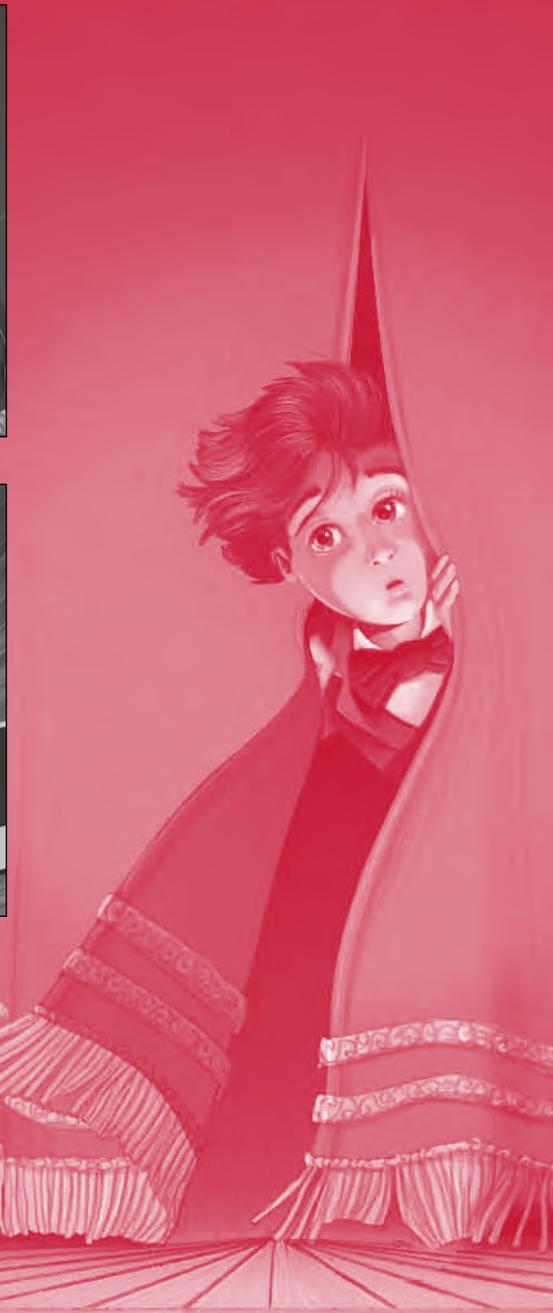
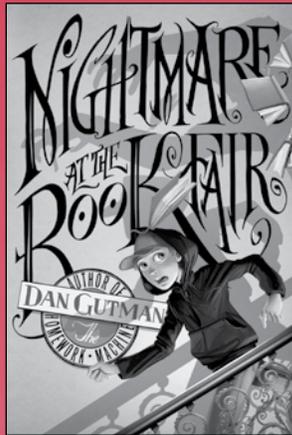
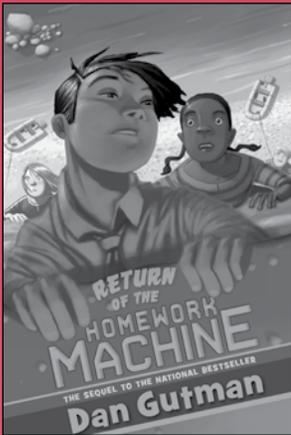
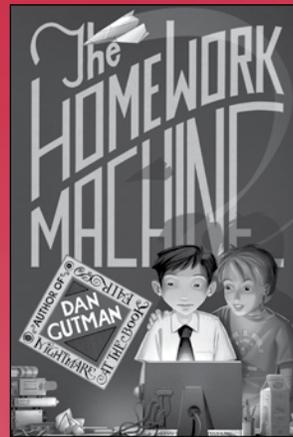
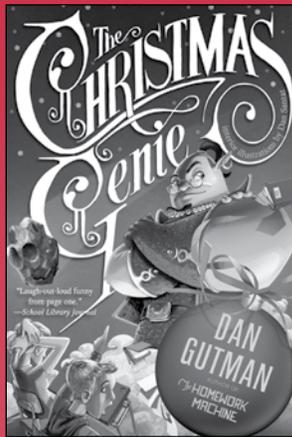
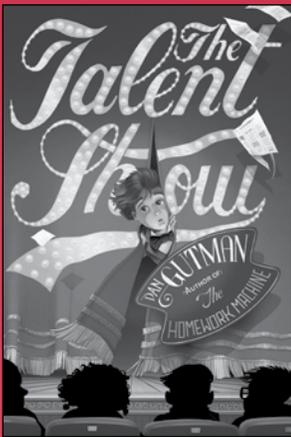


