INTRODUCTION

Life is hard for Mikey. He’s frightened of open spaces and would much rather curl up in his room and avoid the world outside. So going to a noisy, public place is a big deal—but with his sister Meggie by his side, it should be safe. And Mikey is determined to overcome his fear.

But things go badly wrong when he encounters a gang and witnesses something terrible. To make matters worse, they know where he lives, and now they want to see him . . . This time, there’s no hiding place for Mikey . . .

WHAT READERS ARE SAYING

"Game Changer was an incredibly interesting book. I didn’t quite know what to expect when I first started reading it and it still surprised me. This is a very tense thriller with an incredibly unusual hero and a great brother-sister relationship and I’m really glad that I read it."

". . . a very interesting and thrilling read."

"I just wanted to carry on reading it. I felt like I was hiding in the wardrobe with Mikey: listening to every breath and heartbeat . . . This is the magical thing about reading books like Game Changer. It really takes you on a journey—away from your own troubles and worries."

". . . a fast-paced and energetic read full of suspense that makes you want to keep on reading."
**TALKING ABOUT THE BOOK**

- How did you feel when reading this book? And when you’d finished it?
- Which parts of the story do you remember most?
- Was there anything that took you by surprise?
- Were there any parts you didn’t make sense of?
- What was the thing you most liked finding out from the book?
- What kind of a book did you think it was going to be?
- Does the story work for you? What does the book say to you?
- Has reading the book changed or affected you? At the end of the story did you feel as if you’d shared a real experience?
- Did you stop and start, or did you want to read it all through in one go?
- Are there parts you want to read over again?
- What would you say about this book if you were telling someone what you’ve just read? Would you recommend the book to your friends?

**TALKING ABOUT THE BOOK**

1. **Our fears and phobias**

   *If you don’t have the fear you can’t understand the fear.* (p6)

Mikey has agoraphobia—an extreme fear of open spaces. To make this worse, he also can’t stand light and brightness. How does this affect him? And how does it affect his family? What strategies do he and his family use to try to manage his fear? E.g. using routes and places where he feels more sheltered; preparing for and talking through potentially challenging experiences.

   ... it just wasn’t as bad yesterday. (p173)

- What feelings eventually prove to be stronger than Mikey’s phobia of light and spaces and help him to win through in this story?

Think about the difference between fears and phobias:

Fears are a sense of anxiety that is felt and experienced towards a feared object or situation, whilst phobias are extreme fears and extreme anxieties of a given situation or object. For some people their phobia is fear of snakes or spiders, others have a fear of being in enclosed spaces.

Here’s how Mikey describes being outside, travelling in a car:

   I glare round at them, then at the overwhelming space, the bright empty thing that’s not empty at all but hugly, horribly full; and yet this car seems somehow worse, small though it is, closed in though it is. Maybe it’s my emptines that’s filling it. (p17)

- Do you have a phobia, or a particular fear? Can you describe how it feels? How do you deal with it?
**ACTIVITY:** People may have a phobia about anything—here are the names of just a few phobias. Rearrange them so each has its correct description:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHOBIA</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agoraphobia</td>
<td>Fear of spiders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ornithophobia</td>
<td>Fear of being enclosed in small spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claustrophobia</td>
<td>Fear of dentists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arachnophobia</td>
<td>Fear of sleep</td>
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<tr>
<td>Somniphobia</td>
<td>Fear of open spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoophobia</td>
<td>Fear of numbers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dentophobia</td>
<td>Fear of birds</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arthmophobia</td>
<td>Fear of animals</td>
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- Imagine you have agoraphobia and describe what a trip into town might feel like. How might you get there—walking? Bus?
- Which places might you go to? E.g. shopping mall, small shops, coffee bar, along the street, the bus stop.
- What strategies might you use to try to manage your fear?

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**2. The power of story**

*So books are safe, and when I read, I feel safe too. Till I close the book (p7)*

Mikey finds comfort in reading his favourite books over and over. They include *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville, and novels by Charles Dickens, including *Oliver Twist*.

- Why does Mikey like these particular stories?
- What are your favourite books? Do you have ‘safe’ or ‘comfort’ books that you like to read again and again? Or are there films which you love to go back to and watch lots of times?
- Why do you think we enjoy thrillers or horror stories?
3. In Mikey’s shoes

They could leave me alone and everything would be fine, but no. The email stares at me from the screen. We gotta talk. Then a phone number, a mobile. (p1)

Mikey finds comfort in reading his favourite books over and over. They include Treasure Island by Robert Louis Stevenson, Moby Dick by Herman Melville, and novels by Charles Dickens, including Oliver Twist.

