



**TEACHERS' NOTES**  
**SCORPION FALLS**  
by Martin Chatterton

**GENRE: Gothic Horror/Dark comedy**

**ABOUT THE NOVEL**

Scorpion Falls is a darkly comedic YA 'chiller' set in the spooky and claustrophobic central Queensland mining town of the same name where 14- year-old local, Theo Sumner, is dead set on finding out why teenagers are disappearing, especially when the love of his life, Ari Patel, goes missing too. The name of the town is not accidental: this story is constructed with a sting in the tale.

**SYNOPSIS**

Theo Sumner is a 14 year old boy who has been born and raised in the the central west Queensland mining town of Scorpion Falls, a place completely dominated physically and culturally by the sprawling mines and research facilities of corporate giant, Medullo Industries. Theo lives with his TV-obsessed mother, Debs, who, for the past few years has been struck down with degenerative MS (Multiple Sclerosis) which means although she has some mobility, is largely confined to a wheelchair.

Theo Sumner is something of a loner: an outsider who prides himself on his powers of observation and someone who knows more about Scorpion Falls than just about anyone. Theo, in fact, has never left the town once in his entire life. Theo's mother and father met when they both worked at Medullo Industries Research but, when we join the story, his father is long gone after never bothering to return from a new job in Tasmania.

To help make ends meet in the struggling Sumner household, Theo works shifts after school and at weekends at a local motel, The Iguana – known as the Iggy – which is run by the Patels, a second generation Indian/Australian family, incomers from Brisbane, and consisting of Kesha and Mina (the parents) and their only child, their daughter, Ari. The work is often dull and sometimes unpleasant, but Theo doesn't mind being out of the house as often as he is. Not only is he earning some much-needed cash but by working at the Iggy he has the opportunity to be near Ari. Theo is smitten with Ari and she by him, although when the story begins they are at the start of their relationship; a relationship complicated by racism (from Theo's mother and some elements in the town) and distrust about Theo (from Ari's parents).

From his usual spot behind the reception desk at the Iggy, Theo is perfectly placed to observe the usual flow of passing visitors: tourists heading to the Outback, grey nomads who want a break from the caravan, mine workers and visitors to Medullo Industries. And there's also Frank Jones, the Iggy's longest term guest who has been in Room 22 for the past three months. Which is just about the same time that local kids started vanishing. Frank spooks Theo without Theo quite knowing why.

The first of the missing Scorpion Falls kids is Coley Briggs, a 13 year old footy player and bully.

Coley Briggs is swiped from outside his house during a rainstorm by a guy in a white van. It's an abduction (albeit with an apparently willing Coley Briggs) and it's witnessed by Theo Sumner. No sooner has Theo seen Coley taken than he reappears behind him, professing ignorance of any white van or abduction. But Theo knows what he's seen.

He confides what he's seen to Ari but discussion of that is displaced when Theo witnesses Frank Jones being picked up at the Iggy by the same white van who 'took' Coley Briggs. Itching to discuss this development with Ari, but unable to do so due to Ari's strict parents, Theo has to wait until the next day at school. Before he can do that however, he sees an older student, Lina Lanchester acting suspiciously in a maintenance cupboard at school. Theo follows Lina into the cupboard only to find she has vanished into thin air. What follows is a series of increasingly strange events which, as Theo looks for answers, draws him deep inside the Medullo Industries mines and Institute. His investigations reveal secrets about the murky underbelly of Scorpion Falls and a shocking nightmare encounter with the truth.

### **ABOUT THIS GUIDE**

These notes are not intended to be comprehensive. They touch on some of the more important themes and ideas contained in the book and are intended to help your students' understanding of *Scorpion Falls*. The notes do contain plot spoilers!

