A Monstrous HISTORY

Be afraid – very afraid!

John Parsons

Nelson Literacy Directions

A MONSTROUS History

Dear Reader

When I first began to research this book, I knew about some of the more common monsters, such as Count Dracula and Frankenstein's monster. But I quickly realised that, no matter where you are, the world is full of monsters! Whether they exist in reality or only in people's minds, they all seem to serve a common purpose.

> "WHY DO WE HAVE A FASCINATION FOR TERRIFYING CREATURES THAT WE KNOW CANNOT EXIST?"

Every culture around the world has its own monsters, and I hope you enjoy reading about some of them. But, if I were you, I'd check under your desk first! And I'd look over my shoulder, just in case. In fact, what's that behind you **right now**?

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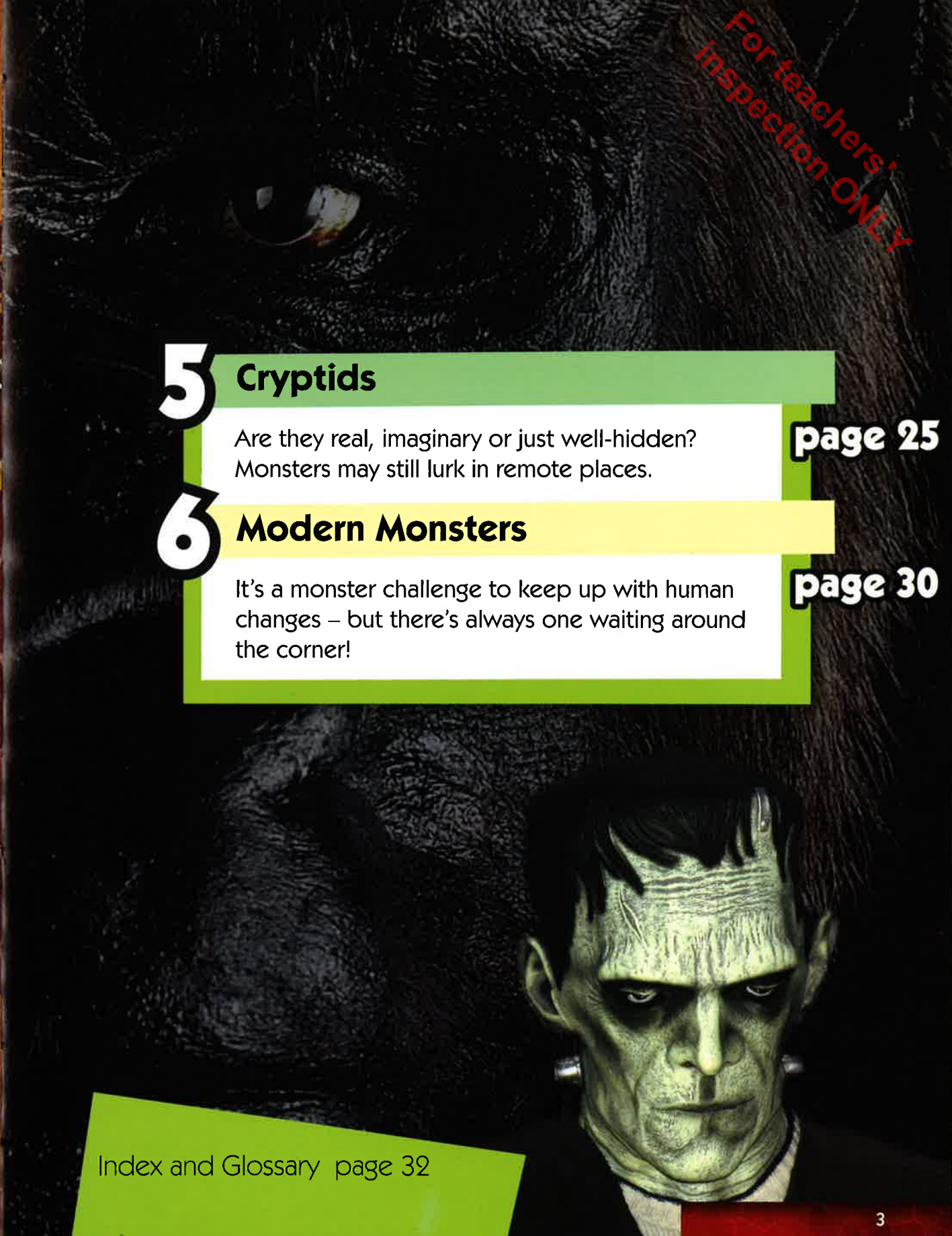

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1 Monstro-duction

Forty Thousand **Fright** Years

Imagine you're in a dark cinema. You're watching a scary movie. The music accompanying the movie is suspenseful, has a sense of foreboding that is rising to a crescendo. The camera focuses in on a close-up of one of the main characters. He looks frightened. Suddenly, behind his shoulder, something moves in the shadows. The music changes to shrieking, staccato violins. The cinema audience gasps and a shiver runs down your spine. You know exactly what's going to happen next. The character is about to be confronted by his worst nightmare – a terrifying monster lurking in the gloom!

You and the other audience members are participating in a tradition that has probably been around since the earliest humans learned how to communicate. Although modern movies may use digital special effects, grotesque make-up and advanced technology to bring imaginary monsters to life, the themes in scary movies are not that different to those that would have been recounted around the embers of fires lit in caves 40 000 years ago.

What's surprising is that although most monsters are completely imaginary, every culture around the world tells stories about their existence. The concept of monsters is so universal that almost every human being will be exposed to it at some time in their lives – often when they are young.

So what is it about monsters that keeps them in our consciousness, generation after generation? Why do we have a fascination for terrifying creatures that we know cannot exist? Why do we deliberately choose to frighten ourselves by telling tales about horrifying monsters that want to destroy us?

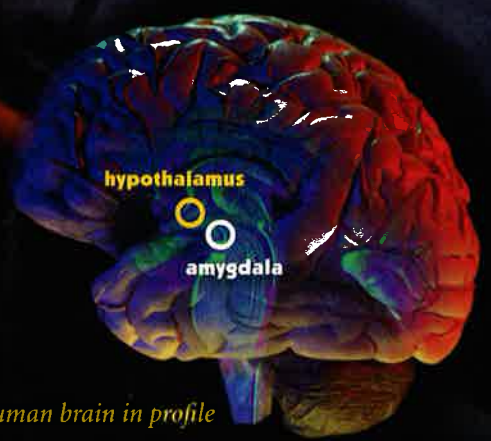
The reason, which has remained unchanged since the Stone Age, may surprise you.

WHAT IS FEAR?

Fear is an emotion caused by a threat, and is a basic survival mechanism. It is our brain's way of recognising danger.

When the brain encounters something it perceives as a threat, a primitive part of the brain called the amygdala instantly releases hormones into the bloodstream. These hormones immediately put the person into a state of heightened alertness. They also increase heart rate, blood flow and breathing rate, which helps muscles prepare for action.

Another part of the brain, the hypothalamus, controls the next stage. The hypothalamus alerts the nerves connected to the muscles to be ready to do one of two things: fight the thing that has caused us fear; or run away from it. This is known as the "fight or flight" response. In a split second, we must decide whether we can overcome the danger or whether we are better to get away from it as fast as possible. All humans and most animals exhibit this behaviour.



a human brain in profile

Once we have either fought or escaped from the cause of our fear, our heart rate, blood flow and breathing returns to normal. The amygdala and certain other parts of the brain, however, record the event as a permanent memory so that we can respond with the benefit of experience next time the threat appears.