



Classroom Guide for
THE MONSTER IN THE MUDBALL
Written by **S. P. Gates**

Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grades 4–5

Interest Level: Grades 2–6

Guided Reading Level: M

*Reading level based on the Dale Chall Readability Formula

Themes

Mystery, Adventure, Monsters, Saving the World, Friendship, Family, Overcoming Obstacles, Self-Esteem/Identity, Animals, Chinese/Asian American Interest, Multiracial Interest

Synopsis

A monster is on the prowl in England and it's Jin's fault. Jin's neighbor, Madalitso, has been keeping the creature in safekeeping for decades but when Madalitso gets hurt, Jin and his baby brother, Smiler, discover the creature's mudball. The monster hatches from an egg made of mud when Smiler drools on it, bringing it back to life. Jin tracks the monster, but he can't figure out how to get her back into the artifact from which she hatched. Then Jin meets Chief Inspector of Ancient Artifacts A. J. Zauyamakanda—Mizz Z, for short—who has arrived from Malawi to inspect the artifact. She and Jin team up to find the strange beast, Zilombo.

Joining them is Frankie, Jin's older sister, who has lost their baby brother, Smiler, while spray-painting graffiti. Mizz Z describes how Zilombo gains new, deadly powers each time she hatches. Zilombo has a sizeable appetite for fish . . . and babies. As the monster's powers continue to grow, Jin, Frankie, and Mizz Z work together to keep Smiler off Zilombo's menu. Mizz Z battled this creature when she was a little girl and learned that

Zilombo will go back into her mudball in a drought or when her fingernails are cut.

Although Mizz Z tries to sing Zilombo to sleep and cut off her nails, Zilombo has become too strong and stuns Mizz Z. Zilombo is enraged that she lost Smiler and is determined to get him back. With quick thinking, Jin and his grandfather put on a Chinese dragon costume to confuse and intimidate Zilombo, but Zilombo still kidnaps Smiler. A near-fatal accident with a metro train and an explosion from a spray can force Zilombo back into her mudball to heal and plot her next emergence. Smiler is safe, Jin has gained confidence, and Mizz Z promises to return.

BACKGROUND

On dyspraxia: A chronic neurological disorder, also called clumsy child syndrome, dyspraxia begins in childhood and affects coordination as a result of mis-transmitted messages between the brain and body. There is no cure, but occupational, physical, and/or speech therapy can provide coping strategies. People with dyspraxia may also struggle with balance and memory tasks, such as following multi-step instructions. Dyspraxia does not affect intelligence. ADHD commonly coexists with clumsy child syndrome. S. P. Gates drew inspiration for her story from her son who is dyspraxic. He has successfully conquered the driving test to earn a driver's license and made the model and several of the pictures of Zilombo on her [guest post at Lee & Low](#).¹ For additional information, check out "[What Is Dyspraxia? One Parent's Experience](#)" available on the Lee & Low blog.²

On Chinese dragons: The dragon in Han Chinese culture is a symbol of luck and is part of almost all special festivals to scare away evil spirits. There are several types of dragons tasked with protecting different parts of Earth and heaven. The dragon was often used as an imperial symbol.³ Dancing dragons can vary in size and length; the longer the dragon, the more luck it will bring. Performers operating a dragon costume hold poles to raise and lower the dragon, which is constructed out of fabric. The dragon appears to spring to life as the artists underneath glide, shift, and shake the body. The performers coordinate the dragon's movements, keeping time and rhythm with a drum.⁴

On museums and countries acquiring artifacts: There is a long, complex, and controversial history of colonial powers acquiring cultural heritage items via payment, theft, smuggling, or donation. Countries and museums have struggled with how to acquire and share ancient artifacts without exploitation or destruction of sensitive sites. Recently, the Association of Art Museum Directors has set forth more stringent guidelines on how to accept relics in North America. For more information, check out the [Association of Art Museum Director's standards](#)⁵ and [Stanford University's report on stealing history by The McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research](#).⁶

On water monsters and other creatures in African folklore: There is no such creature called Zilombo in Malawi folklore. However, there is tradition in telling stories about water-dwelling and "swallowing" monsters that occur again and again in Africa in different forms. The swamp-based monster, Kongamato, appears in folktales from nearby Zambia,

¹ <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2013/09/12/what-does-a-monster-look-like/>

² <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2013/11/25/what-is-dyspraxia-one-parents-experience/>

³ <http://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/article-chinese-dragons.htm>

⁴ http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/Chinese_Customs/dragon_dance.htm

⁵ <https://aamd.org/>

⁶ <http://www.stanford.edu/group/chr/stealinghistory.pdf>

Angola, and Congo. Similar to a pterosaur, its features include wings without feathers, a powerful screech, a beak, and sharp teeth.⁷ Another legendary creature in the Congo River basin is the Emela-Ntouka, “killer of elephants.” It has the body and skin of a rhinoceros and lives in shallow waters. This lake monster goes by the names of Chipekwe, Irizima, and others.⁸

