

# Boost

by Eirlys Hunter

During the summer holidays before I started year 6, an ad for the new Boost Clinic began to flicker up everywhere:

You know you want it.  
You know you do.  
We have just the extension for you!

On the first day of school, Zaza Mackay pranced in with something white and fluffy curled around her waist. Her parents had bought her a tail! Zaza kept twitching it and stroking it. She was practically purring.

“A tail?” said my friend Hine. “Weird.”

“You’d think it would get in her way,” I said, “or make her sneeze.”

“I suppose it’ll be snuggly in winter,” said Hine.

It was like a game of dominoes. Next thing, Alice had a tail just like Zaza’s. Caleb’s was short and waggy, and Ramesh could hang from his like a possum. Lea got one like a horse’s tail. She even plaited it.

“Is this a classroom or a zoo?” Ms Clark wanted to know.



But that was just the beginning. During the next school holidays, the Boost Clinic ran a different campaign:

You know you want it.  
You know you do.  
Get a muscle boost  
for a high-powered you!

In term two, Zaza could jump so high she got a netball through the hoop every time. Our coach made her goal attack instead of me. Soon most of our class made the trip back to the Boost Clinic. Alice’s boost meant she could run super-fast, so she was promoted to play centre. Hine joined me on the reserves’ bench, where we had to watch Zaza and Alice play in our bibs.

Term three was even worse:

You know you want it.  
You know you do.  
We’ll make you into  
a genius too!

Most kids chose a maths boost. “My dad always says if you want to be good at something, you just have to work hard,” said Hine. “But *obviously* that’s not true.”

My parents told me to stick it out, that a new craze would come along sooner or later. That was easy for them to say – they didn’t have to spend all day with Zaza and the boosted kids, who now wanted to study advanced calculus.

“We need different maths groups,” complained Zaza. “Some people are holding us back ... not looking at anyone in particular.” But Zaza was looking at people in particular. Hine glared back.

Ms Clark shook her head. “You can work through the curriculum like everyone else. No one gets special treatment when they take short cuts.”

The boosted kids began referring to the rest of us as “the slugs”. Then one day, Zaza called us “les limaces”. Her mum had bought her a French boost. The following Monday, Caleb called us “babosas”. Spanish. Soon they all spoke different languages.

“My parents don’t care how much they spend on me. They’re investing in my future,” said Zaza.

“Don’t you want to invest in my future?” I asked Mum that night.

“You can invest in your own future by doing your homework,” she said.



I tried Nan for some sympathy. "I used to be clever," I told her. "Good at maths, good at spelling. The best goal attack in the whole school. Now I'm a slug."

"Show them you're not. Learn something you can't get boosting for," said Nan.

"Like what?"

Nan opened a suitcase crammed with balls of wool in every colour. "I'll show you how to knit a scarf. I'm pretty sure there'll be no boost for that."

I was pretty sure, too. In my head, I could already hear Zaza and the others laughing. Who would ever want a boost for knitting?

Nan handed me some knitting needles. "Come on, choose your favourite colour."

I couldn't hurt Nan's feelings. Besides, I could just bury the scarf in my bottom drawer. No one would ever need to see it.

Knitting was hard. To begin with, I was very slow, and Nan had to keep rescuing all my dropped stitches.

But I got the hang of it. Very soon I could knit and talk at the same time, and I only had to look when I was joining two colours together. I had decided on a sunset scarf, the colours changing from sky-blue, to red, to orange, to flaming pink. Gradually the scarf grew until it was long enough to go around my neck with lots to spare.

"Very impressive," said Nan. "I think slugs are my new favourite creature."

I was so proud I wore my scarf to school.

"Wow!" said Alice. "Where did you get that? I want one, too!"

"Sorry," I said, "but it's unique. I made it – the only sunset scarf in the whole world, guaranteed."

"Would your nan teach me?" asked Hine.

That was a good day, and it got even better when I learnt we were back in the netball team. The Sports Council had decided on a new rule: no boosting, and especially no tails. Bad luck Zaza and Alice.



Then it turned out that the genius stuff wore off after a few months unless you paid for re-boosting, which was even more expensive than just boosting. Alice said the boosting machine gave her a headache anyway and she wasn't going back, and the other kids agreed. Soon their advanced calculus and their French and their Spanish faded like a torch that needs new batteries. Zaza was very quiet and sat sulkily, stroking her tail. Who knew how that might end up?

"I'm glad all this nonsense is over," said Ms Clark. "And to celebrate, I think our end-of-year party should have a theme: creativity. Everyone has to wear at least one thing they've made."

On the day of the party, Hine wore the beanie she'd knitted with Nan's help. Alice wore a skirt like a piupiu she'd made out of straws. Ramesh had made a cloak, and Caleb wore an amazing papier mâché warrior helmet.

I wore huge red and yellow wings. They were so good Ms Clark looked worried.

"It's OK," I reassured her. "I made them out of paper and wire. I'm not going anywhere."

"They're absolutely beautiful," Ms Clark said. And she was right – they were.

illustrations by Thomas Hsieh



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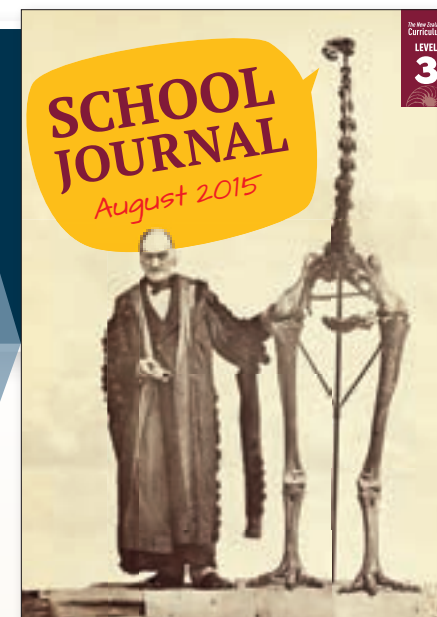
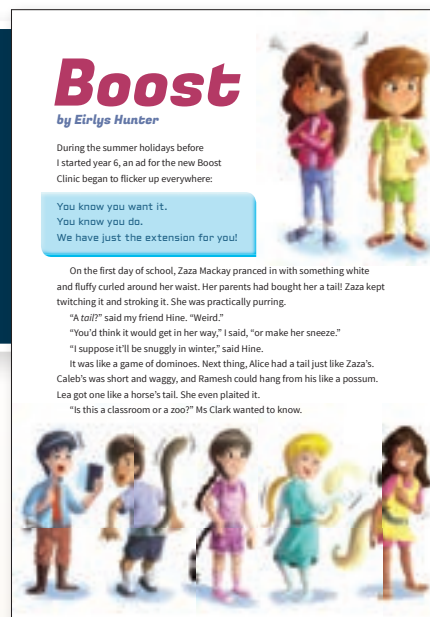
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