◆ What did you think was happening at the start of the book—who could be hounding Mikey, and why? How soon was it before you realized that he had deeper fears to deal with as well as his anxiety about what had happened the day before?

◆ What would you do if you saw something terrible being done? And if you then started getting threatening texts and emails?

◆ What do you think are the reasons why Mikey felt he couldn’t tell anyone about this?
### 4. People—and their strengths

Have a look at these excerpts about some of the characters in the story: Mikey, Meggie, their parents, people in the gang, and Nip, and Nell.

- Some excerpts are about more than one character—can you say who is being described in each one?
- All of these characters show strength in some way, and are mostly positive eg. through trust and friendship. What do you think is each character’s strength?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTER(S)</th>
<th>THEIR STRENGTH(S)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’m not called Mole for nothing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>How can he see me as a friend and not a basket case? Fills me with guilt when he looks at me like this, and now he makes it worse.</td>
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<td>. . . she always seems older than me, even though she’s two years younger, and I guess the boys in my year feel it too; and she is good-looking.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I don’t know how she does this. She always seems to sense when I’m in trouble, and where to find me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>His long, dirty hair flicks round his face as he talks. At least the girl looks like she washes occasionally. But her eyes are as hard as his and her lip piercings make her look even fiercer.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I think of the courage she’s got and I haven’t. I hate letting her down. I know I’ve got to do better for her, got to be braver, not just about going out of doors, but about everything.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normally they turn a blind eye to it. They make out it’s not happening and only get involved when I stay in there too long and have to be coaxed out.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Her voice sounds strange, as though she’s coarsened not just her original accent but the words too. Even when I’ve heard her screaming at a teacher or another pupil, she’s never used words like ‘ain’t’.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘And you’re hating this too, because you know it’s wrong. You’re acting hard because the others don’t believe in you and you want to prove yourself, but for what?’</td>
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<tr>
<td>. . . you’re strong, you’re very strong, and you may find, you know, that these smaller fears are losing their grip on you even now.</td>
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</table>
5. Fun? Or scary?

. . . I walk on anyway, past the hot dogs and toffee apples and candyfloss stands, the ferris wheel and bumper cars and bouncy castles, and the Twister and the Mirror Maze, and on to the great Terror Ride, the last and greatest piece of craziness here: the place where Meggie left me and I was supposed to wait.

If only I had done.

I stare up at it for a moment, the great rollercoaster, gaudy with lights, and at the small moving dot rising and plunging at its far end—but I want no more of this. It was the sight of that racing box of screams that drove me away last time, and it might as well do so again. (p112)

Here’s a description of the fun fair, a place at the heart of Mikey’s story—but for Mikey there is no fun in the noise and the madness of the rides and all the people. This scene emphasizes his fears and dread, through the contrast with the enjoyment going on all around him.

♦ Do you enjoy fun fairs? What do you like or not like about them?
♦ Choose a scene or an activity where people could be feeling enjoyment or fear, eg. riding a horse, climbing a mountain, travelling in a plane. Write two descriptions—one happy and one fearful.

6. Game changing

What does ‘game changer’ mean?

I saw what I saw, and then I lingered, unable to break away, and in that time they saw my face; well, one particular person did. And that was the game changer. (p116)

As well as this episode, there are more game changing elements in this story—what do you think they might be? Have a look, for example, at some of the relationships and character development.
GAME CHANGER: A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

A **psychological thriller** is an adventure-type story which gets your attention and builds up the suspense by focusing on the emotions of the characters more than on physical action.

*I think of how those bastards have found their way into my life, how they’ve taken it over* (p120)

**In a good psychological thriller you will find all these elements:**

◆ The story is told with the emotional stress on the main character, the protagonist.
◆ You feel as if you are in their head, experiencing everything through their eyes, thoughts, and feelings.
◆ You learn about the emotional history of the main character.
◆ You get to know the strategies used to try to overcome their weakness.
◆ The opponent/s in the story put pressure on the main character and try to exploit this weakness—playing a ‘cat and mouse’ game.
◆ The author creates and builds up tension and pace through the story.
◆ The protagonist looks for weaknesses with his opponent/s, which he can then play on and use to his advantage.
◆ The story builds to a climax—and the main character fights and faces up to his weakness.

**Would you agree that this is a good description of *Game Changer*?**

◆ Can you find examples from the book of each of these elements? E.g. the emotional histories, the weaknesses exploited, and especially the ways in which the author builds up the tension, and keeps you hooked and wanting to know what will happen.
◆ What do you think of the ending and how it plays out?
**ACTIVITY:** *Game Changer: Write a page of screenplay—or storyboard*

*Game Changer* would work well as a film or TV play. Have a go at writing some screenplay for it, or creating a storyboard.

