



# Waking BEN DOLDRUMS

## Discussion Guide



### About the book

Frida Bellows lives in a big house made up of four apartments. Every morning, she gets on her father's shoulders and taps on the ceiling with a broomstick. This wakes her neighbor, a student named Ben Doldrums, who knocks on the wall to wake the Mercredis, who in turn knock on the floor to wake the Reynolds. Frida likes this morning tradition. It makes her feel like she's part of something big. Things change, however, when Ben stops getting out of bed to wake the Mercredis, which throws off the whole routine. Frida notices that Ben Doldrums is not himself and she wants to help. But how?

Waking Ben Doldrums is a story of community, compassion and hope. It is a reminder that, while we can't always fix another person's problems, a simple act of kindness can go a long way.

Themes: Mental health | Community | Compassion | Social-Emotional Learning

### Discussion Questions

1. How do Frida and her neighbors wake up every day?
2. Do you have a morning routine? How do you wake up every day?
3. Why does Ben Doldrums stop getting out of bed to wake the Mercredis?
4. Ben Doldrums is suffering from depression, which makes him feel tired and sad. How do you think this makes Frida and the other neighbors feel?
5. The neighbours try to cheer Ben Doldrums up, but nothing works. How does Frida eventually help Ben?
6. If you were trying to cheer someone up, what are some things you would try?
7. If you were unable to cheer up a friend, what are some other ways you could support them?
8. Frida and her neighbors really care for each other. Do you have a neighbor? What is your favorite thing about them?



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## Activities

1. Draw a picture of where you live so you can see the inside like in the book. How is it similar to or different from Frida's house?
2. Discuss with your partner: Think of a time when you were sad. Why were you upset? What made you feel better?
3. Pick three things that make you happy and share them with a partner. What do you have in common? What is different?
4. Create a plan for how you would wake up your family or neighbors by knocking or tapping on the floors and walls. Could you do it without getting out of bed?



## About writing the book

“The idea for *Waking Ben Doldrums* came when I was watching a British show called *The Great Interior Design Challenge*. In one episode they were in Walthamstow, England, talking about the history of the Warner Estate. The historian described how the homes were split into four flats and the walls were so thin the occupants created a morning alarm system by knocking on the walls. I thought it would be cool to write this unique waking-up system into a picture book and explore the occupants' sense of community.” —Heather Smith



Credit: Hilary Gauld

### About the author

**Heather Smith** is the author of several picture books, including the award-winning *The Phone Booth in Mr. Hirota's Garden*. Her middle-grade novel *Ebb and Flow* was shortlisted for the Governor General's Literary Award, and her YA novel *The Agony of Bun O'Keefe* won the Ruth and Sylvia Schwartz Children's Book Award, the OLA Forest of Reading White Pine Award and was shortlisted for the Amy Mathers Teen Book Award and the Geoffrey Bilson Award for Historical Fiction for Young People. Originally from Newfoundland, Heather now lives in Waterloo, Ontario, with her family.



### About the illustrator

**Byron Eggenschwiler** is an award-winning illustrator whose recent books include *Song for the Snow*, *The Strangest Thing in the Sea*, *The Little Ghost Who Was a Quilt* and *Operatic*. Byron's work has also appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Walrus* and *GQ*. He lives in Calgary.



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