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

British/Australian writer, illustrator, performer and producer, **Martin Chatterton**, has been working as a multi-disciplined creative at the highest level in the UK, US and Australia for many years, primarily for mainstream producers and publishers including Penguin Random House, Scholastic, Walker Books, Oxford University Press, Hachette, Simon & Schuster, Macmillan, Harper Collins, Transworld, Egmont Books and the BBC. He has written more than 40 books across a wide range of ages and genres and has illustrated well over a hundred, including books with Michael Rosen, Julia Donaldson, Antony Horowitz, Roger McGough and Alexander McCall Smith. His work has been translated into fifteen languages. Recently shortlisted for both the Prime Minister's Literary Awards and the NSW Premier's Literary Awards, Martin works across a wide range of ages, as well as writing crime fiction, screenplays, and producing animated children's content in his role as partner in UK-based media/IP company, Hungry Head Productions.

Recent work has included co-writing (and illustrating) titles in the globally successful *Middle School* series with James Patterson for Penguin Random House as well as a crime novel with the same writer; writing and illustrating *Winter of the White Bear*, an anti-slavery picture book derived from his PhD on the subject which was shortlisted for the 2020 Prime Minister's Literary Awards and the NSW Premier's Literary Awards 2021. *Winter of the White Bear* is currently in pre-production as an animated feature film with BAFTA-winning Blue Zoo Animation (UK) following funding from the British Film Institute. Other work includes *The Tell*, a YA thriller for Penguin Random House (2020); *Dragonville*, a four book graphic novel series for Hodder UK's Rising Stars scheme: two titles for Hachette's Reading Planet program, and *Bluenoses*, an animated primary age YouTube series Martin devised and directed, featuring the work of UK poet, Paul Cookson. Martin has also been working alongside Paul on four books including *Football 4 Every 1* (for Macmillan), and *Nail On The Head*, the final book in the Covid Diaries (illustrated with Korky Paul and Chris Riddell).

Recent screenwriting/producing projects have included the script for *Winter of the White Bear*; *Dotty*, a six-part TV drama series co-written by Martin with Brian Viner, picked up for development by Bill Kenwright Film UK in 2020. Martin's crime novel, *A Dark Place To Die*, is in development with Escapade Media/Mam Tor as a UK/Australian 6 x 1 hour drama (as *The Art of Killing*).

## **THEMES.**

*Scorpion Falls* is a 'Covid novel' in the sense it emerged following a performance tour of Australian schools immediately prior to the pandemic in 2020. One of the last performances took place over a few days in the Queensland mining town of Moranbah and it was that setting which inspired the story. I had been looking for a subject to follow my YA 'crime/coming of age' novel, *The Tell*, and had been kicking around the idea of writing something which appeared to be supernatural (although, as you'll see, in *Scorpion Falls*, that isn't exactly the case). I had written YA books previously – *Michigan Moorcroft* (Scholastic), *The Brain Finds A Leg* (Little Hare), *The Brain Full of Holes* (Little Hare) – which used seemingly supernatural/surreal events to frame a black comedy and wanted to return to that kind of writing after a number of projects in 2019 which didn't have room for that style. I also wanted the novel to 'mean something'. I didn't want it simply to be an exciting page-turner (although that is very much a vital component); I wanted it to have some underlying serious themes. The themes that emerged could be identified as:

### **Mortality/Covid**

### **Racism**

### **Alienation**

### **Identity**

#### **1. Mortality/Covid**

This was probably the first 'structural' theme of the novel. Following hard on the beginning of the Covid pandemic, it isn't difficult to see the motivation. As 2020 began to reveal itself as the beginning of a global catastrophe, and large numbers of people perished, it was an obvious subject to look at. Further motivation came from discussions with my daughter who is a neurologist and, at the time of beginning *Scorpion Falls*, was working on both oncology and Covid wards in Sydney. Her harrowing experiences (like those of all health workers) made me want to write a book around that subject again. I'd also, like many people had lost friends and family to cancer and I'd previously researched that subject as preparation for a crime book called *Remission*.

