fish bowl and the anthropomorphised equivalent is perhaps an aquarium. Unlike Roya, the cats are eating their fill this evening.

A jelly fish made out of a moulded, sugar jelly is a visual pun.

Roya imagines water because of the general lack of it in her everyday life. Being surrounded water has become the stuff of fantasy.

The scary version activates a big, scary looking fish which swims slowly into the screen. Some deepwater fish are truly terrifying to behold. Search for images of a viperfish, a blobfish, stonefish, a goblin shark, an angler fish. What is the most scary looking fish you can find? What makes it look so scary?

Apart from the jelly, the non-scary version of this page simply depicts sardines swimming inside the tank. ‘Crammed in like sardines’ is an idiomatic English expression. Living in an overpopulated urban environment, it’s likely Roya feels like a sardine in a can.

One of the fish in this aquarium is a type of [dragonfish](#), and dragons will come up on the following page, when Roya tricks her little sister.

The leftmost cat wears a headscarf and sunglasses, intended to be reminiscent of an eel, with the handkerchiefs coming out of his pockets supposed to look like silhouettes of cat heads. The she-cat wears a pearl necklace, with an open pearl oyster

shell on the table, and stud earrings which are reminiscent of salmon roe. Her Davy Crockett hat may well be made of a cat's tail.

10A



Morning. The kitchen table looked just the same. Not a crumb remained from last night's feast.

### Key Questions:

1. What do you eat for breakfast at your house?
2. Does your entire household eat together?
3. What do you eat at school for lunch?
4. What sort of humour is Roya in, and why?
5. Looking around the kitchen, what can you tell about this family?
6. If food became a very scarce commodity, what do you think would happen to household pets?

...

Roya is not in the best of moods. Although she was sent to bed too early, she ended up lying awake for too long also, kept away by the lights outside, her hunger, and the urban sounds of night.

Today is an ordinary school day. Roya tells Afya that a baby dragon might be inside the egg. A 'gobemouche' is a gullible person. Roya has a mischievous, trouble-making side, a consequence of her excellent imagination.

Afya wears a hat on her head which make her look as if she is a black cat. Presumably Afya wears this hat regularly, and it may be Roya's inspiration for the talking black cat who appeared at her window. Or perhaps the family used to own a black cat. In communities with resource shortages, well-fed pets become a luxury, and are often abandoned.

Neither the mother nor the father eats breakfast, instead settling for coffee. There isn't enough food to go around. The mother makes a rather uninspiring lunch of bread and butter-like-substance. She tries to get the last out of the bottle of jam/sauce. It has almost gone.

10B



### Key Questions:

1. What can you see about Roya and Afya's costume?
2. What do the lights remind you of?

...

The kitchen is now a bright morning kitchen. Instead of a poky rather dark place it's a beautiful, sunny and open room, much larger than Roya's real kitchen at home, and they now look out onto a field of poppies, with the sea in the near distance.

Roya has inspired herself to imagine a dragon – the plants in the pots are known as 'dragon tree plants'. The lights in the chandelier are reminiscent of eggs, as are the rounded tops of the fence posts along the wooden veranda outside. I have always thought hot air balloons have a dragon-like quality about them because of their 'fire breathing', and also because of their bright colours. Again, the archetypical hot air balloon shape is designed to evoke the shape of an egg.

Poppies, when used as drugs, are an opiate – to perhaps soothe an otherwise unpleasant situation. Roya is using her imagination in this way. The Latin name of this plant—*Papaver somniferum*—means "the poppy that makes you sleepy."

11A



Roya doubted any amount of reasonable appeal would

### Key Questions:

1. What is the news on the radio telling us about the outside world in this story?

...

The news all stems from the food shortages. Drought has affected crops. Citizens are hoarding supplies. The government is being forced to step in. Even educational policies have been updated to cope with a rapid decline in living standards.

Roya decides to ask her parents if she can stay up for Midnight Feast. She's feeling a little silly about asking. Perhaps she senses that it's not really a 'thing'. She has



work, but there was no harm in trying. What if she were to ask in a semi-whisper?

11B



She was sure they'd laugh their socks/heads off.

surrendered her own egg to Afya now. Perhaps the news in the background makes her feel bad about claiming more than her own share of the food, as she will if she stays up for a 'feast'.

