

★ “In the vein of R. J. Palacio’s *Wonder*, this debut allows readers to step inside Sophie’s thoughts and to understand and empathize with her.” —*BOOKLIST*, starred review

A MONSTER Like Me

W E N D Y S . S W O R E



I must be a monster.
But if I can gather the right feather, the right shell,
and the right crystal, I can make a wish . . .
. . . and be human again.

PRAISE FOR A MONSTER LIKE ME

“Shines in its portrayal of finding self-acceptance.”

—FOREWORD REVIEWS

“Uplifting, inspiring, and speaks to the power of
friendship, courage, and kindness.”

—JENNIFER A. NIELSEN, *New York Times* bestselling author

“A unique, whimsical look at what it means to be a monster—and a human!”

—JESSICA DAY GEORGE, *New York Times* bestselling author

“There’s magic in these pages. I’ve never wanted to love a monster more.”

—OBERT SKYE, bestselling author of *Wizard for Hire*

“This book touched my heart. A magical coming-of-age story.”

—J. SCOTT SAVAGE, bestselling author of the *Mysteries of Cove* series



There are trolls, goblins, and
witches. Which kind of
monster is Sophie?

Sophie is a monster expert. Thanks to her *Big Book of Monsters* and her vivid imagination, Sophie can identify the monsters in her school and neighborhood. Clearly, the bullies are trolls and goblins. Her nice neighbor must be a good witch, and Sophie's new best friend is obviously a fairy. But what about Sophie? She's convinced she is definitely a monster because of the "monster mark" on her face. At least that's what she calls it. The doctors call it a blood tumor. Sophie tries to hide it but it covers almost half her face. And if she's a monster on the outside, then she must be a monster on the inside, too.

Being the new kid at school is hard. Being called a monster is even harder. Sophie knows that it's only a matter of time before the other kids, the doctors, and even her mom figure it out. And then her mom will probably leave—just like her dad did.

Because who would want to live with a real monster?

Inspired by real events in the author's life, *A Monster Like Me* teaches the importance of believing in oneself, accepting change, and the power of friendship.

WENDY S. SWORE farms with her husband and children in Idaho. She writes part-time, particularly in winter when her farming chores give her time to plant seeds in her imagination. This is her debut novel.



PHOTO BY MARCY CURR

**VISIT THE AUTHOR AT
WENDYSWORE.COM.**

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A
MONSTER
Like Me

The title is rendered in a mix of blackletter and script fonts. The word 'A' is at the top. 'MONSTER' is in a large, bold blackletter font, with a fly on the 'M' and a dragonfly on the 'R'. 'Like Me' is in a smaller, elegant script font below it.

FOR REVIEW ONLY

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A MONSTER Like Me

WENDY S. SWORE



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This is a work of fiction. Characters and events in this book are products of the author's imagination or are represented fictitiously.

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This book is dedicated to my parents for loving me,
my family for believing in me, and my writing
group for dreaming with me.

Most of all, this book is dedicated to every child
who ever felt different, alone, or unwanted.
You are magnificent just the way you are.



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THE BIG BOOK OF MONSTERS

AN INTRODUCTION

Beware all who enter here, for things once seen cannot be unseen. There are monsters among us. They are crafty and sly, patient and wise.

But wait, you say. If such things exist, why do we not see them? Prove to us such things are real.

It's your human sight, dear friends, that hinders you.

You may have seen centaurs and minotaurs but thought them only horses and cattle. Magic can cloud the minds and memories of men. Few have seen a dragon and lived, and fewer still have wept at the sight of a unicorn and remembered. The pages to come are filled with secrets no human was ever meant to know, a list—albeit incomplete—of magical creatures great and small.

You must understand, dear reader, the only beings who truly know what is hidden are those who are in hiding themselves.



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ONE

Book of Monsters

You'd think monsters would have their own grocery store, but they don't. They walk around with a cart the same as regular people and keep the monster part hidden inside where no one can see it. Mom's grocery cart squeaks with every step like an elf getting squished, but Mom's not a monster—not that I can tell anyway.

She grabs a box of granola cereal and sets it in the cart beside all our other stuff. "Pick something, Sophie. Then all we need is milk."

