



Men in Black

J J Gardner



About the film

An outrageous mixture of comedy and science fiction, the film, *Men in Black*, was one of the most successful films of 1997. This Penguin Reader is based on J J Gardner's book of the film which loses none of the surprises and maintains the same crazy humour. This is a wonderful story for teenagers – and for adults!

Men In Black is a film that leaves viewers longing for a sequel! It is an extremely funny movie: by the end, viewers will have laughed so much that they may feel the need to see a doctor! It is full of surprises. The director, Barry Sonnenfeld, has succeeded in the most difficult trick of all – to make the unbelievable believable. Much of the reason for his success in doing this is his choice of the two leading men in the film. Tommy Lee Jones plays the part of Kay, one of the Men in Black. Jones is tall, grimaced and craggy. He has a seriousness of manner which makes people believe what he says – if he says there are aliens in New York, of course there are aliens in New York. The second Man in Black, Jay, is played by Will Smith, who brings to the part his unique brand of laid-back wit.

The screen story and screenplay for *Men in Black* were written by Ed Solomon. Solomon has written other famous screenplays for films – *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, for example – and he also writes for television.

Men in Black was produced by Steven Spielberg, one of the greatest film-makers of the twentieth century. As in *ET*, the hugely successful science fiction film made by Steven Spielberg, the special effects in *Men in Black* are ingenious and fascinating. *Men in Black* is Hollywood at its dazzling best, transporting viewers into a world of fantasy from which they really do not want to come back!

Summary: The Men in Black, as in the title of the film, are American government agents. They have no names, no contact with their families, and their existence is totally secret. They wear black suits and very black glasses. Their job is to observe and track aliens, who have been living on this planet since the early 1950s. These aliens disguise themselves to look exactly like human beings. The public has no idea about this, hence the utter secrecy of the Men in Black.

A special kind of alien arrives, a 'Bug' that kills people and other aliens. It has come to start an intergalactic war. If it succeeds, planet Earth will be destroyed. Only the aliens know this and start to leave Earth. The Men in Black are puzzled. Why are all the aliens leaving?

When James Edwards, a brave and clever policeman, meets an alien, he can't believe his eyes! Invited to join the Men in Black, he changes his name to Jay. He teams up with Kay, who is an expert on aliens. Together, Kay and Jay make a formidable team, as they try to stop the planet from being destroyed by the 'Bug', who has entered the body of a man called Edgar.

Chapters 1 and 2: Detectives stop a van with Mexicans hiding in the back. Suddenly, Men in Black appear. They take Mikey, an alien, away from the others. Mikey escapes and Kay shoots him. The detectives realise that Mikey is not human, so Kay uses a machine called a neuralyzer to make everyone forget what happened. Next, a man is running up and down Madison Avenue shouting, 'The world is finished.' Policeman James Edwards chases the man and has a fight with him. The man runs into a building and jumps out of a window. Kay finds James and asks him lots of questions. They go to Jeebs's gun shop and Kay finds out the man used a carbonizer gun. Jeebs is an alien too, and Kay then uses the neuralyzer on James who forgets everything.

Chapters 3 and 4: Edgar and Beatrice are having a meal. Suddenly there is a noise outside. Edgar goes out and sees a large hole in the road. An alien pulls Edgar into the hole. When Edgar comes out, his face looks strange. At work, James Edwards is sent for a test to join Men in Black. He passes the test. Kay explains what Men in Black do and Edwards meets some aliens. Edwards decides he wants to be one of the Men in Black too.

Chapters 5 and 6: A man with a van comes to his Edgar's house and Edgar kills him. Edgar puts the spaceship from the hole into the van and drives away. Kay gives Edwards a



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new name, Jay. Kay and Jay go and find the alien Redgick. They find Redgick and his wife and Jay helps deliver her baby in the van. The Redgicks want to escape from Earth as there are other aliens coming whom they don't like. Kay and Jay go to meet Beatrice, and Kay realises there is a Bug in New York.

Chapters 7 and 8: Rosenberg goes to a Russian restaurant where he meets an Arquillian. Edgar comes in and kills them. Afterwards Dr Laurel Weaver is cutting up the second body, when Kay and Jay come in, pretending to be doctors. Rosenberg's body is that of a green man and he tries to tell them about the fighting. Back at the office, Kay and Jay watch their screens and realise that all the aliens are leaving Earth. They see an Arquillian spaceship and decide to go and get their guns. Edgar kills again.

Chapter 9: Kay and Jay find Edgar and chase him, but Edgar escapes in a police truck. Kay speaks to a dog who tells him that the Baltians want to give the Arquillians the Third Galaxy, but the Bugs want to stop this. The dog says the galaxy may be very small and may be on Earth. Kay realises this galaxy is in the jewel in the cat's collar with the word 'Orion' engraved on it and goes back to the restaurant. Edgar has the same idea and is already there. Edgar points his gun at Laurel.

Chapter 10: The Bug takes Laurel and escapes and the Arquillians fire on the Baltians. The Men in Black realise the battle is going to damage the earth and that they need a spaceship so they go to the World Fair Building, where there are two space ships They don't know if the spaceships will fly. Laurel manages to escape, but Edgar flies away in a space ship. Kay and Jay get out their big guns which pull the spaceship back towards the ground. Edgar's body splits open and a big Bug climbs out. The Bug eats the guns, and then it eats Kay!

Chapters 11 and 12: Kay manages to shoot the Bug from inside it, so the Men in Black save the Earth and get the Third Galaxy for the Arquillians. Kay telephones Zed to tell him so that the fighting between the Arquillians and the Baltians can stop. Afterwards, Kay asks Jay to neutralize him as he doesn't want to remember being inside the Bug. However, he doesn't neutralize Laurel but changes her name to Elle and she becomes part of the Men in Black team. Elle and Jay continue to work for Zed.