'Mortality' as a theme is something I've written about a number of times in various, usually comedic ways. I'd written three primary age books previously centred on a character called 'Mort' – the French word for 'death' – (*Mort*, *Mortified* and *Mortal Combat*); had written a YA novel in which the central protagonist dies in the opening paragraph (*Michigan Moorcroft*); a five book series (*Bad Dog*) where a dog is on what amounts to 'Death Row' at the city pound; and, of course, my work as a crime writer and screenwriter often (of necessity) involves mortality. For me, without being morbid, this is THE big subject of almost all writing. It could be said that it is our mortality which drives us to create *all* art: the desire to both explain and celebrate our human condition is one that

lies at the heart of all creativity (in my view: other opinions are available). But, of course, that theme has to be handled carefully, especially when writing to a specific age group and *Scorpion Falls* (I hope) walks that line with sensitivity. As Sian Cain expressed it in an article on YA fiction dealing with difficult subjects in The Guardian: *'reading about death does not make you want to die; likewise, reading about suicide does not condone suicide. We can't put an age on the ability to differentiate between fiction and reality or being better at dealing with emotions: that oversimplifies people. Our fears, triggers and troubles are all so entirely individual that to assume that the whole YA readership is unable to cope healthily with the concept of death is unsubstantiated.'*

### Potential questions (post reading):

1. *People often assert that 'there's nothing funny about death' or that it isn't a suitable subject for humour. Can you think of five movies or books which defy those opinions?*

*(cheat answers: Beetlejuice, Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey, Coco, Soul, It's A Wonderful Life, Catch 22 (Joseph Heller), The Loved One (Evelyn Waugh), Warm Bodies (Isaac Marion), Suicide Notes (Michael Thomas Ford) etc)*

2. *What is meant by the term the 'Danse Macabre'?*

3. *A eulogy is a tribute given about someone at their funeral and is often a serious celebration of their life. Some of the best eulogies however, opt for humour. A great example of this is John Cleese's eulogy\* for Graham Chapman (both members of the famous Monty Python comedy team): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TH3rIMI-pAg>*

*Write a eulogy for **your** best friend and see if you can make it both funny and touching.*

*\*contains three swear words*

## 2. Racism

The past six years saw what could easily be classified as a global pandemic of racism. We've seen the rise of nationalism and intolerance everywhere. In 2017 I completed my PhD which, to a large degree, was 'about' racism in the sense that it focused on the toxic legacy of slavery in my home town of Liverpool (UK) which had been a primary driver and beneficiary of an aggressive and long-lived thirst to profit from that trade. I'd written a novel (*The Last Slave Ship*) and a picture book (*Winter of the White Bear*) which articulated that theme. *Scorpion Falls*, in a smaller, less overt way, continues that aim of keeping the subject in the discussion. There are no revelatory insights into racism in the novel; the thematic use of it as a device is to (a) add a level of drama and conflict and (b) to ensure the subject isn't forgotten or normalised (as has been the case in recent years). Theo's friendship with Ari Patel, who is of Indian heritage, is the central driver of the underlying racism throughout the narrative. And the casual, unthinking racism of Theo's mother is there to provide a point of discussion about the 'sin of ignorance' when it comes to ignoring the past. It's worth pointing out that this subject was emphatically *not* inspired by anything I experienced in Moranbah.

### Potential questions (post reading):

1. As we see in the book, Theo's mum has some racist ideas. When she is arguing with Theo about Ari being 'a Paki' from Pakistan (although her heritage is actually Indian and the family is from Port Macquarie) she says, 'we're from Australia and people call us Aussies (and we don't mind that)'. What is the key problem with Theo's mum's argument?
2. What is the difference between patriotism and xenophobia? Why do you think some people often get them mixed up?

### Alienation

This is a second 'Covid-related' theme. Australia (and everywhere else) locked down and we were encouraged (or instructed) to 'isolate', to 'maintain social distance' and to wear masks in public and our levels of alienation grew exponentially. As schools closed and home learning/working became the new normal it seemed to me, as a writer, that this was a subject to work with. Writing a book 'about Covid' was not of any interest to me but I did think that examining the corrupting influence of forced alienation was worth looking at; particularly for young people at a particularly tricky developmental inflexion point. I made my protagonist, Theo, a loner but, crucially, gave him a strong friendship with Ari Patel. However, as the events in *Scorpion Falls* unfold, Theo is pushed further and further into isolation – even losing the foundation of his relationship with Ari – until he is utterly alone. The ending of the book apparently puts Theo 'alone' in the sense that he is fighting (literally) the battle of his life solo. However, the reality of his situation is anything but: a team of dedicated professionals, along with a supportive family, are doing everything possible to be with Theo in his darkest moments.