**Key Questions:**

1. Roya routinely changes figures of speech into literal images inside her head. Where else in the story has she done the same so far?

...

Once again, Roya takes an English-language figure of speech and imagines its literal sense: with her mother and father 'laughing their socks off' in the non-scary version, and 'laughing their heads off' in the slightly more gruesome version. She has already imagined dressmakers' mannequins in the 'Cat Dresses Up' page, so imagines them again here. She has riffed on 'fanfare' and she will later be inspired by soldiers and 'capital' and 'in a flap' → flapjacks.

12A



**Key Questions:**

1. Do you think it's fair that Afya will have to go to bed at the usual time?
2. Does this scene change the way you feel about the relationship between Roya and her parents?

...

Roya's parents are surprisingly amenable to her staying up for Midnight Feast. Even though they will go out of their way (as much as they can) to make the evening special, it won't live up to Roya's imagination. They have no idea about what goes on inside their older daughter's head. They also underestimate her emotional age. Their idea of a 'treat' may well work on Afya, but Roya has grown old enough to expect more. Although it's Afya who complains about never getting any older, in contrast it's actually Roya who isn't getting any older in her parents' minds.

12B



**Key Questions:**

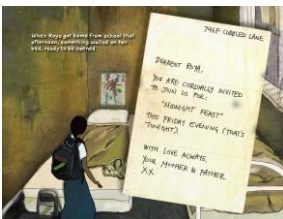
1. Why have the poppies made an appearance on this page?

...

The poppies, once again, are associated with fantasy, not reality. (Earlier in the story, butterflies performed this function, but Roya moved on with the internal narrative.)

Roya says nothing of her delight – she flies around the kitchen only inside her own head -- so her parents will naturally underestimate how much The Midnight Feast means to Roya. Roya says very little throughout the story. Perhaps she thinks she says more than she really does, since her inner-world is so active.

13A



When Roya got home from school that afternoon, something waited on her bed, ready to be opened.

**Key Questions:**

1. Have you ever written any invitations?
2. What might you expect if you were invited to a Midnight Feast? What would you hope for?

...

Even with no money, Roya's parents do what they can to make the evening into something of an event, and they think they're entering Roya's imaginative world by writing an invitation – usually reserved only for noteworthy events.

13B



She felt like royalty.

**Key Questions:**

1. Does this page remind you of any fairytales?

...

To 'feel like royalty' means simply that you feel very special and important, but Roya – again – takes the phrase literally and therefore imagines a crown, jewellery, and generally in the clouds. What does a royal bedroom typically look like? Roya wouldn't know, but she is no doubt inspired by illustrated fairytales. The beanstalk is reminiscent of Jack and the Beanstalk and of the mattresses of *The Princess and the Pea*. Her braid is even longer, like that of Rapunzel, who also spends her life in captivity in the name of protection. Dressed in army attire (the army is a 'royal'

institution in Commonwealth countries), she feels suddenly empowered.

14A



But midnight was a long time coming.

### Key Questions:

1. What has Roya's father done to try and make this evening special?
2. What do the book titles tell you about the food situation?
3. What might the dolls represent?
4. Why is Roya holding a camera?
5. How would you describe the body language of Roya and her father? What does this say about their relationship?

...

Roya's father tries to make the evening special by hanging up a balloon and drawing a smiley face onto it which looks more like a sad face when it's hanging upside down. He has got his hands on some glow sticks (usually associated with much louder, more populated events), but Roya is too old to enjoy the activities he suggests. Her father doesn't understand that she has recently grown out of childish games. Later, he tries to enliven the evening by pulling funny faces as Roya takes snapshots, but this is a kind of faux-excitement: what he's really doing is getting ready for bed by shaving and brushing his teeth. Roya is not only too old for these antics, she is too big for such an early regular bedtime and the paltry food allocated to her at dinner. Roya is on the cusp of adulthood. She craves the trappings of adulthood accordingly – the dressing up, the freedom to manage her own bedtime, and to experience new things such as exotic foods. New experiences would serve as prompts to fire her increasingly exploratory imagination. Instead, she's still relying on fairytales for inspiration, augmented with the odd detail from her real life (alley cats, word associations).