THE WORLD OF DAN GUTMAN

A Guide to Books by Dan Gutman



The Talent Show



ABOUT THE BOOK

When their town gets destroyed by a tornado, everyone in Cape Bluff is pretty depressed. So in order to cheer everyone up and raise some money, the community decides to put on a talent show. Unfortunately, no one is particularly talented. But that doesn't stop everyone from giving it their all! Especially the one star in town. She just might have what it takes—if she can get to the show on time. When another tornado hits, the kids make every effort to put on the show, but there may be more surprises in store!

DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Do disasters bring out the natural goodness of people? What about the people who exploit the crisis situation?
- The principal suggests that the community needs to be doing something positive after the devastation to the town. Is his suggestion for a talent show a good way to bring people together to help one another?
- *The Talent Show* suggests that people may have hidden talent. Have the students discuss the characters in the story who might. Once the hidden talent is discovered by others, does this change their perception of these people?
- Discuss living vicariously through others. What does it mean? Have the students give examples from the book of parents living vicariously through their children.
- What does it mean to be “popular”? What traits describe someone who is popular? Are these characteristics necessarily good? Julia describes being popular as being at the top of the food chain, and she says she could get used to the feeling. Are some people popular without even knowing it? Is being popular something one should try to accomplish?
- Do all people have some form of talent? Define talent. Is someone who collects rocks talented? Would a paleontologist be considered talented? Is a farmer talented?
- Does talent always have to do with performing? Consider the stage crews, the sound and light people, the publicity crews.
- Does it take courage to perform onstage in front of an audience?
- Is it possible to have a talent and yet believe the talent is a curse? Consider Elke who loves to sing yet doesn't want to be discovered.
- The Blufftones wanted to play the song “Stacy’s Mom” as their act for the talent show. The judges refused to allow the song to be performed due to the lyrics. They decided to perform it anyway. Were the judges correct with their decision to censor the song? Were the Blufftones correct to undermine authority?
- Discuss some of the problems that may arise from a talent show. How does one deal with a person whose act is terrible? What determines if an act is acceptable? What are the standards for decency? Consider Julia’s dance and lip-synch group and Paul’s Blufftones.

- Discuss ways for people to cope after a devastating experience in their lives, such as the loss of a job, home, or loved one.
- Was it fair for the judges to refuse the student who wanted to show a PowerPoint presentation? They allowed a girl who sat and crocheted. Take into consideration that no one knew what the topic of the child's presentation was.
- Discuss Elke's situation concerning the talent show. She enjoys singing and performing yet does not wish to be famous. She has been told that if she wins her mother plans to divorce her father and take her to Hollywood. What options are available to her? How would you feel if you were told your parents would be getting a divorce if you won a talent show? Who would you talk to about this situation? How would you address this problem?
- Consider what it is like to be famous. What are the pros and what are the negatives? Do the pros outweigh the negatives?

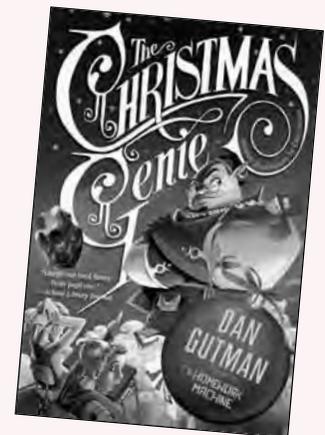
ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH

- Organize a talent show in your community. Make it part of a Community Service Learning Project where students, using their unique talents, work together to bring positive change to the community. Students will learn by firsthand experience how to organize an event through the planning stages, auditions, costuming, props, stage management, publicity, lighting, and direction. The students will gain experience and realize positive feelings for performing good deeds, and the community will benefit from any money raised for the designated project. It is a win-win situation.
- Consider a small classroom talent show. Each student must participate in some way. Have the students create a contract that they all must sign, which allows for diversity of talent. Stage management is just as important as performing. Not all students need perform. Perhaps someone could compose and write lyrics to a song and another person or persons would perform the piece.
- Research tornadoes and Tornado Alley on the Internet or in the library. Why do tornadoes form in certain locations?
- Invite the school psychologist to come to class to discuss ways to deal with traumatic events.
- Discuss the pros and cons of being famous. Make a chart listing the different suggestions. Do all the students agree on what is considered pro and what is considered con? Take each suggestion and ask the students if they consider the choice a pro or a con. Discuss why there might be differences of opinion.
- Research social agencies who would be able to provide help to victims of devastating calamities. Are there any local agencies who would provide food and/or clothing for those in need? What about shelters for people who become homeless?

