

A Curriculum Guide to

***The Dark Side of Nowhere***

By Neal Shusterman

This curriculum guide correlates to the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.6.2, 3) (RL.7.1, 4, 6) (RL.8.2, 6, 9) (RL.9-10.3, 5) (L.7.5, 5a) (L.8.5)

**About the Book**

Ninth grader Jason Miller has more than his share of teen angst. He hates his small hometown, despises his boring parents, and is tired of his dull life. Then his best friend dies, and the school janitor begins dropping weird hints that things aren't normal. Jason begins to suspect that his town is hiding a secret.

With the help of a newcomer to the town, Paula Quinn, Jason begins searching for the truth. They start researching an epidemic that took the lives of many townspeople twenty years earlier. But when the janitor, Grant, gives him a strange glove with mysterious powers, Jason's attitude changes. He loses interest in Paula's search through the past when he realizes he's looking for the secret in the wrong place: his own parents have been lying to him.

When Jason finally learns the truth from his parents about who they are and who he really is, it is only the beginning of his search for identity. Who is Jason Miller? And as his entire community sets about changing the world as we know it, Jason has to decide where his true loyalties are, and whether he is capable of setting things right.

**Discussion Questions**

1. The novel opens with a short, declarative sentence: "Ethan died of a burst appendix." This not only packs an emotional wallop, it creates a tension that overhangs the early pages of the novel. Why do you think the author chose to start the book with this subplot?
2. Why do you think the story is told from a first person point of view? In particular, the POV of an angry teen? How does Jason's narration make the fantastic elements seem more credible?
3. The opening scenes introduce a raft of characters: Jason, Roxanne, Paula Quinn, Mr. Smith, Pastor Bob, Wesley, Mr. Grant, Jason's parents. How do each of the characters react to the news of Ethan's death? How does the author reveal more about these characters over the following pages? What do we learn about each of them?
4. One clue that things aren't as they seem in Jason's hometown is his strange visit to the family doctor every month for shots, which he mentions off-handedly. What are some

other clues in the story that things in Billington are not normal, and how does Jason view them?

5. Early on, Jason has a choice to spend more time with Paula, investigating the town's secret past, or with Mr. Grant, learning about the mysterious glove. What do you think about Jason's choice? Would you have made the same one? Why or why not?

6. As Grant trains the town kids, he exhorts them with "strange profundities," including:

- a. "Remember what you once were. Imagine what you'll soon become."
- b. "Your parents have chosen to forget. You'll make them remember."
- c. "You can't imagine how different things will be tomorrow."

What do you think each of these sayings means to Jason when he hears them the first time? What do they mean after he finds out the truth? What do you think they mean at the end of the novel?

7. When Jason finds out the truth about himself, at first he's *thrilled*. He feels no remorse about leaving his ordinary life behind and can't wait to begin his new life. Trace how his attitude, gradually, changes. How would you feel if you suddenly found out you were more powerful than you could have imagined, but there would be a cost?

8. Many parts of the book are very funny. Give some examples of the use of humor—jokes, physical comedy, puns, irony, sarcasm, light banter—and explain how they are used to advance the story, reveal character, or lighten the tension.

9. Mr. Grant is asked what will happen to all the people not like them, and he responds, "Fill your minds with [your friends], and with your parents. As for everyone else, they're not your concern now. That will all work itself out." How does this attitude parallel every war crime and genocide ever committed? Discuss what Mr. Grant really means by the euphemism, "That will all work itself out."

10. Shusterman takes on the challenge of describing the indescribable when he shows us the first alien being among them: "I thought about how I might describe it to others," Jason writes, "and realized that it simply wasn't possible." Then he goes and does it. How would you describe the color red to someone who can't see, or the taste of a peach to someone who has never tasted fruit? Think of other things or states that are impossible to describe, and try to describe them.

11. The best science fiction and fantasy explore real world issues by way of metaphor and analogy. What serious issues do you think are being explored in *The Dark Side of Nowhere*? What attitudes are being addressed? How are these issues and attitudes characterized in the book?

12. The author has said that the conclusion of this book is one of his personal favorite endings, yet it leaves the reader a moment before what would be a major event. Why did

the author make the conscious choice to do this? The most important statement Jason makes in the entire book is in the last paragraph. What is that statement? Can you think of other books or movies that end at the moment something else is about to begin?

### **Activities and Research: Beyond the Text**

1. Jason describes Billington as a typical boring town, with fast-food places and an uninspired mall. How many anonymous, “pin-prick road-apple towns” just like Billington are there in the United States? Using online resources, do a census of small towns. Divide into small groups, and have each group choose one town for an intensive study. What is the geography? The climate? Main industries? What is the economic picture of the town? The political? The social? Does the town have an online newspaper available to read? Have each group present a profile of their town to the others.
2. Write an article for the fictitious town newspaper, *The Billington Bugle*, or present a video newscast, describing an event or series of events from the story. Include “interviews” with experts and locals, and describe the situation and background in reportorial style. How far is your news report from the first-hand experience as described by Jason?
3. Jason’s father told him a bedtime story when he was little, which began, “Once upon a time there sailed a ship of fools who fancied themselves warriors . . .” The story, in coded language, tells the story of Jason’s family’s origins. Many nursery rhymes and fairy tales contain secret meanings. Research other bedtime stories that contain hidden messages, or make up one of your own. Explain what the story or rhyme really means.
4. One of the things Jason is looking for, and one of the themes of the novel, is belonging to “something much larger than yourself.” While in some ways this could be ennobling, Jason later describes the concept of the “feedback loop” in a group where everyone agrees with everyone else, “and the things that start to sound normal and reasonable have no bearing on what’s true.” Research real world examples of like-minded, self-isolating groups, and describe some of the costs and benefits of being a member.
5. Other films and books tell stories of aliens living hidden among us, such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Invaders from Mars*, *They Live*, *The Faculty*, and even *Men in Black*. Such stories are usually metaphors, analogies for a serious issue, or social satire: a remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, for instance, made fun of the creeping culture of conformity. Choose another film, book, or story of hidden invaders. What metaphor do you think the author or filmmaker was trying to draw? What did critics and thinkers of the time suggest that story was about? What metaphor do you draw from *The Dark Side of Nowhere*? How is this book different from the other stories? How is it similar?
6. The novel ends before Jason gives a speech to the state senate. Write the speech you would deliver if you were in Jason’s place.

7. Jason's thoughts constantly return to the question, "What does it mean to be human?" At the end of the novel, he chooses to stand with humanity. You can do the same by getting involved with a cause you believe in. Whether human rights, the environment, or another issue, find an organization actively working toward your goal. At the end of the semester, present to your class, in the form of a short video, what you've learned from the experience.

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