Zilombo is most closely based on a tale the author, S. P. Gates, heard in Malawi about a monster called Fisherwitch, who in times of drought hibernated like a frog in the mud and would come out after the rains to spear fish and children with her long spear-like nails. S. P. Gates heard this local story near Lake Malaw, where parents used it to keep their children away from the lake edge. To learn more about how the author came up with Zilombo, check out her [blog post at Lee & Low](#).⁹

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background knowledge and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

1. Take a look at the front and back covers. Ask students to make a prediction. Do you think this book will be fiction or nonfiction? What makes you think so? What clues do the author and illustrator give you to help you know whether this book will be fiction or nonfiction?
2. What do you know about stories that are fantasy? What kinds of things happen in a fantasy? What are some things that will not happen in a fantasy? Why do you think authors write fantasies? How are their reasons different from those of authors who write nonfiction? What are some of the characteristics of a fantasy?
3. What does it mean to be biracial or multiracial? What types of challenges do people who are biracial or multiracial face? What are some of the benefits?
4. What do you know about England? What do you know about Malawi, Africa?
5. What do you know about animals that hatch? How does an animal hatch out of a shell?
6. Why do you think I chose this book for us to read?

Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1, and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

Read and talk about the title of the book. Ask students what they think the title means. Then ask them what they think this book will most likely be about and who the book might be about. What places might be talked about in the text? What do you think might happen? What information do you think you're going to learn? What makes you think that?

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: front and back covers, title page, half-title page, chapter headings, and epilogue.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kongamoto>

⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emela-ntouka>

⁹ <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2013/09/12/what-does-a-monster-look-like/>

Have students read to find out:

- what problems the main character, Jin, has.
- what the title, *The Monster In the Mudball*, refers to.
- how Jin overcomes his obstacles.
- how Jin changes from the beginning of the book to the end.

VOCABULARY

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

The story contains several content-specific and academic words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below. Encourage a variety of strategies to support students' vocabulary acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

CONTENT SPECIFIC

Chewa dyspraxia Achilles heel

ACADEMIC

inspector	glistening	desperately	bellowed	rummaged	underestimate
propelled	astonished	bewildering	inconsolably	frantically	descent
posh	exasperation	derelict	sardonic	distress	serene
demolish	ambushed	majestic	bungalow	talons	graffiti
flustered	ancient	nuisance	clenching	artifact	condescending
towpath	defiance	ferocious	scornful	frail	territorial
coaxed	precautions	murmured	lullaby	predator	

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages in the book to support their responses. **To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite evidence with their answers.**

Literal Comprehension

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1 and 3)

1. What caused the mudball to hatch?
2. What disability does Jin have? What is hard for him to do?
3. What does Jin feel when he observes the mudball hatching and moving?
4. What does the mudball do to the seagull?
5. Why does the mudball go toward the Oozeburn? Why does Zilombo need water?
6. What are Zilombo's two weaknesses?
7. How does Frankie lose Smiler?
8. Why does Mizz Z have an eye patch? What did Zilombo do to Mizz Z and her family?
9. What is Mizz Z's job? Why is she in England? What motivated Mizz Z to become an inspector?
10. What is Grandpa Tang's plan to defeat Zilombo? Does it work? Why or why not? Why does he think this plan will work?
11. What type of food are Mizz Z, Jin, and Frankie most concerned that Zilombo will go after? Why?

12. What causes Zilombo to attack the metro train?
13. When Mizz Z was a little girl living with her parents, what technique did Mizz Z learn to defeat Zilombo after an attack?
14. Why does singing a lullaby or cutting Zilombo's nails fail to stop Zilombo?
15. What new powers is Zilombo gaining?
16. What does Zilombo wear around her ankle? Where did she get that?
17. How did Zilombo end up in England from Malawi, Africa?
18. What does Mizz Z mean when she says "Zilombo's nails are her Achilles heel?" (P. 133)
19. Why does Zilombo never stray far from her den?
20. Why does Mizz Z say to "never underestimate Zilombo?"
21. What finally causes Zilombo to go back into her mudball?