The Christmas Genie

ABOUT THE BOOK

It's the last day of school before Christmas vacation and Alex, Chase, and the rest of Mrs. Walter's fifth-grade class couldn't wish more for that final bell to ring. But the day takes a crazy turn when a mysterious meteorite crashes through the classroom window and a genie pops out. He will grant just one wish for the whole class to share. Be careful what you wish for!



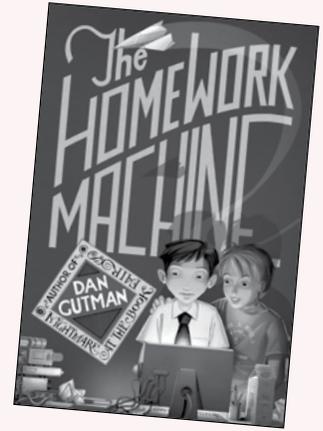
DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Dan Gutman is known for cleverly including facts and vocabulary in his stories. In *The Christmas Genie* there is a teacher who is studying for her PhD in astrophysics. The author uses her to introduce many facts about astronomy. Before reading the book, ask how many students know the difference between meteorites and meteors. What are the differences between comets, meteoroids, and asteroids?
- How does the author use the spirit of Christmas to encourage the students to think about someone other than themselves?
- How does the author demonstrate the importance of being careful what you wish for?
- The ground rules Genie Bob establishes insist that the students make a wish within an hour's time. For such an important decision is an hour enough time? Why or why not?
- Of all the wishes the students ask for, how many wish for something that would benefit others? What does this tell us about the students?
- If Genie Bob gets his wish to be Santa Claus, what happens to the real Santa Claus?
- Discuss the various themes in the book. Some of the themes include selfishness, greed, family relationships, friendship, and authority.
- When the students in the book were making their wishes, did they think about each wish's consequence? Discuss how the author has the students react positively or negatively to one another's wishes.
- Does hearing the pros and cons discussed from the point of view of the students make a difference in the reader's reaction to each wish? Did any comments change the reader's opinion? Does a student bring up an idea that didn't occur to the reader?
- Discuss the different personalities of the students in the story. Which student did readers admire? Which student did they dislike? Was there any character who stood out from the rest, and if so, why?

ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH

- Allow your students one hour to come up with a wish that would benefit the entire class. They should suggest wishes different from those discussed in the book. Discuss the wishes and have your students provide any pros and cons for each wish. Does any one wish succeed?
- Research meteorites in the library and/or on the Internet. What is the probability of one hitting the earth? What is the probability of one crashing through a window in a school?
- Have the students write what they hope to accomplish with their lives. What types of goals do they set for themselves in order to achieve their life dreams?
- Have the students take the point of view of Bob the Genie and write what it was like to live in a meteoroid before it came crashing to earth. How did he end up in a meteorite? What is it like to grant other people's wishes yet be unable to do anything to make oneself happy? Does Bob have a family?
- If your students could travel in time where would they go and why?

The HOMEWORK MACHINE



ABOUT THE BOOK

Doing homework becomes a thing of the past!

Meet the D Squad, a foursome of fifth graders at the Grand Canyon School, made up of a geek, a class clown, a teacher's pet, and a slacker. They are bound together by one very big secret: the homework machine. Because the machine, code-named Belch, is doing their homework for them, they start spending a lot of time together, attracting a lot of attention. And attention is exactly what you don't want when you are keeping a secret.

Before long, things start to get out of control, and Belch becomes much more powerful than they ever imagined. Now the kids are in a race against their own creation, and the loser could end up in jail . . . or worse!

DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Mrs. Wallace, a seasoned teacher, says that if an unpopular student suddenly becomes popular it means the other students are using him. Do the students in D Squad take advantage of Brenton and his homework machine? After the homework machine is destroyed, do they abandon Brenton? Does the D Squad learn anything in fifth grade?
- Is the suggestion by a teacher to give Miss Rasmussen's class a surprise quiz good advice? Why or why not? Is Judy's reaction to her pop quiz grade positive or negative?
- Kelsey says that worrying about the homework machine and keeping it a secret takes more time than if they did their homework themselves. Is this true?
- Discuss Brenton's description of himself as a coward for not confronting Kelsey and Snik about their lack of learning.
- Compare and contrast Miss Rasmussen's 10 Commandments of Homework to Sam's.
- Brenton says he feels morally obligated to leak the information about Belch. Is Brenton's idea for destroying any evidence on the hard drive of Belch moral? Is it justified?
- Do you believe that Belch is able to learn on its own and improve itself? Defend your answer. Consider artificial intelligence and Mr. Milner.
- What name would you give a computer that did your homework for you? How are you influenced by names?
- Do computers influence us?
- Is it possible to support the military and at the same time be against war?
- What effect does learning chess have on Snik? How does it affect his relationship with his dad? With Brenton? With his classmates?
- Discuss the value of having Miss Rasmussen's 10 Commandments of Homework in a classroom.
- Mr. Milner wants Brenton's homework machine because of its ability to influence the way people think and behave. Is it a good idea to allow this type of influence? What other implications could a machine like this have?
- Discuss ways to destroy Belch other than catapulting it into the Grand Canyon.

- Sam says the human brain doesn't fully develop until age twenty, and this is why the kids did a dumb thing. He feels they shouldn't be blamed for their mistakes. Is this a good excuse? Do students know that cheating is wrong? Sam says if anyone finds out about the homework machine then he will be in big trouble. Is there any time when cheating would be permissible?
- Do students know the difference between good and bad? Judy's dad mentions that sometimes the difference between right and wrong is obvious and other times it isn't so easy.
- At the beginning of school the D Squad is a mixed group and none of the students are friends. At the end of the year they've become friends. Is the seating arrangement by Miss Rasmussen a good idea? Should teachers mix up the classroom seating?

ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH

- Research Abraham Lincoln's Cooper Union speech to learn if Lincoln really said, "That is cool."
- Have the students write their own 10 Commandments of Homework. Share the results with the class and discuss them.
- Research artificial intelligence. Discuss if it is possible for a computer to take over control of itself or if computers still rely upon human control.
- Provide the class with a chessboard or use a computer program. Provide information on how to play chess and some free time for the students to practice. Host a chess tournament. Research the origins of chess and how it is related to war strategy.
- Sam says the human brain doesn't fully develop until one is about 20 years old. Research the development of the human brain. Is Sam correct or not?
- Sponsor a Ping-Pong tournament. Which students excel in the sport? Are there any surprises about who is the winner, as when Brenton won against his friends? Are there special techniques that one could use to control the game?
- Research catapults, their design and uses. There are many websites available with plans on how to build one.

**RETURN
OF THE**

HOMework MACHINE

ABOUT THE BOOK

Snik, Brenton, Judy, and Kelsey haven't stayed in the best touch since last year's big homework-machine scandal. But they are all pulled back together again when Brenton realizes that the most powerful part of the machine—the one that lets you cheat on homework—was never really destroyed. And there is someone out there who wants to use it for a lot more than cheating. So the group bands together again to stop the culprit. But first they have to solve the mystery of a hidden treasure. If you enjoyed the first adventure of *The Homework Machine*, hold on to your hats for this one!



DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Judy compares playing chess to warfare. She wonders if playing chess promotes aggressive behavior—does it? Is it possible that chess encourages one to look at a problem from several different ways? Discuss the difference in opinions among Judy, Mr. Murphy, Brenton, and Snik about chess.

