Pinky Aquafin and the Thing That Never Noticed Her

An Axolotl Argonautica — A Reader's Guide

For readers aged 8–12, their teachers, librarians and parents

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About this book

Pinky Aquafin and the Thing That Never Noticed Her is a middle grade novel for readers aged eight to twelve. It runs thirty-four chapters, 212 pages, with an illustration for every chapter. It is the first of six.

Pinky is ten and a half, an axolotl, and in her whole life no one has looked at her for more than a second — which she takes to be correct, and ordinary, and the way the world is arranged.

Then something goes wrong in the west. A dark band appears at the edge of seeing. The coral out there turns the colour of bone. And people in Aqua Haven begin to go slow: forgetting a conversation, asking the same question twice, losing the reason they came into a room.

The Committee for Ceremonial Arrangements debates it. Pinky builds a boat and goes.

What follows is a voyage west with a crew of seven, across five months of water, to fetch one cutting from a garden at the far end of everything. They do not all come back. The ones who do are told a version of the story that is not quite what happened.

A note for parents and teachers. The sickness in this book is memory loss, written plainly and without euphemism — a woman who cannot hold the thread of a conversation, a man who asks about a festival five months gone. One member of the crew dies of it, offstage and without drama. Another chooses to stay behind and is not punished for it by the story.

Children who have watched a grandparent go through this will recognise it immediately, and the book does not pretend it can be fixed by being brave. For most readers that is the reason to hand it to them. For a child in the middle of it right now, read it first.

The story behind the story

This book stands on the oldest surviving voyage story in Greek literature: the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes, written in Alexandria around the third century BC.

In it, a king named Pelias sends his young nephew Jason to the far end of the Black Sea to fetch the Golden Fleece. The errand is meant to kill him. Jason has no army and no great strength of his own.

So he builds a ship, the *Argo*, and he gathers a crew. That is the whole of his plan, and it is the reason the story has lasted. What gets Jason to Colchis is not what he can do alone. It is who he can persuade to come with him.

The voyage out is a chain of obstacles. A blind old seer is tormented by harpies until the crew drives them off, and he repays them with the knowledge they need. Two cliffs clash together and crush any ship that tries to pass between them. At the far shore wait fire-breathing bulls, an armed crop grown from dragon's teeth, and a serpent that never sleeps.

The voyage home is longer and stranger than the voyage out — which is the part most retellings leave out, and the part children usually find most interesting.

Why this source, for this story. The *Argonautica* is a crew book. Its hero is the least remarkable person on his own ship, and the poem is unembarrassed about saying so. That makes it a far better fit for a reader aged eight to twelve than a story about someone born strong.

What is borrowed, and what is not. The book's own closing note is explicit about this, and the two should be read together. Borrowed: a crew assembled for one job, a thing taken from somewhere far away, a person who helped and was owed, and a homecoming where the telling does not quite match the going.

Not borrowed: the ending. Pinky is not Jason and Nimblehorn is not Heracles, and the note says so plainly. Children who know the old story will spend the last chapters expecting something that does not arrive.

Who's who

The crew of the Bucket. Seven go west. The boat gets its name on the second day, from the people sailing it.

Name	What they are	On the boat
Pinky	An axolotl, ten and a half	On top of the hull, because it is the only place she can see everyone and be seen
Nimblehorn	A narwhal, and not a whale, and he will keep telling you	In the yoke, pulling
Sandy	A seahorse who cannot keep up and would like the distinction preserved	Towed in the well; makes the charts nobody can read but him
Coll (rhymes with roll)	A father, quiet, already at the yoke before anyone asks	At the line, at Nimblehorn's shoulder, always
Razorfin	A warrior from the shelf patrol	Ahead and out to the side, far enough to be taken on faith
Kell	A lantern fish, one of three in Aqua Haven and the only young one	In the lamp housing. Kell is the lamp
Velora (veh-LOR-uh)	A manta ray who can do one thing, once	Aft, folded, and you do not go near that end

At home

- **Mother Pell** — a grouper the size of a doorway, who has had her fins on the gills of everybody in Aqua Haven and half their mothers. She does a thing for luck and tells you every time that it does not do anything.
- **Tibbet** — the baker. The first person Pinky watches go slow, and the reason she starts counting.
- **Undo** (UN-doo) — a bristling old wrasse who has chaired the Committee for Ceremonial Arrangements for twenty-six years. Things get decided. What gets decided is frequently not what anybody came in wanting, but it gets decided by Thursday.
- **The Coral Queen** — who speaks from the middle arch at the Festival of the Returning, and has the trick of sounding as though she has only just thought of it.

In the west

- **Zara** — some kind of ray, from nowhere anyone can name, found sitting on the hull one morning. She knows the way in. She helps for her own reasons, and she is owed for it. Readers who know the Jason story will see her coming; readers who don't should be left to meet her as she arrives.

Themes and talking points

The word to watch is *noticed*. It appears around fifteen times across the book, and it is doing the work every time. A reader who tracks that one word has most of the story's argument in hand.

Being overlooked. The book takes seriously something children know and adults forget: that not being noticed is its own kind of injury, separate from being treated badly. Nothing cruel has to happen for it to hurt.

The animal that cannot change. Pinky is an axolotl, and this is not decoration. An axolotl is a salamander that never grows out of its larval form — it keeps its gills and its young body its whole life, while its relatives change and walk out onto land. She is, biologically, the animal that does not transform.

That is the choice at the centre of the series. She is the one character who cannot become something else, in six books about change.

Courage without transformation. Most stories for this age group solve the problem by changing the hero: she discovers a power, comes into an inheritance, becomes brave. This one is not allowed that move. Whatever Pinky manages, she has to manage as herself.