Bright boxes of all colors crowd the shelves. A silly dragon peers out from behind a bowl on one box, but I bet real dragons don't look that stupid—after they shed their human skin, I mean. I skim past the marshmallow cereals and snag a box of Honey O's before cracking open my book and waiting for Mom's cart to move on. The raised lettering on the cover fits nicely against my hand, and I know what it says without

looking: *The Big Book of Monsters*. The page corners curl a little from the thousand times I've turned them, but mostly I'm careful.

Shuffling behind Mom as we near the dairy aisle, I peek over the edge of my book, trying to read and watch the other shoppers at the same time.

A woman shushes a screaming kid, giving her a doll and shoving a pacifier in her fat little mouth. As we pass, the red-eyed girl turns her tear-streaked face to me, and I squirm under her stare. She raises both hands and shoves the doll behind her head while sucking on the pacifier so hard, I expect the whole thing to pop into her mouth and disappear.

With a shudder, I speed up so Mom's between me and the little creature; I'm sure I've seen something like it before. Pages whisper as I flip through the book until I see the futakuchionna. In the picture, a woman feeds two mouths—one on her face, and the other on the back of her head, hidden in her hair.

If not fed properly, the mouths
screech obscenely and demand food.

I peek around Mom as the kid drops her pacifier and cries harder, her little eyes scrunched into angry slits like she knows I figured out her secret. If I were braver, I'd go right up there and look in her hair for that other mouth . . . but I'm not.

My arms ache from carrying the book all the time, and my steps lag behind Mom's. Someone should install those moving sidewalks they have at airports in grocery stores. It'd be like riding a scaly basilisk through the aisles, and we could grab stuff we wanted as the shelves whizzed by, and if we missed it the first time around, we could just go for another ride. I bet my idea

would get a million dollars, and all the little old ladies would love it—unless they fell off. Then maybe not so much.

“Do you want string cheese for your lunch tomorrow? Maybe a special treat for your first day?” Mom hovers by the cheese, and I nod.

“Yeah, and fruit snacks.” We moved from Beaverton to Portland, Oregon, last month. And we’re renting, not buying. I’m pretty sure Mom didn’t have a choice about coming here, but she pretends it’s all a great adventure. New house, new school, new doctors. None of that is a good thing, but Mom did get a teaching job here, so at least there’s one bright spot in the middle of all this.

“You got it.” She grabs a package of white cheese sticks and moves on. Her black tennis shoes barely make a sound—not that we could hear anything over the wheels—but it’s nice to be near her. She’s graceful and pretty. I think her eyes might be bad though, because she still smiles when she looks at me.

My last school was not so nice. That’s where I first saw my book in the library, and lucky I did or it would have been a lot harder to find out about monsters. The whole school was full of them—mean ones who learned my secret until I couldn’t stay there anymore. Mom says this new school is a new start, a clean slate. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a slate, dirty or clean, but if it’s better than the old place, I’m willing to try.

I pick out some fruit snacks and line up with Mom at the checkout.

A bunch of kids in front of us load the conveyor belt with junk food as their mom reads a magazine behind the cart. The littlest kid, a boy with black hair and a gold chain necklace, scopes out the candy bars. I wonder if he might be a troll since

his nose flares and he likes shiny things, but he scowls when he sees me looking. I should have hidden my face then, but I didn't. Sometimes I forget.

Most of the time, grown-ups look away when they notice me—like it's more polite for me to be invisible than different. Most of the time, I believe them.

He tugs on his mom's pink sweatpants until she puts the gossip magazine down and turns her bleached-blond head. "What?"

The cashier scans the last bottle of pop and presses a button. "That'll be thirty-seven dollars even."

The blond lady follows the kid's pointing finger and stares at me, her eyebrows arching up into her poofy hair, which is okay, but then she opens her mouth, which is not. "Hey, look, kids! That girl doesn't even need a costume for Halloween! She's already got one."

Four heads peek around their mother like a five-headed hydra to stare and stare and then laugh. They point their fingers and giggle like it's the funniest joke in the world, but it's not funny. And I'm not laughing.

Mom's mouth drops open as the hydra family walks away, and I bury my face in my book. The echoing laughter hurts my ears. It grates and stings, and I press my face against the pages so I'll never have to see anyone ever again. My eyes burn, but I blink fast and hold the tears inside. I don't want Mom to see me cry, and besides, I don't want to wreck my book.