Background and themes

Science fiction: *Men in Black* is in the grand tradition of twentieth century science fiction stories. Science fiction

truly began with the book *The War of the Worlds*, written by the English novelist H G Wells in 1898, about how the planet Earth is invaded by Martians. Since then, the science fiction genre has developed rapidly.

Life on other planets: In the 1990s, there was a widespread, if rather unlikely belief, that there was life on other planets. Sightings of Unidentified Flying Objects were common, and in the United States in particular, a significant minority of people claimed to have been abducted by aliens. A number of books have been published on this subject, not all of them arguing against this idea. Inevitably, the Hollywood film industry has capitalised on these beliefs and possibilities. The most famous science fiction movies of all time are probably Steven Spielberg's *ET* and George Lucas's science fiction series *Star Wars*. *Men in Black* also looks at an invasion of Earth by aliens and brings this idea right up-to-date with the involvement of the Secret Services.

New frontiers: Psychologists have their theories as to why people are so fascinated by the idea of life on other planets. It seems that humans are creatures who must constantly explore and enlarge their frontiers. Now that the continents of Earth, once so mysterious and unknown, have been minutely explored, where can man look next, if not to the stars? Humans set both their imagination and their scientific intelligence to work, and the result is that men have walked on the moon.

Discussion activities

Before reading

- Discuss:** Put students in small groups and ask them to discuss the book cover. If students have seen the film, ask them to wait until the others have spoken. *What do you think the book is about? What are the men wearing? Why are they dressed in black? How does the cover make you feel? Is this a book you would like to read?*
- Guess:** Pre-teach the word *guess*, and then write these words on the board: alien, bug, body, galaxy, Earth, collar, space ship. Ask students to guess what the words mean. Students can look at the Word List at the back of the book to help them.
- Write:** Have students write their own sentences using the words in question 2 to show they understand the meaning.
- Look:** Have the students look at all the pictures in the book and guess which pictures show aliens and how many aliens there are. Ask students to write down what they think. Refer to this as you come to each picture.



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Introduction

After reading

- 5 **Discuss:** Have students discuss the following questions in pairs. *Who are Men in Black? What do you think it means to 'watch the aliens'? What do you think they do in their job? Do they meet aliens? What are the Third Galaxy and the Bug? Write down your predictions.*

Chapter 1

After reading

- 6 **Artwork:** Ask students to draw an alien but not to show it to anyone else. Ask students to be imaginative and to use lots of colours.
- 7 **Pair work:** Ask students to work in pairs. The first student describes their alien to the other student. The second student mustn't look at the picture, but must try and draw the alien following the instructions. When the second student has finished drawing, they can compare pictures.

Chapter 2

Before reading

- 8 **Predict:** Ask the students to discuss the title in small groups. *What do you think this chapter is about? Have you heard the phrase 'the end of the world' before? Predict what you think is going to happen in this chapter and write down your predictions.*

After reading

- 9 **Check:** Ask students to discuss their predictions about this chapter. *Were your predictions correct? What do you think the title 'The end of the world' means now?*
- 10 **Write:** Ask students to answer the following questions.
- What does a neuralyzer do?
 - Why does Kay use this?
 - Would you ever use a neuralyzer? What would you use it for?

Chapter 3

After reading

- 11 **Role play:** Student A is Beatrice. You want to know what happened outside and why Edgar's face looks strange. Student B is Edgar. You feel strange and do not really understand what has happened. But you are also the Bug, so you need to pretend to Beatrice that you are OK. Have the conversation.

Chapter 4

After reading

- 12 **Write:** Ask students to imagine they are Kay and are looking for a new person to be one of the Men in Black. Ask students to write down a list of adjectives. *What type of man are you looking for? Write down as many describing words as you can to describe the right person for the job.*

Chapter 6

After reading

- 13 **Pair work:** Ask the students to discuss these questions in pairs.
- Why does Edwards get a new name?
 - Why are Redgick and his wife leaving?
 - What are they going to do?
 - Why does Kay neuralyze Beatrice?
 - What does he tell her to remember?
 - Which would you prefer to remember, what really happened, or what Kay says happened?

Chapters 7–9

After reading

- 14 Ask the students to write down everything they have learned about the following: Laurel Weaver, the little green man, Orion, the Arquillians and the Baltians.

Chapters 10–12

Before reading

- 15 **Predict:** Have students predict the end of the book and write down their predictions. *What will happen to the Bug? Do you think the Baltians and the Arquillians will fight? Who will find the Third Galaxy? What will happen to Laurel Weaver? Will the Men in Black save the world?*
- 16 **Write:** Before reading the end of the book, have the students use their predictions and write a short ending in their own words.

After reading

- 17 **Discuss:** Have students discuss the following questions in small groups. *Were your predictions about the end of the story correct? Was your ending the same as the book? How was your ending different from the book? Which do you prefer?*
- 18 **Write:** Ask students to imagine they are a newspaper journalist and they have to write the story of the Bug. They can include an interview with Kay. Ask them to think about the following questions: *What happened to Edgar? What did the Bug do? Who did it kill? What happened to Kay? How did the Men in Black save the Earth?*
- 19 **Discuss:** Put the students into small groups and ask them to discuss what will happen in the future. *What will happen to Jay and Elle? Will they continue to work for Zed? Will they get married? What will happen to Kay? Will he ever remember being a Man in Black?*

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.