

A Curriculum Guide to

Nate Expectations

by Tim Federle

About the Book

Fourteen-year-old Nate loves living in New York City and acting in a Broadway musical version of *E.T.* When the musical closes and he has to return home to Jankburg, Pennsylvania, he's devastated. Most upsetting is the thought of being separated from his first real crush, Jordan, the star of *E.T.* Arriving at his hometown high school, Nate's shocked to realize he's no longer an outcast. His fellow students—including a cute boy named Ben—find Nate and his Broadway career intriguing. And when Nate and his best friend, Libby, decide to put on their own musical, Nate's dreaded hometown actually starts to feel like home.

Discussion Questions

The discussion questions below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.4-8.1, 2, 3) (RL.5-6.5) (SL.4-8.1)

1. Nate explains in the first chapter that, "Sometimes, you have to leave your hometown to finally feel at home." What does he mean by that? How does the statement apply to his life? In what ways does returning to his hometown create tension?
2. Why is Nate surprised to see his father at the bus station? Why is his father there? What do the answers to those questions tell you about their relationship? Discuss how their relationship changes in the book, pointing to specific scenes throughout that show those changes.
3. When he arrives in Pittsburgh, Nate feels apologetic, and when he admits to the coach that he's Anthony's brother, he sounds like he's apologizing. What is it about those situations that makes him feel apologetic? How does he change over the course of the book? What helps him gain confidence?
4. What aspects of Nate's voice make him such a likeable narrator? Which personal qualities stand out to you, and how do they come across in his story? What parts of life are hard for him? How does he handle those situations?
5. Nate is still close friends with Libby. Describe Libby's personality and her home life. What makes Libby and Nate good friends? How do they complement each other? Talk about their roles in putting on the musical and how they work out their differences. What makes each of them successful in their theater roles?

6. How does Nate feel about Jordan when the book opens? How do you think Jordan feels about Nate? How do they treat each other? What are some clues throughout the novel that the relationship might not last much longer?
7. “When you’re fourteen, you’re basically sixteen but also basically twelve,” observes Nate. What does he mean by this? Do you agree? In what ways, if any, are Nate and Libby like sixteen-year-olds? How are they like twelve-year-olds?
8. Describe Ben’s personality and what you can discern about his living situation. What are his hopes? How does he pursue those hopes? What are some problems that he faces?
9. When Nate learns that Ben is, contrary to his slacker image, a star English student, he says, “Every boy is basically a secret in a ball cap.” What does he mean? What other characters turn out to have unexpected qualities? How is Nate himself a secret to others?
10. How does Nate’s growing relationship with Ben seem different from his relationship with Jordan? How does Ben make Nate feel about himself? Why do you think they are attracted to each other? Describe the scene in which Ben asks Nate to Homecoming. What does this show about Ben?
11. How do you expect the coach to act before Nate talks to him? What does Nate expect? How does the conversation with the coach turn out differently than expected? Describe the coach’s concerns about his niece and what they show about him.
12. What is Nate’s first impression of the coach’s niece, Paige? Describe Paige’s personality and her attitude toward the musical. Why is the experience so important to her? How does it transform her?
13. Without Mr. English’s support, Nate wouldn’t have put on the musical. Give examples that show Mr. English’s qualities as a teacher and a person. How does Nate react to him? Explain the assignment that leads to the musical.
14. Libby explains that high school is different from middle school. What aspects are different for Nate? In what ways is it better than his middle school experience? Do you think there are ways in which it is worse?
15. What is the significance of Nate’s mother sending him a gay pride flag emoji? What is his reaction? Why does she text him instead of talking to him directly? Discuss Nate’s observation that his mother’s texts “are her novels, her sonnets.”
16. When the cast meets in the chapter titled “Signs,” Nate notes that they used to come to rehearsals as individuals, “heads down, phones out. But they’re a family now.” What aspects of working on the musical bring them closer together? How can a group experience create these types of bonds? Is this always the case? Discuss a group experience you’ve had and whether it was similar to Nate’s.

17. Aunt Heidi tells Nate, “Sometimes you have to say goodbye to someone before you can say hello to yourself.” What does she mean? What happens to cause Nate to see the point of the phrase? Can you think of instances from your life or other books when this observation was true?

18. Talk about the book’s title, which echoes *Great Expectations* with the word *Nate* substituted for the word *Great*. What role does the Dickens novel have in the story? What are some of Nate’s expectations, and how do they turn out for him?

Extension Activities

The discussion questions below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.4-8.1, 4) (W.4-8.2, 3) (SL.4-8.1)

1. Nate, his friends, and even his mother communicate by texting. Imagine an event that takes place after this novel ends, such as Homecoming or a visit to Nate’s aunt in New York. Then write a text exchange between Nate and another character that mirrors the way Nate uses emojis. The texts should communicate information and emotion. Share the texts with your classmates.

2. Instead of writing original music, Nate finds popular music to go along with *Great Expectations*, choosing songs that fit certain scenes. Take *Nate Expectations* or another novel you like and choose songs that would work for a musical based on the book. List the songs and explain how they fit with specific scenes or characters in the book.

3. Nate comments, “I feel like there’s got to be some kind of manual that high school students get, that tells them how to not completely screw up their lives.” Brainstorm three major guidelines for doing well in school in any capacity; consider social, psychological, and academic aspects. Write short explanations for each of your three guidelines on a single sheet of paper. The class can then create a “How to Survive School” manual by binding all the sheets together.

4. *Nate Expectations* is full of funny incidents and comments. In small groups, find sections of the book that made you laugh or smile. Read them aloud and then discuss what makes them funny. See if you can come up with some guidelines of humorous writing based on the book and Nate’s narrative voice.

5. Nate interprets Mr. English’s assignment, “The Story of the Day I Was Born,” as “the day I count as when I really became myself.” Write an essay or journal entry using Nate’s interpretation, which you won’t have to share with the class. It doesn’t have to be as dramatic as Nate’s, but should be about a memorable event or experience that made a difference in your life.

6. Nate uses the phrase “Bawling Broadway babies,” and then explains, “I’m obsessed with alliteration.” Find at least three examples of alliteration in the novel. Post the examples on a bulletin board and then add alliterative phrases of your own.

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