The books on the shelf show that the family has relearned how to cook in a time of food shortage. People are now forced to rely on insects, for instance, presently considered unpalatable in most parts of the world.

Roya holds a camera at the ready because she expects something photo-worthy to happen.

The Russian dolls, like the nested tables they sit upon, symbolise entrapment. Like the dolls, Roya is growing bigger. The dolls represent growth and entrapment simultaneously. Like one of the smaller dolls, Roya herself is trapped inside a room, inside an apartment, inside an apartment block inside a city, and otherwise inside classrooms and school buses. On a more positive note, the dolls also symbolise the small surprises that emerge if we're ever able to strip away the surface of a personality to reach the depths of inner-life and imagination.

Roya is upright and expectant, and solitary at the same time. Her father's body-language is relaxed and open. He hopes for some intimacy, and looks accommodating with his arm stretched out toward Roya. Although he reaches toward his older daughter, he doesn't quite get there. He doesn't understand her anymore.

14B



This allowed plenty of time to reimagine the interior décor.

### Key Questions:

1. What might the feather represent? (Scary mode)
2. What is the significance of the dancing lights that come out of the lamp?

...

Roya's idea of a fine evening involves much pampering. In popular imagination, the pampering trope involves being fed grapes, with someone to fan us by hand with a giant feather. Feathers of any colour may represent flight or freedom due to their association with birds. Once again, Roya has 'escaped' into her imagination.

Roya reclines on a chaise lounge dressed in a more elaborate costume than her white nightdress.

The wallpaper behind shows grapes but when the reader touches the painting on the wall, Roya escapes to a vineyard with a wonderful view from the veranda. In this story app, light is important throughout the story. While real street lights keep her awake, colourful lights dance in Roya's imaginary world. But will she really 'see the light'?

Occasionally a large tray of grapes appears. The hands of mysterious butlers with very long arms emerge from off screen to offer platters of cheese and tall glasses of grape juice. (The arms are black – the butlers are black cats.)

*Fromage de chat* means ‘Cheese of Cat’ which [is enjoyed in Eastern Europe](#), and is a nod to the prevalence of cats in this story.

15A



She listened as her mother talked to Auntie. Alack and alas, nothing juicy was revealed.

**Key Questions:**

1. What does the intratext (the posters and the graffiti) tell the reader about the world of the story?
2. What is the mother talking about, do you think?

...

Roya follows her parents around, hoping for them to kick into action. Instead, her mother talks to an auntie on the phone in the stairwell of their apartment block. The stairs are a dark, dingy place, with an elevator that doesn’t work, where flies buzz around somebody’s smelly rubbish bag. The elevator is broken; a terse note speaks to unpleasant realities such as mopping the toilets (which are communal). This is Roya’s unglamorous reality. Roya herself is a ‘fly-on-the-wall’ as her parents basically go through their usual evening routine.

As uninspiring as this scene is, the stairwell is commensurately spooky for Roya, with dark, ghostlike figures whooshing around in the scary version of this page. At the bottom of the stairwell someone has scrawled ‘The End Is Nigh’. Of course, it might be a joke, because the graffiti artist may simply be saying that the stairwell itself is coming to an end. Alternatively, this may be real for world of the story.

15B



**Key Questions:**

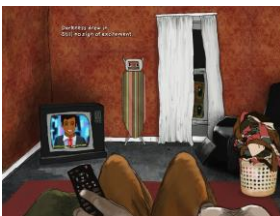
1. The vibe (or pace) of this scene contrasts directly with the previous scene of reality. In what way?
2. Why does the bird come out with an electronic sound when touched?

...

Roya’s boredom prompts her to reimagine the stairwell. It is now the staircase of a busy, upper-class household, full of nervous energy and last minute organisation before the Midnight Feast. Her mother is all ‘in a flap’, whereas in the previous scene she’s talking about day-to-day boring things. The feather boa around her neck continues the analogy between the woman and a bird. Her hair looks a bit like a bird’s nest.