"Sorry about that," the clerk says over the sound of our groceries beeping across the scanner.

I peek over the book to see if he's making fun, but he really does look sorry.

Mom's face is red, her lips mashed tight in a thin line. The rest of the shoppers around us are quiet too, and I duck back into my book, hoping that Mom doesn't understand what the hydra lady was talking about. She knows part of the truth about me, but not all. And she never will if I can help it.

The checkout machine prints the receipt, and I hear the cashier rip it off. Mom's gentle touch pries my hand from the book and presses it against the cart's handle. I wait till we're out of the store to close my book, but even then, I keep my head down, my hair falling over my face like a curtain.

"You can open the fruit snacks now, if you want," says Mom.

I pretend I don't hear and run the last few steps to the car.

Lights flash as she pops the trunk with her key button. "We have one more place we need to go today after we drop off the groceries, then we can do something fun. Maybe plan for your birthday next week?" She winks and flashes ten fingers plus one.

"Place? Like an appointment?" My stomach churns like I ate a pile of worms, and I slip into the back seat, my hands gripping the edges of the book till my knuckles turn white. When she starts the engine, I close my eyes as the car vibrates and rumbles around me.

"Don't worry, honey. It's just a quick physical for the school this time." Mom uses big words like *hemangioma* and *blood tumor* when she talks about my face to the doctors who poke and prod, and I die inside, wishing to be anywhere but there. I keep quiet and let them think what they want.

"Sophie? You okay?" Mom checks my reflection in the rear-view mirror.

I know what she sees: a spiderweb of blood-filled lumps

bubbling up from inside the skin between my right ear and my eye. The mark is puffy and swollen and scary to look at because it keeps reaching for more of me, the purple-red bumps spreading out from the main body to stretch from my cheekbone up to my temple.

I know she worries about it—the loads of doctors' visits prove that—but she doesn't know how frightening it really is because she believes them when they say it all fits in a medical book. She doesn't feel the hidden part pulsing inside, always one heartbeat away from pushing through my skin.

"I'm fine," I mumble.

As long as Mom never finds out the truth, it'll be okay. She'll still love me, and I can stay at home. Until then, I have to do what every other kid—who's not really a kid—does and hide my true nature from her. Only I can know.

I really am a monster.



THE BIG BOOK OF MONSTERS

GUARDIANS OF THE UNDERWORLD

Count yourself lucky, dear reader, if the only monsters you encounter are small and human-sized, for many can grow so tall in their true form that their heads touch the sky. Such are the scorpion men. Spawned by the goddess Tiamat of ancient Babylon, the agrabuamelu (pronounced AWK-raboo-AMA-loo) guard the entrance to Kurnugi, the underworld. Each morning, the scorpion men open the gates for the Sun God, Shamash, to start his journey across the heavens, and again for his return each night. Though they have power to see over the horizon and warn of danger, few travelers dare seek their help because a single glance from an agrabuamelu can kill.



TWO

No Picture Days Allowed

Today should be my first day of school, but it won't be. Mom let it slip that today is picture day and unfortunately, I'm sick.

As soon as I find out when retakes are, I'll be sick that day, too.

Once I totally screwed up and actually went to school on picture day. Big mistake. Ten steps inside the door and I saw the huge white umbrella and backdrop that filled half the hallway. My stomach flipped like a mermaid's tail whacking against dry land.

The photographer reached deep inside a bag and slid out a venomous black camera, drawing the weapon out as an aqrabuamelu scorpion man unrolls his stinger. He probably thought no one would notice he'd slipped away from his job guarding the underworld, but I did. A single glance from an aqrabuamelu

could mean death. Even if I didn't actually die, having a photo taken of me would make me wish I had.

There was only one thing I could do—I turned and ran straight out the door.

Mom was already pulling out of the parking lot, but I cut across the corner of the ball field where the sprinklers were shooting everywhere. Freezing water hit the back of my head while another squirt went right up my nose. Gasping, I ran even faster. I probably should have walked, but it was *picture day*, with a scorpion cameraman besides. No measly bunch of sprinklers was gonna make me miss my ride home.

I burst onto the street, and tires screeched to a stop. Hand over her heart, Mom rolled the window down on our Buick. “Sophie, what on earth are you doing?”