You could choose any passage from the book—or use this episode where Mikey is cornered by some of the gang in the groundsman’s shed. (p44).

**It begins:**

> I check round the shed. It’s not dark inside but it’s nice and dim and I don’t have to duck the screaming brightness echoing through my eyes and into my head. Nothing much seems to have moved since the last time I came here . . . I slump to the floor and lean back against the wall. Then the door opens. And it’s them.

**. . . and finishes with:**

> He throws the fork to the side and they yank me to my feet. I don’t resist. There’s no point, and anyway, I’ve got something new to worry about. The daylight already feels more scary now I’m standing up, and it gets worse as they pull me towards the door. I turn my head, catch a stream of images from the inside of the shed: nothing clear, just the memory of rakes, hoes, the discarded fork, the darkness I came looking for. But the light’s caught me first. The russet of the beech trees has faded. Maybe the brightness has swallowed it, or I’m just not seeing any more.

**Here are some tips:**

- First, read through the passage and picture it in your mind.
- Mark up the passage. What scenes you are going to use. How they will link together, e.g. dissolve or cut from one scene to the next.
- It’s useful to sketch out a plan, with words and pictures.
- Create brief scene headings and character descriptions.
- Identify the dialogue—you may want to add in more; and you may want to add in a voice-over for some of the main character’s inner thoughts.

**TIP:** See [http://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Script](http://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Script)

And some tips for presentation:

- Use a clear font such as Courier.
- Make indentations so that it is clear what is dialogue.
- Have a ‘slug line’ before each scene, saying what’s important.
- Put the characters’ names in capitals.
- Put instructions in brackets, e.g. (Pause)
FADE IN:
INT: GROUNDSMAN'S SHED – DAY
MIKEY, fifteen, leaning against the wall. Shed nice and dim. Two members of the gang come in.

MIKEY (Voice over)
They look different from when I saw them peering over the wall... up to... I'm toast.

GREASY, seventeen, long dirty hair, hard eyes. Leans close to Mikey.

GREASY
You was supposed to ring, posh boy
... or you could storyboard your scene, using this template:
# MORE READING

## MORE BOOKS BY TIM BOWLER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHOR</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PUBLISHER</th>
<th>ISBN</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Blade series</strong> (4 titles)</td>
<td>OUP</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Blade 1: Enemies</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Frozen Fire</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>River Boy – Carnegie Medal Winner</strong></td>
<td>OUP</td>
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<td><strong>Storm Catchers</strong></td>
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## MORE BOOKS TO HOOK YOU

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<th>TITLE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Kevin Brooks</td>
<td>The Bunker Diary</td>
<td>Penguin</td>
<td>978-0-14-132612-2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anne Cassidy</td>
<td>Looking for JJ</td>
<td>Scholastic</td>
<td>978-0-40-713809-1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lucy Christopher</td>
<td>The Killing Woods</td>
<td>Chicken House</td>
<td>978-0-54-546101-6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gillian Cross</td>
<td>Tightrope</td>
<td>OUP</td>
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<tr>
<td>E. Lockhart</td>
<td>We Were Liars</td>
<td>Hot Key</td>
<td>978-1-47-140398-9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marcus Sedgwick</td>
<td>She is Not Invisible</td>
<td>Indigo</td>
<td>978-1-78-062134-0</td>
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## ... AND MIKEY’S FAVOURITE BOOKS

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<tr>
<th>AUTHOR</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charles Dickens</td>
<td>Oliver Twist</td>
<td>Wordsworth</td>
<td>978-1-85-326012-4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Herman Melville</td>
<td>Moby Dick</td>
<td>Wordsworth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Robert Louis Stevenson</td>
<td>Treasure Island</td>
<td>OUP</td>
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</table>
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Bowler is one of the UK’s most compelling and original writers for teenagers. He was born in Leigh-on-Sea and after studying Swedish at university, he worked in forestry, the timber trade, teaching, and translating, before becoming a full-time writer.

He lives with his wife in a quiet Devon village and his workroom is a small wooden outhouse known to friends as ‘Tim’s Bolthole’.

Tim has written twenty books and won fifteen awards, including the prestigious Carnegie Medal for River Boy, and his provocative BLADE series is being hailed as a ground-breaking work of fiction. He has been described by the Sunday Telegraph as ‘the master of the psychological thriller’ and by the Independent as ‘one of the truly individual voices in British teenage fiction’.

His books have sold over a million copies worldwide.

www.timbowler.co.uk