The imaginary black cat reappears as a butler, from a cat flap. Under the silver platter, he serves flap jacks (the American kind). The birds, like Roya, are caged in. They don’t sing as birds should; touch the birds and you’ll see that all Roya can imagine coming out of them is the echoic, slightly creepy sound of a mobile phone. (Her imagination is sometimes punctured by real-world noises.)

16A



Darkness drew in. Still no sign of excitement.

**Key Questions:**

1. In what way does Roya’s imagination set to work on this page?

...

Roya sits on the sofa watching TV with her parents but Roya is bored by the television, which is ridiculously tedious with lawn bowls and stock market news and a joyless choir. (Note that the ‘green’ of the lawn bowls has turned to ‘drought brown’.) Roya can see through a chink in the curtains toward the apartments across the way, and they look like the fish eyes of her imagined scene of the night before. As the night grows darker her imagination begins to run away with her a bit, and she sees the washing jump up to form a monster. Even the boring old ironing board looks like a scary Sadie. In the non-scary version, the rabbit-ear antennae are actual ears off a rabbit. Although this is an ‘a-side’ page, Roya’s imagination is starting to work overtime. She not only spirits herself away to different places, but is transforming her home.

16B



**Key Questions:**

1. If you touch the popcorn machine you can end up with a mountain of popcorn. Why do you think Roya likes to imagine food in excess?
2. Who else is watching the movies?

...  
A trip to the movies would be more exciting for Roya than watching lawn bowls and religious songs and news on TV. Of course she imagines the food that would go with that, since she is hungry. Hunger leads her imagination toward hyperbole.

Two pointy black ears poke up above the seat next to Roya's. She has imagined the cat. Or perhaps it's Afya, since Afya owns a hat with pointy ears at the top of it (seen at breakfast).

17A



Her mother and father danced in the living room. Roya preferred the hallway.

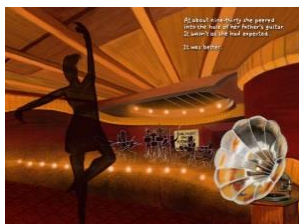
**Key Questions:**

1. Why does Roya prefer the hallway?
2. What is the significance of ripped/tatty wallpaper?

...  
Roya dances with her own shadow on the wall. A male dancing partner appears, in shadow only. While her parents dance together in the living room ('off-stage') Roya has no one to dance with, so instead of feeling left out she conjures up her own partner. She is entering adolescence, and is beginning to wonder what it would be like to dance with a man. Another part of the reason Roya's parents might like to send her to bed early is so they can enjoy time in each other's company alone. Roya may well feel like a third wheel, encroaching on her parents' time together. She therefore chooses the hallway.

The ripped wallpaper not only shows that Roya lives in a house with little money but also offers glimpses of the next page, underneath. Roya is 'tearing through' the walls to get into her own mind.

17B



At about nine-thirty she peered into the hole of her father's guitar. It wasn't as she had expected. It was better.

**Key Questions:**

1. Roya's imaginary dancehall is inspired by something from her living room – can you see what it is?
2. Why might she imagine there are tiny people trapped inside a guitar?

...  
The architecture of the imagined dance hall is meant to look like the inside of a guitar. Sometimes if you're really taken by a piece of music, it's almost as if you're 'inside' the music – represented here quite literally.

Roya herself feels trapped so she is inclined to imagine examples of imprisonment in unlikely places. Also, she is bored.

18A



The dancing continued...

**Key Questions:**

1. What is the mother doing with the hands on the clock? Why?
2. Is this fair?
3. In the world of the story, why might it be significant that midnight never arrives?

...  
Although the clock shows about five to eleven pm, the parents really want Roya to go to bed already, so you see the mother's fingers pushing the hands forward. This does indeed fool Roya, who has no other means of telling the time. But her subsequent disappointment comes not from the fact that the clock was put forward, but from the total letdown of ordinary fare in place of her imagined Midnight Feast.

The parents have effectively lied to their daughter. This may be the kinder thing to do, though, since the evening is only going to drag on and on with little more in the way of entertainment. Later, the reader will see that there is another reason why the parents want Roya to go to bed.

A subjective yet sophisticated interpretation may leave the reader with hopes, however, that a fairytale kind of magic still does happen at midnight... it didn't

happen in *this* story simply because the parents have not waited long enough (and have not looked hard enough) for it. There have been supernatural elements on some of the pages (for example the witches on broomsticks). In picture book world, magic is often possible even though it's well hidden from adults.