Extension/Higher Level Thinking

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 2 and 3 and Craft & Structure, Strand 6)

1. Why does Jin want to get the mudball back? Why does he choose to follow it?
2. Why didn't Jin have confidence in himself in the beginning of the book? Why does he have confidence at the end of the book? What caused him to change?
3. What does Jin learn about himself? How did this experience shape him as a person? Was it a positive or negative experience? What makes you think that?
4. Why do you think everybody calls Jin's baby brother "Smiler?"
5. What did the author do to make the first chapter in the text exciting? What words did she use and what details did she choose to include to help create this mood of excitement?
6. How do you think Jin felt about having "clumsy child syndrome?" How do you know?
7. Why does Frankie draw graffiti on buildings? What is she trying to prove to people?
8. What features in this book demonstrate that it is a fantasy?
9. What character trait would you use to describe Mizz Z? Why?
10. What character trait would you use to describe Jin? Why?
11. What character trait would you use to describe Frankie? Why?
12. Does the author want you to aspire to be like Jin or to not be like him? How do you know?
13. Why does Mizz Z not want to kill Zilombo? Do you agree or disagree that Zilombo is the way she is because of her nature and that she can't help it?
14. Why does Mizz Z keep correcting Jin on how he speaks, such as saying "anyhoo" for "anyhow?"
15. What characteristics does Zilombo share with humans? Why do you think the author compares Zilombo to humans?
16. Why do you think Mizz Z said "Tionana" (I will return)?
17. Why do you think the author ended the story with Zilombo laughing? What might Zilombo be laughing about?
18. What perspective did the author use to tell the story? First person? Second person? Third person? What tone did the author, S. P. Gates, use in her writing, formal or informal? How did these choices affect how you read the story?
19. How might the story be different if Jin's sister narrated it? Mizz Z? His grandparents? What makes you think so?
20. The author is very good at creating vivid images with her words. What are some of the strongest images she created in this story? What are some adjectives and verbs she used to create these specific images?

21. Why do you think the author chose to have Jin defeat Zilombo rather than have an adult, like Mizz Z, Grandpa Tang, or the police, do it? What might the author be trying to show child readers?
22. Mizz Z is blind in one eye and Jin has dyspraxia. Mizz Z and Jin both have a disability. What does the author, S. P. Gates, want to teach children about overcoming adversity or obstacles? What might the author want to teach children about disabilities and people who have them?
23. In this story, we learned about folklore from Malawi, Africa, and China. Why do you think so many cultures all over the world have folktale traditions? What makes these stories powerful? Why do people continue to share these stories?

Literature Circles

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to the ones in the Discussion Questions section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines or sentences in the story that explain new vocabulary words.
- The **Illustrator** might create a diagram of Zilombo and label her different features and powers. The illustrator should explain where he/she found those details in the text.
- The **Connector** might find other books written about characters with disabilities or other books written about fiction monsters.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might look for information about dyspraxia or folklore monsters from Africa.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: *GETTING STARTED WITH LITERATURE CIRCLES* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), *LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and *LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)
(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3, Craft & Structure, Strands 4–6, and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9)

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and make personal connections to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's response journals, essays, or oral discussion. You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

1. Describe Jin. What were his defining characteristics? How did he demonstrate these characteristics in this story? How did he change from the beginning to the end of the story?
2. Would you hire Frankie or Jin to be your babysitter? What characteristics make a good babysitter? What should Frankie or Jin have done differently? What advice would you give them if your parents hired Frankie or Jin to watch over you for the evening?

3. Think about how the book ends. Why do you think the author chose to tell us that Mizz Z would return? Why do you think the author chose to tell us about Zilombo in the mudball? What do you predict will happen next? Write a chapter about what might happen next after the end of the story.
4. Would you recommend this book to a friend? Why or why not? Describe what makes this an interesting book or what you would do to improve it.
5. Jin not only had to save his brother from a monster but he had to do it with a disability. Why do you think the author chose to write this story with a main character who has a disability? What do you think the author wants you to understand about overcoming obstacles and facing adversity?
6. How would you define the word "hero?" Who is your hero and why? Do heroes have to be famous or have superpowers? Could Mizz Z become your hero (heroine)? Why or why not?

ELL Teaching Activities

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English Language Learners.

1. Assign ELL students to partner-read the story with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading between pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader.
2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about what they admire about a character or central figure in the story.
5. The story contains several content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose English Language Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Student who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use any of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

Social Studies

1. Every culture in the world has stories. In this book, both Grandpa Tang and Mizz Z share folklore from their cultures. Have students research the folktale traditions of China, Malawi, or their own family. What makes these stories unique? What

characters keep coming up? What lessons do these cultures' folktales teach children? Why might adults continue sharing these stories with new generations?

2. Mizz Z described how ancient artifacts from one country could end up in another country. Have students research a popular history museum in a nearby city or state and learn how it acquired its artifacts. Were they given or donated to the museum? Did the museum buy them? Were they stolen? Encourage students to research some popular museums and what countries are doing to get artifacts returned to their original homes. Students could also choose to study one particular artifact, like a mummy or statue, to find out where it came from and how it got to a particular museum.

