TEACHING NOTES

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Hal Junior: The Secret Signal
Simon Haynes

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Synopsis

Hal Junior is a ten-year-old boy living aboard Space Station Oberon, a scientific research outpost. Today is special, because Hal's class is off to watch the arrival of a supply ship. As if that wasn't exciting enough, the crew has invited them on board for a tour!

During the tour Hal sees his mum, the Station's chief scientist, but she pretends not to recognise him. Instead, she passes him a message warning him to leave the ship and raise the alarm about a sinister plot. Unfortunately she doesn't have time to explain.

Hal escapes the ship but the Space Station is in lockdown and the Station Commander surrenders without a fight. Hal isn't finished yet - with the help of an unexpected ally, he dons a space suit and sneaks back aboard the ship to free the captives.

Unfortunately that's not the end of it: someone aboard the Space Station was in on the plot, and they escape with the station's precious research!

The ship is leaving with the research, and there's no way to stop it. At least, not until Hal Junior comes up with a crazy plan!

Writing Style

The Secret Signal is written from Hal Junior's point of view, using a humorous, easy-to-read style. It's also packed with witty illustrations, sight gags and diagrams.
Simon Haynes has been writing science fiction comedy for over a decade, and his speciality is unvarnished prose and snappy dialogue. According to Simon, lengthy descriptions are something you resort to when you've run out of ideas ...
Hal Junior was written in Australia, and uses British spelling.

Author's Comments

I grew up in rural Spain in the 70's, and my childhood was free and wild. At age ten I enjoyed all the things kids aren't allowed any more: air rifles, camping trips with my mates, heading off to climb the local mountains, and wonderful days spent scavanging for goodies at the local tip.
My goal with Hal Junior was to write a realistic story about a boy living in the distant future, but I wanted him to taste the freedom and adventures I enjoyed.

Themes

* Scarcity of resources - Living aboard a space station means growing, creating or importing everything. A cup of water or a sheet of paper is far more valuable than it would be on a planet, and the inhabitants of Space Station Oberon have to recycle everything. Even their food!

* Owning Up and accepting blame - Hal Junior initially conceals an action which has life-threatening consequences. When the time comes, he realises he must own up and seek forgiveness.

* Mateship - Sticking up for your friends.

* Science and technology - The Secret Signal sneakily introduces scientific concepts like gravity, chemistry, the vacuum of space, airlocks, space travel and more, and deliberately asks open-ended questions. The idea is to get readers to think for themselves, not just enjoy a funny story.

Before your class reads the book

Hal Junior is set in the distant future. You could discuss what a future classroom might be like. Some ideas include robot teachers, using teleporters to get to school (what would that do for health and fitness?), and a classroom with no paper or pens.

You could also discuss what life might be like aboard a huge space station, using ideas from the book. E.g. picture an environment where opening the wrong door could let all the air out.

Look at the cover. Do you think Hal Junior is scared, surprised or laughing?

How could you possibly build a space cannon? What would it use for ammunition?

Ideas for the classroom

Design a spaceship! Ask your students to draw a plan of a space ship, then see how many forgot the kitchen, or the bathroom, or the fuel tanks! Hint: start with a large camper van and extrapolate!

Write a short essay on living in space. What do you think your day might be like? How do you keep clean when there's no water? What do you eat? What do you do for fun?

Draw a movie poster for the book. Who or what would you include? How would you promote the film to other kids?

Build the Phantom X1! Plans for this tricky paper plane are included at the end of the book.

Questions raised by the book

Do you think Hal went a bit far to get his homework back?
What do you think of Hal's robot teacher. Is he a bit too sarcastic, or does Hal deserve it?
Do you think it's fair the way Hal treats his friend 'Stinky'? E.g. using him for homework help, roping him in to mad schemes. Do you remember how Stinky got his own back?
Which part of the book did you enjoy the most? Can you explain why?
Can you list some of the dangers you might face when living in space?

For Advanced Readers

Unfortunately there's a real lack of science fiction for juniors. However, if you have one or two advanced readers in your class, and they're not averse to a little swearing and a few double-entendres, then they might enjoy Simon Haynes's adult 'Hal Spacejock' series. (Suggested reading age 14+)

Feedback

If you have any comments or suggestions, please email the author: spacejock at gmail . com