18B



...and midnight never drew near. Until suddenly it did. At last!

**Key Questions:**

1. Where else have you seen a cuckoo in this story?

...

This page is foreshadowed first by the cuckoo chicks who appear at Roya's window, and next by Roya's mother, who was snapped reading a book of Wordsworth's poetry earlier in the evening. (Readers familiar with Wordsworth will know that he wrote a poem called 'To The Cuckoo'.

19A



**Key Questions:**

1. With little money and little food, what are the things Roya's mother and father have done to try and spice up this very ordinary climax?

...

The parents have borrowed a valuable plate from a neighbour, but since it is Roya who has to take it back and say thank you, this underwhelming privilege accompanies obligation.

Her father tries to gussy up the ordinary fare by making jokes. He has noticed that a squashed loaf of bread looks a bit like the letter R (which Roya points out is 'capital'). Perhaps Roya has inherited her imaginative tendencies from her father, because this really is a stretch.

Boiled eggs are not exactly novel fare – Roya already demonstrated this at breakfast by offering her own egg to her sister, choosing instead to go without breakfast at all. Her parents have tried to make this occasion special by drawing a panicked face on it, but inside the shell there is still just an ordinary egg, no matter how it's dressed up. This egg only emphasises to Roya that her imagined world is nothing but a decorative façade. The face is supposed to be ironic, but unfortunately Roya can empathise a little with its pain, and so the joke falls flat.

Roya's imagination has been inspired by her favourite mug. Is there really a black cat somewhere, or does it exist only on the mug (and on a picture in the living room)? But the black cat silhouettes on the real-life mug almost detract something from her imagination: she is reminded that the cats exist *only on the mug*. Touch again and the cat on the mug fades to nothing.

19B



Soldiers of multigrain toast marched to a dreary beat.

**Key Questions:**

1. What might the eggs symbolise in this story? And the 'soldiers' of toast, and the cracks?
2. How would you describe the colour scheme of this page?

...

The egg is similar to the Russian dolls in that there is a hard shell which contains something inside. In most cases it's nothing more than an egg white and a yolk, but there is sometimes the hope that it contains more than that; utilised in popular culture by the Kinder surprise, for instance, or by chocolate eggs at Easter. So the eggs in this story are a motif for hope.

The cracking of the entire screen represents Roya's shattered dreams. She 'soldiers' on even through disappointment, without vocalising complaint.

The droplet of water falling onto the plate continues the water shortage theme. The lone tear emphasises the loneliness of Roya, but also is supposed to represent drought.

Every page in the story so far has alternated in colour scheme, from ochres or slightly dull orange and browns (the a-pages), to brightly coloured imaginary pages (the b-pages). This page is a break from that pattern, and demonstrates that since Roya's illusions have been shattered by disappointment, she is temporarily unable to retreat into her own head. She hadn't anticipated that she would need to. She thought Midnight Feast would provide the stimulation she craves.

20A



If not a five-star restaurant, perhaps a downtown diner?

**Key Questions:**

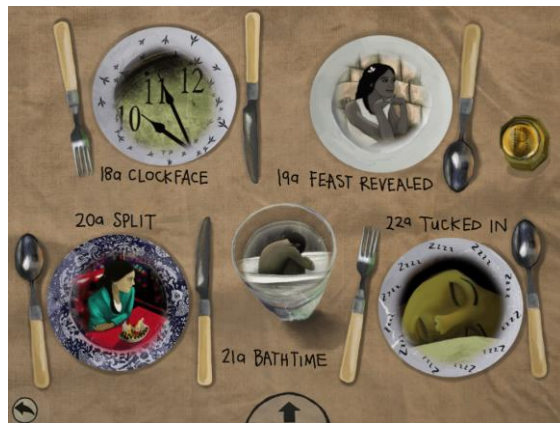
1. Roya's own reflection can be seen in the imaginary window. This reflection appears at other times in the story. What do you think Roya is thinking about as she looks at herself?
2. What do reflections represent throughout the story?

...