Art

1. The book has multiple passages describing the physical characteristics of the beast, Zilombo. This creature is made up of a lot of different animals. Refer back to the text and then have students sketch what the monster looks like. Afterwards, invite students to check out S. P. Gates' guest post at Lee & Low where her son and the book's cover illustrators created the model and drew [pictures of Zilombo](#).¹⁰ Encourage students to compare and contrast their work and what details from the text they used to draw their version.
2. Grandpa and Grandma Tang create Chinese dragons for festivals and holidays. Ask students to research the history of the Chinese dragon and its form. How old is this symbol? What are Chinese dragons used for? What do they symbolize in ancient Chinese culture?
3. The author, S. P. Gates, sets the story in England. Have students study images of England and discuss why England might make a fitting place for the setting. Students can see images of the book's setting on our [Open Book blog](#).¹¹
4. Have students design a Chinese dragon using paper and watercolors. Instruct students to draw the dragon so it has the features of several creatures. Chinese dragons often have the scales of a fish, the beard of a goat, the claws of an eagle, and the body of a snake. For an excellent and more detailed lesson on drawing a Chinese dragon, check out the [Art Institute of Chicago](#)!¹²

Writing

(Writing Standards, Production and Distribution of Writing, Strand 5)

The author, S. P. Gates, uses a lot of colorful language, especially verbs, to make the writing exciting and face-paced. Ask students to go through the book and make separate columns with "talking/speaking," "running and walking," and "surprise" in the headings. Then have students study the text for synonyms of each and list them in the columns. Encourage students to use these synonyms in their own writing or in a writing prompt and discuss how synonyms improve writing.

Science

1. Many animals develop in and hatch out of eggs. Ask students to research what types of animals develop in eggs and the life cycle of animals in eggs. How is a shell advantageous to small animals? Why do some animals develop in eggs, but others, like humans, do not?

¹⁰ <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2013/09/12/what-does-a-monster-look-like/>

¹¹ <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2013/11/01/where-does-zilombo-live-a-photo-tour-of-the-english-countryside/>

¹² <http://www.artic.edu/aic/resources/resource/930>

2. Assist students in studying African bullfrogs. Like Zilombo, African bullfrogs create waterproof cocoons to hide in times of drought, emerging only during the rainy season. Ask students to compare and contrast Zilombo and African bullfrogs. What characteristics do they share? What sets them apart? How might African bullfrogs have inspired S. P. Gates and even some African folktales?
3. Baby Smiler is attracted to the slime mold in the drainpipe. Have students research slime mold. What causes it? In what environments can slime mold be found? Is slime mold harmful or beneficial to humans?

Home-School Connection

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strand 2 and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strand 7)

1. Support students in interviewing their parents or grandparents about their culture's folklore they heard growing up. What scary monsters did they read or hear about? What did the folktale monsters look like and act like? What lesson did the story teach? Describe a folktale here.
2. Invite students to interview a peer or adult about who his/her hero is and why.
3. Baby Smiler seems to put anything nasty and dirty in his mouth, like worms, slugs, and slime mold. Encourage students to make their own (nontoxic) slime! There are many recipes available online. The recipe listed below is from chemistry.about.com.¹³

Follow the directions below:

Materials needed: water, white glue, borax, food coloring

*Warning: This is NOT an edible slime recipe.

Step 1: Mix 1 teaspoon of borax in 1 cup of water. Stir until the borax is dissolved.

Step 2: **In a separate container**, mix ½ cup (4 oz.) of white glue with ½ cup of water. Add food coloring (your choice!), if desired.

Step 3: After you have dissolved the borax and diluted the glue, you are ready to combine the two solutions. Stir one slime solution into the other. Your slime will begin to solidify.

Step 4: The slime will become hard to stir after you mix the borax and glue solutions. Try to mix it up as much as you can, then remove it from the bowl and finish mixing it by hand. It's okay if there is some colored water remaining in the bowl.

Step 5: The slime will start out highly flexible. You can stretch it and watch it flow. As you work it more, the slime will become stiffer and more like putty. Then you can shape it and mold it, though it will lose its shape over time. Don't eat your slime and don't leave it on surfaces that could be stained by food coloring!

Step 6: Store your slime in a sealed Ziploc bag in the refrigerator.

For more information on [slime recipes](http://chemistry.about.com), check them out on About.com's Education: Chemistry section!¹⁴

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S. P. Gates, a native of England, is the author of more than one hundred books for young people. She has been commended for the UK's Carnegie Medal and shortlisted for the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize. She has also twice won the Sheffield Children's Book Award, for which children choose the best books published each year. A former teacher

¹³ http://chemistry.about.com/od/slimerecipes/Slime_Recipes.htm

¹⁴ http://chemistry.about.com/od/slimerecipes/Slime_Recipes.htm

who has taught in England and Malawi, Africa, Gates now lives in the north of England with her husband.

Book Information

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Guided Reading Level: M

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RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about *The Monster In the Mudball* at: <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2831>

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