

A Curriculum Guide to

Also Known as Elvis

By James Howe

About the Book

In this fourth book of James Howe's Misfits series, Skeezie Tookis, also known as Elvis, is starting his summer after seventh grade with a pretty bleak outlook. His best friends Bobby, Joe, and Addie all have great plans for their summer vacations. Skeezie, on the other hand, is looking at a summer filled with babysitting his younger sisters while their mom works two jobs, since their dad walked out two years ago and has hardly been seen since. Even with the two jobs, the bills are stacking up, and Skeezie's mom tells him that he needs to get a summer job to help support the family. Thanks to Steffi, Skeezie lands a job at the Candy Kitchen, where not only does he learn about the virtues of sweet potato fries but he also discovers new friendship, realizes the meaning of "frenemy," learns to pity the town bully, and re-encounters his long-absent dad.

Discussion Questions

The discussion questions below align with the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.7.1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 10)

1. Does Skeezie's mom treat him more like a son or an adult partner? Use examples and quotes from the novel to support your answer.
2. Summarize Skeezie's relationship with Becca Wrightsman. What is their relationship like?
3. Would you say that Becca is a good person? How about Skeezie's dad? Why or why not?
4. The setting of *Also Known as Elvis* is in the small fictional town of Paintbrush Falls in Upstate New York. In the first book of the series, *The Misfits*, it's implied that Skeezie's leather-jacket-wearing, Harley-riding dad leaves this town because he doesn't fit in. But even though he slicks his hair back and wears his dad's old black leather jacket, Skeezie sees himself staying in Paintbrush Falls. Using examples from the book, explain why Skeezie is comfortable in Paintbrush Falls and how he makes this small town his home.
5. Do any of Skeezie's friends need to leave Paintbrush Falls when they're older? Explain why.
6. Explain what Skeezie means by this simile/extended metaphor: "I guess you could say I saw it coming, but it's kind of like hurricane warnings. You think, 'Yeah the rain's getting kind of heavy, but a hurricane? Not going to happen here. And then it hits. It had

been raining pretty hard.” What is happening in his family when Skeezie says this? Why does Skeezie use the image of the hurricane? Consider what happens before, during, and after a hurricane.

7. One of the themes in *Also Known as Elvis* is the effect on a family of a father’s abandonment. Describe how losing her father affects Megan.
8. Though most of the novel is written in first person from Skeezie’s point of view, the dialogue, forums, notes, texts, and “The Skeezie-Steffi Dialogues” give the reader added insights into the different sides of Skeezie. What do you learn about Skeezie from the other characters in the book?
9. Another theme in the novel is honesty and disclosure. Many characters in the story either lie or don’t tell the entire truth. Skeezie says, “There were things I wasn’t being honest about with my friends.” What is Skeezie lying about? Are there other characters who are not open and honest? Find and describe points in the book where other characters lie.
10. In terms of the theme of dishonesty, explain why Licky/Lily and Penny, the dogs, are important in the book.
11. One aspect of great writing is using sensory detail. Skeezie spends a lot of time eating. Make a list of at least ten different items that Skeezie eats, and write down the sensory details he uses to describe them.
12. Make a list of all of the different styles of writing used in the novel (e.g., song lyrics, lists, notes). What is your favorite style that was used, and why? How do these different styles contribute to Skeezie’s story?
13. When Skeezie says that he is good at wisecracks, he is saying that he is funny. Find a comic scene in the novel. (There are many!) Analyze what makes the scene humorous. Are there literary devices used, like puns, hyperbole, or repetition, that add humor to the scene?
14. Many of the chapter titles are funny. Analyze them and explain what, if anything, makes them funny.

Research and Writing Activities

These activities align with the following Common Core Standards:
(RL.7.1, 5, 7, 9, 10)

1. Relate to Informational Reading. Read the following excerpt written by Roy F. Baumeister, an Eppes Eminent Scholar, Professor of Psychology, and head of the social psychology graduate program at Florida State University from an article in *Psychology Today*, published on June 23, 2008:

“Our society wants men to accept obligations of fatherhood, but they are not respected for doing so. In the media, fathers are mostly portrayed as clueless, hapless buffoons or, occasionally, as violent abusers. Social policy and social science have affirmed for decades that it is perfectly fine for a woman to raise children without a husband or father.”

Cite some media, such as movies, books, or video games that either support or contradict this statement, and explain how this quote relates or does not relate to *Also Known as Elvis*.

2. Make a playlist of the songs mentioned in the book. Listen to the songs. (You can do this on www.youtube.com.) Make a collage that includes pictures of the musicians and lyrics from the songs.
3. Write a forum with the Gang of Five that takes place during the first few days of eighth grade, following the events of *Also Known as Elvis*. Make sure to have the characters sound authentic. Reread the forums, and imitate how the characters talk, what they discuss, their humor, inside jokes, etc. Then construct a set to look like the Candy Kitchen and perform your forum.
4. Act out the “Skeezie-Steffi Dialogues.” Pair up students to act out the dialogue. After each performance, have the students comment on how the interpretation of these characters differs from their own (interpretation).
5. Debate. Look at 3a and 3b in the Discussion section. Jot down notes on your ideas. Define your terms (i.e., write a definition for “good”). State a claim or take a stand. Write a concluding statement. Then organize yourselves into groups and have a debate. Create a group of judges who will base its verdict on the best arguments backed up with textual evidence. Remember to anticipate the other side’s arguments so that your group is prepared to rebut the other groups’ claims.
6. Essay. Choose either number 1, 3, 6, 7, or 8 in the Discussion questions to use as a prompt, and write a formal, four-to-six paragraph essay. Remember that an essay must have an introduction with a thesis, body paragraphs with evidence from the novel, and a conclusion. It must be in third person and proofread.
7. Time line. *Also Known as Elvis* jumps back and forth in time. Throughout the book, the reader finds out different characters’ back stories; for example, we gradually learn the full story of why Skeezie’s dad left. The central plot occurs within one week – the week that Bobby, Addie, and Joe are on their vacations. Make a time line of that week and include only actual events that happen. For example, you couldn’t include on your time line when Penny escaped (that was in the past), but you could put that Skeezie’s dad tells Skeezie the whole truth—that would go towards the end of your time line.
8. Make comic strips out of two scenes from *Also Known as Elvis*. Make one strip out of

a serious scene and one out of a humorous scene. Be sure to include the actual dialogue or narrative from the book, and draw details that match the description of the characters and places.

Postreading Activity

This activity aligns with the following Common Core Standard: (RL.7.1)

Read the full series: *The Misfits*, *Totally Joe*, *Addie on the Inside*, and *Also Known as Elvis*.

Consider the labels that one reads and hears about the characters of the Misfits series—not only in the books themselves, but in reviews, summaries, and book talks. For example, Bobby is overweight. Joe is gay. Addie is too smart. Skeezie is a greaser. The irony is that the books show how labels are just one part of a person and that people are really multifaceted—we are made up of many, many parts. Each of these books allows its character to reveal their inner as well as their outer selves. Just like the Gang of Five do in *The Misfits* when they are writing down names that they have been called, make a list of twenty different personality traits for each of the four protagonists, or choose one character (Bobby, Joe, Addie, or Skeezie) and see if you can list fifty traits for them. Be prepared to back up each trait with evidence from one of the books.

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