Roya's lack of imagination doesn't last long. Whereas before she was imagining a banquet, she has scaled her dreams down, and now she sits in a downtown diner. She is not dressed in finery; instead, she wears casual clothing, and her hair is in the same style as in real-life.

The reflection of Roya looks straight at the reader, with a rather confronting stare. This is not the first time we have seen Roya's reflection in a window. She saw herself with the cat on page 6, in which the cat (her own imagination looking in) appeared on the other side.

It's obvious when looking at the navigation page that this return to full-colour (imagination) is a departure from the colour pattern initially established. The only colourful spot is the thumbnail for page 20a:



20B



The sounds of Friday night punctured her thoughts. When had she grown tall enough to see out of the kitchen window? She hadn't meant to see. She didn't mean to keep looking.

**Key Questions:**

1. Roya can no longer see her own reflection. What does she see instead?
2. What is going on in the world right outside her own window?
3. Why is this page called 'The Switch'?
4. The three-petaled flower that Roya has used to decorate her hair this evening comes from the vase on the kitchen window-sill. The flowers are not looking too healthy. Why not?
5. What do you usually associate with this shade of green?

...

Roya has her unwelcome epiphany. This is the turning point of the story. After this view, in which there is no reflection, Roya no longer sees herself on the outside looking in – she sees that she is actually one of the more privileged members of a starving society. Her food is not of high quality and there is not quite enough of it, but she does have food and she does have a roof over her head.

There is no water in the vase of flowers. Drought.

The green overlay is different from the colours used throughout the rest of the story. Although we tend to associate verdant colours with food-bearing vegetation, this

particular shade of green is meant to evoke memories of rubbish and stench. This is the green of rubbish bags and skip-bins, mimetic of foul odour.

In scary mode, people scream and moan below. A woman calls out 'The End Is Nigh!' Perhaps this is the same person who wrote the graffiti on the stairwell wall. Perhaps many are saying it.

The switch refers to the light switch turning off, of course, but also to the fact that this is a 'b-page', in which Roya is generally depicted existing inside her own head, except now she is looking down from her real apartment, into the reality of homelessness and starvation below. The switch is from 'imagination' to 'reality'.

21A



She prepared for bed as usual. Mindful of the drought, she wasted not a lukewarm, second-hand drop.

**Key Questions:**

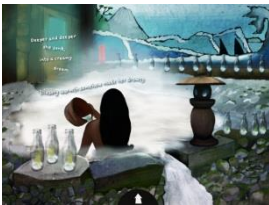
1. Why is Roya using 'second-hand' water?
2. What does her body language tell you?

...

On page 16 the newsreader mentioned heavy water restrictions in the home. This is a situation that many Australian residents face already, with Sydney now under permanent water restrictions. Note that Roya is having a very shallow bath. This is quite different from the typical depictions of bath time in happier picture books. Most often we see a child sitting in deep water, often with bubbles, having fun. But Roya is hunched up. She looks cold and alone. For Roya, bath time is not a luxurious experience. She retreats from the world – or comforts herself -- by curling up. There is a window ahead, but she doesn't even want to see what's on the other side.

Presumably she sits like this for some time before she is able to imagine herself somewhere better.

21B



Deeper and deeper she sank, into a creamy dream. Illusory warmth somehow made her drowsy.

**Key Questions:**

1. Do you recognise the picture in the background? It's a riff on a famous Japanese painting.
2. What do you think Roya is feeling right now, even as she imagines herself somewhere better?

...

The painting is based on *The Great Wave Of Kanagawa*. In this case, the wave has been turned into a cat's paw, with its claws out, drowning. Water is indeed abundant in Roya's imagination, but her thoughts have taken on a sinister hue.

Japan is famous for its bathing rituals. In public Japanese bath houses ([sentō](#)) there is often a painting on the wall to emulate a traditional *onsen* (hot spring). The ideal Japanese bathing experience takes place in the wild. Roya first imagines a Japanese bathhouse, then 'upgrades' to an outdoor bath, because eventually (after some rubbing effort on the reader's part) she is able to manipulate her imagination and think of somewhere better, as she managed to do earlier when waiting on the couch with her father (the blue and red rooms), or when lying in bed counting sheep (the peaceful pastoral scene).