For a child who has quietly concluded that the interesting things happen to other people, that is the point of the book.

Discussion questions

None of these has a right answer, and a reader who argues with the book is reading it properly.

Before reading

1. Think of someone at school or in your family that nobody much notices. What do you think *they* notice, from where they are?
2. The title says the thing never noticed her. What would it mean for a thing — not a person, a thing — to notice you?

While reading

1. *Chapter 4.* Fourteen hatchlings all know what Morvark is and not two of them agree. Sandy says a story lasts *because* it is different every time. Is he right? Can you think of a story you have heard that changes depending on who tells it?
2. *Chapters 1 and 5.* Tibbet says the same thing about the lantern twice, months apart, in exactly the same words. What is different the second time, and how does Pinky know?
3. *Chapters 6 to 8.* The Committee meets, debates properly, and decides something. Pinky does something else. Was the Committee wrong, or just slow? Is there a difference?
4. *Chapter 13.* Nobody tells Pinky to sit on top of the hull. She climbs up there to look at something and never gets down. How does a person end up in charge without anybody putting them in charge?
5. *Chapter 17.* Kell asks to stay behind, and Pinky could have told him not to, and he says so himself. Should she have?
6. *Chapter 20.* Velora says plainly that there is no right moment to ask her — that she is saying it in a straight line so Pinky will not spend a month believing she missed it. Why does Velora bother to say that part out loud?

After reading

1. At the very end Pinky looks into the polished shell and sees the same face, the same frills, the same everything. Most heroes come back changed. Why doesn't she, and does it make the ending sadder or better?
2. The Retelling is very good, and parts of it are not what happened. Is that lying? What is a retelling *for*?
3. Zara helped, was owed, and was not there when her name was read out. Did the story treat her fairly?
4. Go back through and find the word *noticed*. It is there about fifteen times. Who is doing the noticing each time, and does that change across the book?
5. Pinky could not have gone west alone, and the book never pretends otherwise. Make the list of what each of the seven brought. Which of them could the voyage actually have done without?

Words worth knowing

Words the book made up

Word	What it means
Aqua Haven	The reef where Pinky lives. Coral gardens, a market, a bakery, a reading hall, and a great many people who have known each other far too long
The Festival of the Returning	The end-of-summer festival. Lanterns, speeches from the middle arch, bad dancing, and the same six pastries
The Retelling	What Aqua Haven does when a voyage comes home: the story told out loud, in front of everyone, with the names in it
Morvark (MOR-vark)	A word people use for anything out west they have no word for. Everyone's Morvark is different. That is the whole point of him
Going slow	What people say when someone starts losing the thread — forgetting a conversation, asking a question twice. A soft word doing an enormous amount of work
The Lip	Where the sand of Aqua Haven runs out and the seabed drops away into open water
The Bucket	The boat. It was not called that on purpose
A cutting	A piece taken off a living plant that will grow into a whole new one. One becomes two, two become four. It is why the voyage is worth making
Bubbleberry	Eaten whole. This is not a matter of opinion, whatever certain people in Aqua Haven will tell you

Real words worth looking up

Word	What it means
Axolotl (AK-suh-LOT-ul)	A Mexican salamander that keeps its young body and its feathery outside gills for life instead of growing up and walking onto land. Pinky's frills are real anatomy

Word	What it means
Narwhal (NAR-wall)	An Arctic whale with a single long spiralled tusk, which is actually a tooth. Nimblehorn would like it on the record that he is not a whale. He is
Grouper	A large, heavy, slow-moving fish that can live a very long time. Mother Pell is one
Wrasse (RASS — the w is silent)	A bright, busy, talkative reef fish. Undo is one, and it suits him
Lantern fish	A real deep-sea fish that makes its own light. Kell's light is not magic and he cannot switch it off
Manta ray	A huge ray that glides on wings rather than swimming. Velora folds when she sleeps
Yoke	The frame a load is pulled from. Nimblehorn wears it; Coll works the line beside it

For classrooms and libraries

Read-aloud. The book runs thirty-four chapters over 212 pages, with an illustration for each chapter. That shape suits a chapter a night at home, or two or three a week as a classroom serial.

Where it fits a curriculum

- *Greek myth and epic.* A way into the Jason story for readers too young for the source, and a worked example of how writers borrow from old stories without copying them.
- *Life science.* Axolotls are real, neotenic, and critically endangered in the wild — almost all of them now live in captivity, and their native lake system outside Mexico City has nearly gone. The book's central metaphor is also a conservation lesson.
- *Writing.* The book is built on one repeated word. Ask students to find it, count it, and then write a short piece built the same way.

Pairing it on the shelf. Readers who come to this from *Wings of Fire*, *Guardians of Ga'Hoole* or *Warriors* will recognise the shape: an animal cast, a serious quest, no winking at the reader.

Pairing it with the source. A young-readers retelling of the Jason story alongside the novel makes the borrowing visible, and children enjoy catching it.

The book's closing note deliberately names no particular edition — it tells the reader only that versions exist for people their age, and that they are full of things the author did not use. That leaves the choice to you. Any good children's retelling of the Jason story will do the job.

About the author and the series

D.M. Giblin writes the Pinky Aquafin books. They are published by Deep Channel Books, an independent imprint in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The six books. Each one is built on a classical source, in this order: the *Argonautica*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, the *Canterbury Tales*, *Gilgamesh*, and *The Tempest*. Each stands on its own, and each is a step in one story.

The first book is *Pinky Aquafin and the Thing That Never Noticed Her*. The second is *Pinky Aquafin and the Song That Followed Her*.

Companion coloring book. A separate companion volume, *Pinky Aquafin Coloring Book One*, carries all thirty-four illustrations from this book as line art, in the order they happen.

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