Shivering, almost crying from the thought of facing that camera, I held onto the doorframe and bowed my head. Right. She needed a reason. Something with no fancy doctors. “My stomach’s upset. I think I’m going to throw up.” Thinking of going back inside made me queasy for sure.

“Oh, honey, you’re white as a sheet.” She peered at me through the window. “My gosh, you’re trembling. Get in.” Mom popped open the door.

Success!

Since then, I’ve avoided picture days like werewolves avoid silver. And this time, I’ve got a plan.

I blink a drop of sweat out of my eye and pray that twenty minutes of hiding under the electric blanket is enough to do the job. With the heated fabric draped over my head, I sit on the floor, dying to breathe fresh air.

“Sophie?”

At Mom's call, I rip off the electric blanket and jump into bed. The cool sheets raise goose bumps against my superheated skin, and I shiver.

The door opens. "Honey, you need to get up, it's—oh! Are you sick?"

A thin white streak from her temple contrasts against her pretty auburn hair, which is twisted up professional-like, except for a few harried strands that never seem to behave. She sits at the edge of my bed and touches the good side of my face. "You're burning up. No school for you today."

I nod sadly. I can't quite squeeze out a tear, but I've got sweat running into my eyeball, so that's pretty close. My monster mark is always warm, but the extra heat makes it throb.

"Should I stay home? I could call a substitute." Mom slips her phone out of her pocket, but I shake my head.

"No, I'm okay." Mastering the pathetic "let me stay home cause I'm sick" look without tipping into the "take me to the doctor cause I'm dying" look is tricky, but I manage. I've had lots of practice.

She hesitates and glances at her watch.

"I'll be fine. I swear."

"Okay, call me if you need me. Oh, a neighbor brought by a plate of cinnamon rolls as a housewarming gift. They're on the counter if you get feeling better. I'll pick up chicken noodle soup on the way home." Bending over me, she smooths my sweaty hair away from my forehead. Her kiss is soft and light, a beat of a butterfly's wings. Then she slips out the door.

I wait patiently, faking sleep just to be safe while she bonks around the house. After forever—ten minutes at least—the front door opens and closes, her car starts up, and she drives

away. *Finally!* I fling off the covers and peek out the window as our car disappears down the street.

The wooden stairs creak under my bare feet, and I pause at the bottom where sunbeams toast the carpet. My toes sink into the warm shag, and I close my eyes and listen to the empty spaces of the house. A clock ticks in the entryway. The refrigerator hums in the kitchen. The fan inside Mom's computer buzzes quietly from her bedroom. The air in my lungs moves in and out, and I'm sure I'm the only monster here. With the human away, this monster will play.

With my arms spread wide, I spin in the middle of the living room, my head back and eyes closed to soak it all in—one last stolen day of safety before I start my new school and everything changes. Wobbling a little, I stop, lean against the counter, and squint to read the fancy writing on a note attached to the plate of cinnamon rolls.

Welcome to the neighborhood. I look forward to getting to know you and your wee lass.

Best,

Mrs. Barrett

Perfect. A cinnamon roll will make a great breakfast, but first, I've got an audience to please. I grab a bag of unshelled peanuts and slip out the back door.

Dozens of yellow finches flit from Mom's feeder to the nearby tree, but I ignore them. Squinting, I scan the branches higher up.

"Prp." I trill my special call, and seconds later, several bushy tails flick into view.

I started out with one squirrel the day we moved here—I

named him Bob—but now a half dozen come when I call. To the average person, they look like normal squirrels, but for monsters like me, they're the best magic-show audience I could ever hope for.

Zippering along the top of the fence, the five newcomers follow Bob to the perch I made for them. The old board hangs like a bridge from the fence to the pear tree, making it the best seats in the house.

I crack open a couple of peanut shells and give each one of them half a nut as a bonus for showing up. Like always, Bob grabs his and stuffs it in his cheek quick just in case I'm going to give him more, but when I don't, he settles down to eat it. Most of the others take their nut more slowly, and the last one is still scared of me. I put hers on the board beside her.

When they finish eating, their little ears stand up, and they watch with shiny black eyes.

It's showtime.

I start by rolling a peanut across my knuckles. Flip, flip, flip—the peanut walks end over end from my thumb to my pinkie, back and forth. Easy peasy, my hands come together, and the peanut marches from one hand to the other and back.