### Potential questions (post reading):

1. What are some of the negative effects alienation can have on society?
2. During the Covid pandemic what kind of things did you do to lower the effects of alienation? How successful were they?
3. Rutger Breman's recent book, *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, makes the case that the idea that human beings are self-interested is plain wrong. Breman argues that the reason humans became such a successful species is that we are very good at co-operating and thrive when working in harmonious groups. Research the true story of the six Tongan boys shipwrecked in 1965 (which Breman writes about in his book) and discuss.

### Identity

The question of identity is such a ubiquitous one it features as a theme in almost all narratives. The search for 'who we are' is crucial to most artistic endeavours. In *Scorpion Falls* however, this question takes a more central role. As Theo's reality begins to be stripped away, and the support beams around the identity of the town, its occupants and Theo himself begin to fall away, Theo is

confronted by the seemingly impossible fact that he doesn't exist.

### Potential questions (post reading):

1. *One of the biggest shocks in Scorpion Falls comes when Theo finds an exact copy of himself in a steel drawer at the Research Institute. Why do you think this would be such a shock?*

### INFLUENCES

All creative projects have multiple influences and *Scorpion Falls* is no exception. As *Scorpion Falls* began to take shape (more on that below), several key texts emerged which would have a significant influence on the ingredients of the book. Some of those, like CS Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, or *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, are what might be categorised as 'playful' influences in that they are simply referenced in the text rather than forming part of the underlying structure. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is an influencing text that deserves a longer discussion, but many of the things that have translated from *Alice* to *Scorpion Falls* (eg: another world underground, increasingly surreal events, a confused protagonist) are covered elsewhere, or are simply stylistic touches. Below are what I think are the three most significant ingredients that helped the novel.

#### Theseus and the Minotaur

The most obvious clue to this novel being influenced by this particular Greek myth can be seen in my protagonists name (Theo/Theseus) and in the name of Theo's girlfriend, Ari, a shortening of Ariadne, a character in the myth.

The myth is as follows:

Queen Pasiphae gives birth to the Minotaur, a half man – half bull, embarrassing her husband, King Minos who conceals the monster in an underground labyrinth on the island of Crete; a labyrinth too difficult for anyone to escape once inside. After his son, Androgeus is killed by a bull, and a plague descends on his kingdom, King Minos offers seven sacrifices each year to the Minotaur. One of those sacrifices, Theseus, the son of King Aegeus, decides instead to slay the Minotaur. He is helped in this task by Princess Ariadne who, in love with Theseus, gives him a thread which he can use to retrace his steps once he has killed the Minotaur. All seems to have worked but, after losing Ariadne at Naxos, Theseus is so upset he forgets his promise to his father to use white sails on his return to Greece (and thereby signal success). Instead he uses black sails (indicating Theseus' death). A distraught King Aegeus commits suicide by throwing himself into the sea.

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Possibly due to being a claustrophobic, I have been fascinated with Theseus and the Minotaur for a long time and have used it previously as a thematic 'skeleton' for two novels: *Underland* (Random House) and *Remission* (Caffeine Nights). The reason for coming back to using Theseus is probably because it works on several levels. There is the literal setting: an underground labyrinth containing a terrible creature, the Minotaur, half-man, half-bull which feeds on sacrificial offerings in the form of young men and women. Secondly, there is the protagonist quest: Theseus must enter the labyrinth unarmed and slay the beast. It doesn't take a great deal of imagination to see that this offers up a terrific metaphorical basis for a story: a hero must overcome overwhelming odds to save the day. In other novels I have used both the literal (underground) setting alongside the metaphorical meaning, and stories with 'simply' the metaphor of a maze. With *Scorpion Falls* being a mining town, the parallels with the Theseus myth are clear, as is the notion that people enter the labyrinth and disappear. In the case of the original myth there is no secret as to why they disappear: they are served up to placate the Minotaur. In *Scorpion Falls*, that has been changed to 'people are disappearing'. The labyrinth in *Scorpion Falls* is both literal (the mines and the laboratories of the Institute) and metaphorical (Theo's struggle to understand what's happening and his real-world battle with cancer).