The lantern, which turns into a cat, reprimands her, reminding her that bathing in milk is a waste. Since the rest of the world is starving, of course this would be true, if she were really bathing in milk. After seeing out of the kitchen window, she is newly aware of her privilege, and the guilt she feels after her great disappointment 'flows over' into her imaginative world.

22A



Outside, all was silent. All was dark.

### Key Questions:

1. Does your family have its own traditional sayings at certain times of the day? Here it's 'Goodnight, sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite.' Or your grandmother might say, 'Skin a bunny' when she undressed you as a toddler, or 'Home, James' as if you're being driven by a chauffeur. What are the phrases specific to your own family's routine?
2. On this page, Roya's eyes open suddenly. What does the opening of her eyes represent?

...

Not only is it dark outside – Roya's inner world is about to get darker than before.

The opening of Roya's eyes represents her 'awakening' – she is haunted by what she's just seen out of the kitchen window. After she has had time to think about the drought while bathing in her shallow bathwater, she has realised that there are starving people worse off right outside her own window.

Leaves blow across Roya's face. Reality is once again melding with imagination. From previous pictures of Roya's environs, we know there are no trees in Roya's phenomenal environs. She lives in an impoverished urban environment devoid of greenery. This begins her transition from reality into her habitual dreamlike state. But this time her dreams won't be quite the same.

22B



But the dreams continued, on and on, deep into the shimmer of the night.

### Key Questions:

1. What does the glasshouse represent?
2. Why is there an industrial scene in the background? Is that part real or imagined?
3. Looking back on the story, do you think there was another good reason why Roya's parents wanted her to go to bed early each night?

...

The 'bedbugs', of course, traditionally refer to parasitic insects that feed on blood. Roya imagines far more attractive glow-worm type things, coming out of garden beds – a more pleasant thought with which to lull herself to sleep.

This final page synthesises wider themes of the story.

The motif of a glasshouse full of vegetables is twofold. In its more basic sense, Roya has reimagined a 'bedroom' full of abundant, fresh food growing in garden beds. But more disturbingly, after growing tall enough (or *old* enough) to see out of her kitchen window, down to the homeless, starving people below, she now understands the reality of the world around her. So her bedroom walls were formerly a prison, but as well as being a prison, they are a refuge and a shield. Now that she has seen, she can never un-see. Metaphorically, it is as if the apartment walls have suddenly turned to glass. No doubt Roya would prefer to imagine a lush, garden scene outside, but now she can't imagine past the reality of her own, very real, very grimy, industrial part of the city, with its dirty smoke contributing to that beautiful pink of the sky. By staying up late like an adult, she has come to understand that her own little space in this world is abundant, in contrast with the starving strangers down below, and she can no longer ignore the reality just beyond her own walls.

In the modern world, the things we *know* are out there (brought to us via news and advertising, through our own glass screens) are often far more lavish and attractive than our day-to-day realities. The reverse is also true. Growing up means learning to cope with the dissonance between world-wide reality, personal reality, and aspiration. Roya's parents sent her to bed early each night because they hoped to shield her from the starving homeless somebodies who appear routinely on the street below, after dark falls, sleeping on the cold, hard ground. They treated her as younger than she really is because they *wanted* her to stay younger, and naïve to the realities of a drought-stricken world.

Can you see the frog, also looking out of the glasshouse window? In Japanese, the word for 'frog' is a homophone of the word 'to return home' (both pronounced '*kaeru*'). (For this reason, ceramic frogs are often sold at Shinto shrines.) Roya has 'returned' to her bed to retire for the night, but she has also returned -- or retreated --



to her safe inner world.

In other cultures, pumpkins are a symbol of plenty, representing the entire world, and enough food to feed it.

The cuckoo makes a brief reappearance. It is an elusive thing (as in the Wordsworth poem) as well as an unwelcome omen.



This is a picture of a house Roya would *like* to live in: a spacious mansion surrounded by greenery. The pinkish sky from the previous page is now a deep, magnificent kind of ethereal pink. The shrubbery that has been planted along the front of the house ends in two topiary trees reminiscent of black cats.

Think back to the transition page, right at the beginning of the story. The only thing Roya's imaginary-world has in common with reality is the moon.

\*\*\*