The squirrels watch so hard, their tiny heads moving back and forth, following each movement.

"Keep watching, guys." I roll my hands and suddenly both peanuts are gone.

The squirrels chatter anxiously, and Bob clicks his teeth. He thinks anything that makes peanuts disappear is stressful.

I show him my hands. Nothing in this hand, or that one.

His tiny claw reaches for my finger, just in case a peanut might be hiding inside.

Grinning, I twirl my fingers, and peanuts appear between my knuckles on both hands.

“Ta-da!” I smile, and the crowd goes wild! At least, I pretend they do. Really, the squirrels just snatch the peanuts and stuff them inside their faces so their cheeks bulge like they’ve tried to swallow a boomerang. While they work the shells off their treats, they watch as I roll a quarter across my knuckles, making it disappear and reappear.

I keep hoping I’ll manifest magical powers to go along with my monster-ness, but so far all I can do is regular human-style magic tricks. The squirrels like my sleight of hand stuff, but card tricks? Not so much. Whenever I have Bob pick a card, he chomps down on it and runs off. I bet his nest is full of cards by now.

“You’ve been a good crowd.” I drop six more peanuts on the board by the tree.

Bob holds his cool for about two seconds before cramming three peanuts into his cheeks. He reaches for a fourth, but by then, the other squirrels have claimed the rest.

“Thanks for watching,” I whisper. I’d take a bow, but my audience is already halfway up a tree, chasing each other like a bunch of furry pixies doing a war dance.

I slip a deck of cards from my pocket and fan them open and closed, rippling them back and forth like a paper wave cresting between my fingers. One card flips from the pack, and I catch it by balancing it on one finger. I blow, and the card spins on the tip of my finger like a pinwheel.

Laughter echoes from somewhere nearby, and I snatch the card, listening for which direction the voice might be coming from.

Somewhere overhead, squirrels scold each other.

Again, a girl laughs, light and airy like fairies playing on the wind. She's at least a couple yards over. Part of me wants to follow the sound, but I don't know what I'd do if I actually found her. Making friends is definitely *not* one of my monster powers.

I spin the card again, but Bob and the others couldn't care less about my card tricks. If there aren't nuts involved, they don't even come down to look.

Maybe Bob would be more impressed if I had a top hat and wand and all the things that real magicians have, like the stuff in the Magician's Apprentice Ultimate Magic Kit. It costs gobs of money, and Mom can't afford it, so I don't ask. But I want it. Gosh, I want it. Of course, I'd like to put on a show for somebody other than my squirrels too. But then I'd have to stand in front of people. So maybe not.

My card slips a bit, and I snatch it before it falls. Things would be different if I had a friend. I wouldn't be picky, either. It's been so long since anyone wanted to be my friend, I've almost forgotten what it feels like. I'd be friends with any old monster that wanted to—as long as they didn't want to eat me or steal my mom or anything. There's loads of nice magical creatures out there—unicorns, sprites, fairies, and brownies—but they'd probably run from me. I'm pretty sure they keep to their own kind, and monsters aren't invited.

"Autumn!" a lady calls from somewhere nearby. "You're going to be late for school."

"Coming, Nana!" The girl's peal of laughter rings out again.

Suddenly, even with my squirrels playing overhead, our yard seems too empty.

Sliding the cards back into the box, I head inside the house

and try not to think of who Nana and Autumn might be, because it's crazy to want what I can't have. I'm better off alone, and I know it. It's dumb to let loneliness ruin my special day. I tried to make friends at my old school, but once kids know you're a freak, it follows you forever. Schoolkids are just monsters with sharp teeth and sharper words. If I could get away with faking sick every day, I would, but there's no escaping tomorrow.

Don't think about it. Only think of today. Today *will* be awesome. First off, no school! I could stop there, but there's ice cream in the fridge, a bubble bath for later, and a TV with my name on it. Best of all, there's no one to see me. Not a single soul.

With a stretch, I crack my knuckles, grab the video game controller, and push the power button on the console.

The screen lights up. "Multiplayer or One Player?"

What a stupid question. Who wants screen-sharing anyway? Someone else hogging the whole thing? Ridiculous.

The flashing light toggles over the "One Player" option.

"Okay, Mario Kart, let's do this!"