### **Potential questions (post reading):**

1. *We have touched on some of the challenges faced by Theseus. What were some of the others?*
2. *The myth of Theseus is often said to be the perfect 'Hero's Journey'. What is meant by the phrase 'Hero's Journey'?*
3. *What is the difference between a myth and a legend?*
4. *I talked about Alice's Adventures in Wonderland being a (secondary) influence. Can you find some things in Scorpion Falls that reference Alice?*
5. *Claustrophobia is the fear of being confined. It comes from two Latin words: 'phobia' meaning 'fear' and 'clastro' meaning 'bolt' (as in the bolt on a door). What, loosely speaking, is the opposite fear called and what other word makes up that phobia?*

### **Romeo & Juliet**

This is a (mostly) straightforward influence on the text in that Theo and Ari's relationship echoes (in part) that of literature's most famous doomed couple. While the fate of Theo and Ari doesn't completely follow that of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, what is the same is their (apparent) devotion to each other in trying circumstances. Technically, where Romeo & Juliet was of particular influence was in the way Shakespeare switched back and forth between tragedy and comedy. As a writer I have used this often in my work: it helps make a difficult subject approachable and Shakespeare was one of the very first writers to use this device. Another technical writing takeaway from the play is how well developed Shakespeare's minor characters are. This is another

'good habit' to get into. Making supporting characters believable and rich makes the whole novel more complete.

## **Potential questions (post reading):**

1. *Like almost all writers, William Shakespeare was influenced in his own work by other writers. What two particular works are said to have influenced Romeo and Juliet?*
2. *In the book, Theo eventually thinks he has discovered Ari is a clone. Why do you think that would matter if she looks, sounds and behaves in exactly the same way as the real Ari? Theo and Ari joke about the meaning of life being '42' and that's one of the things that makes Theo emotional at the end of the book. What novel (and film/TV series) does this come from?*
3. *There is one major difference in the relationship between Theo and Ari and that of Romeo and Juliet in that, in Scorpion Falls, Theo and Ari survive. Would the story have been better if (as in Shakespeare's play) both characters died?*
4. *Romeo and Juliet is a tragedy that has comedy elements (as does Scorpion Falls). What is the difference between tragedy and comedy?*

## **The Pied Piper of Hamelin**

This legend, of a rat catcher who rids a town called Hamelin in Germany of a plague of rats, is one that gave me nightmares as a small child. In the story, the Pied Piper does as he is asked (gets rid of the rats by playing a 'magic' tune which they follow as he dances them out of Hamelin) but is then cheated out of his money by the townspeople. In revenge, the Pied Piper 'pipes' the children of Hamelin out of the town and into a cave where no-one ever heard of them again.

There are multiple theories about the origin of this folk tale. One background theory that interested me in particular when working on *Scorpion Falls*, was that the origin story reflected some kind of natural disaster (such as disease, flood or famine) occurring at that time, and that the piper represented the Grim Reaper. Like I say, the stuff of nightmares. And, perhaps, of Covid.

## **Potential questions (post reading):**

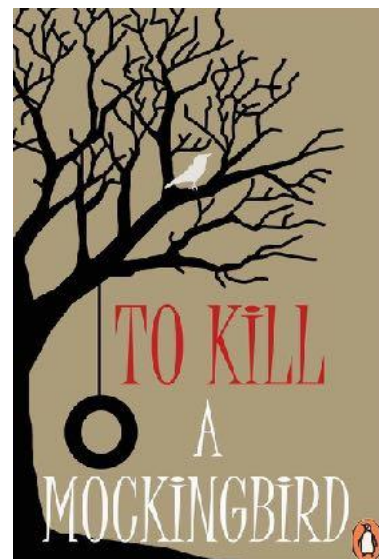
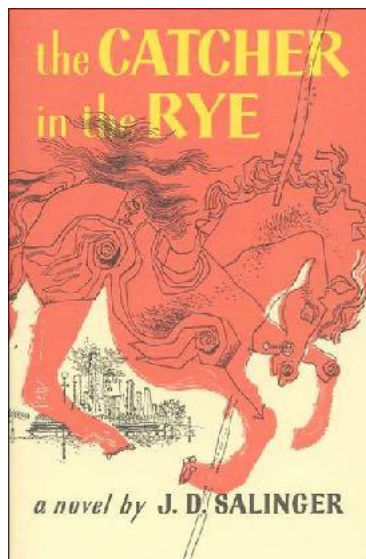
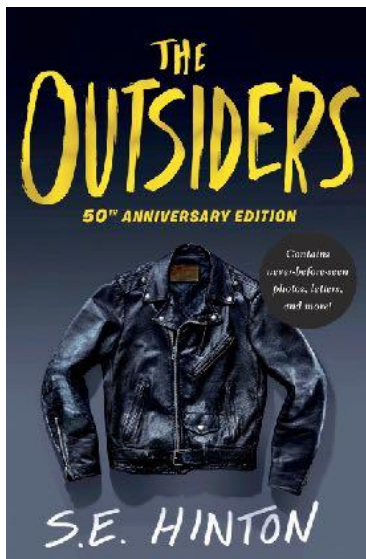
1. *To what does the 'Pied' part of the Pied Piper refer?*
2. *What is a folk tale?*
3. *Why do you think folk tales were so important to people?*
4. *Can you think of any modern day stories/urban myths that might be classed as a folk tale?*



## RESEARCH/PREPARATION

### COMING OF AGE NOVELS

I deliberately set out to make *Scorpion Falls* feel like some of the timeless 'coming of age' novels I read as a teenager, partly because I enjoyed writing this way in *The Tell*, and partly because they were important to me as a teenager. The three I particularly focused on – S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee – are all fantastic books which have stood the test of time, sold millions and still feel in many ways like they are contemporary. They are also all told in the first person, which is a technique I often use.



### Potential questions:

1. What is meant by the phrase 'a coming of age novel'?
2. Write a review of your favourite coming of age novel. Tell us why it is important to you.

### GOTHIC HORROR

*Scorpion Falls* probably sits somewhere in the Gothic Horror genre.

I've made a film discussing Gothic Horror as a genre and you can access that here:

<https://vimeo.com/720979214>

### MOOD BOARD/MOOD FILM

**Note: the information below is also contained in the 'Gothic Horror' talk detailed above.**

The last element that I think could be of interest to the students concerns the 'how' of I put the

book together. Students often ask me 'how do you think of your ideas?' In the case of *Scorpion Falls*, the ideas emerged from a somewhat unusual source. As mentioned previously, the notion of setting a novel in a remote mining town had come out of a school visit to Moranbah in Queensland. I had the title early and the notion that each chapter (and the ending) should contain a 'sting in the tale/tail'.

However, I was struggling to come up with exactly what I should be writing *about* and how the book should feel. I'm not someone who suffers writer's block (professional writers shouldn't really have that condition) but I was 'stuttering' a little at the beginning until my partner, Annie, suggested a different approach might work.

I'd been doing a lot of recent work involving film and animation and cutting together a number of videos for various projects. Annie suggested I made a short 'mood film' which would suggest what kind of book/film *Scorpion Falls* would look, sound a feel like. I'd put together lots of static mood boards before as part of different projects but hadn't done it with film. At this point there was no text of any kind and no plot. I simply mixed video clips, audio and graphics in a two minute film which felt and looked like it might have already been made. Some of the clips I found suggested characters I might use, some suggested a creepy atmosphere, while others indicated locations and props I could use.

By the end of it I felt much more confident about starting the writing process. The 'mood film' gave me the notions that it should be a love story of sorts, should be a little scary and that it have a first person protagonist. I'd highly recommend this visual process (it needn't be a film; it could just as easily be a static mood board) for any student who is struggling with a creative piece of writing. After writing the book I made a trailer which used many of the original clips I'd found. You can access the trailer here:

<https://vimeo.com/709939279>