- Discuss “small town” police chief Rebecca Fish’s style of policing as compared to an inner-city police chief. How does she respond to Canyonism and the additional work imposed by these people? Does the punishment for the students fit the crime, taking into consideration a murder was involved?
- Discuss Kelsey’s excitement over having her picture in the paper and her fifteen minutes of fame, even though the reason for her fame was for something she did that was wrong. Could this positive experience for a wrong action make a difference in one’s perspective of what is right and wrong?
- Brenton is a very intelligent student, and he says that he wants to take responsibility for his actions. Discuss his idea of making a Time Machine so he can go back in time to correct his mistakes. If he was able to do so, would he ever learn from his mistakes? He talks about having high moral standards, yet it is his idea to break into Ronnie’s house to look for the microchip. He also is the one who makes up the bogus cult, Notnerb. Does Brenton really have high moral standards?
- Mr. Murphy describes Brenton as a divergent thinker, one who looks at the world and sees things the rest of us overlook. What are the positive aspects for being a divergent thinker and what are the negative aspects?
- After reading the book, do you believe that some ancient people migrated from Egypt to the Grand Canyon? Could there have been a cover-up by the Smithsonian Institution?
- Judy, Kelsey, and Brenton decide to give Sam a surprise birthday party. Consider the presents they give Sam (the history of graphic novels, a violent video game, a model rocket), and the reason for each gift. How much thought went into buying the gifts? How well have they gotten to know Sam? Are these appropriate gifts?
- Critique Judy’s and Sam’s essays on “What If Women Ran the World?” Whose side would you be on? Do they have some legitimate complaints and solutions?
- Who is at fault for the death of Richard Milner? Is it Mr. Murphy? Brenton? Ronnie? Richard?
- Mr. Murphy doesn’t want to tell the police the whole truth about the body he reported. What is the difference between withholding information and lying? Is there a difference? Mr. Murphy is able to obtain special rocket fuel to launch their homemade rocket, with the computer chip inside, into outer space. This fuel is not accessible to the public and he needs help from his friends at NASA to get it. Is this action legal? What is Mr. Murphy’s moral standard?
- What does the saying “Take only pictures, leave only footprints” mean?
- Discuss Notnerb and its resemblance to cults. What are cults? Mr. Milner wants to make money from people who want to join Notnerb. How would you characterize Mr. Milner, as an opportunist, capitalist, sleazebag, etc.?
- Without the super GPS would Mr. Milner and Ronnie have found the cave? Are Ronnie and Mr. Milner correct when they say, “You never would have found the cavern if we hadn’t found it first”? If Mr. Murphy and the students hadn’t bumped into Mr. Milner’s raft would they have found the cave? Does discovering the treasure make it theirs as they claim?
- Richard Milner has a superchip that allows Brenton’s computer to perform complex applications not available for normal computers. He says that technology can be used for good and bad purposes. Discuss some of the positive and negative uses for technology. Should computers be allowed to influence the way people act? Is it possible for computers to influence the way people act?

ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH

- Have your students do a character analysis of the students in the book, Mr. Murphy, and police chief Rebecca Fish. To help the students visualize the results, have them make a chart with all the details. Which character has shown the most growth in his/her personality? Kelsey becomes aware of the environment, Brenton takes more responsibility for his actions, Sam admits he is smart and puts his intelligence to work, Judy always does the “right” thing.

- Research the debris in outer space left from all our space explorations. Have the students write an essay on the topic, “Is space a good place to dump our unwanted garbage?” Have the students rewrite and correct their work then share their essays with the rest of the class.
- Dan Gutman includes many interesting facts about the Grand Canyon throughout the book. Have the students write an essay on the facts they have learned.
- What’s in a name? Brenton interprets Ronnie’s last name, Teotwawki, to mean, “The End of the World As We Know It.” Have the students use the last names of the different characters as acronyms and interpret what the names mean, based on what they know about the character.
- Have the students plan a three-day rafting trip down the Colorado River. Research the equipment one would need to take on the trip. The book lists some suggestions but there are more items that are needed. Remember to consider the weight of the equipment and the amount of space available.
- Research safety rules for traveling in the Grand Canyon with the varying temperatures and increase in activity. One rule is to eat before becoming hungry and to drink before getting thirsty.
- Each of Mr. Murphy’s students enjoy a different aspect of Egyptian culture. Have your students explore their favorite part of Egyptian culture. The options mentioned in the book include pyramids, mummies and the mummification process, the beliefs for preserving mummies, the different gods—Ra, Horus, and Osiris—the artwork, hieroglyphics, and the many rulers.
- Brenton comments that walking down the trail of the Grand Canyon is probably the closest anyone will get to time travel. Have the students examine the different geological layers in the sides of the canyon. Discuss the millions of years it took for the river to wear away the rock. Notice the different coloring of the rock.
- Brenton discovers a pictograph as they go down the trail. Investigate the different pictographs found in the Grand Canyon.

NIGHTMARE AT THE BOOK FAIR



ABOUT THE BOOK

Trip Dinkleman hates to read. Hates, hates, hates it.

All he wants to do is play lacrosse. So when the president of the PTA asks Trip to help her out on his way to tryouts, he is not happy. He is even more not happy when a stack of books tumbles onto his head and knocks him out cold, and especially when he wakes up and has absolutely no idea where he is. Now all he wants to do is get home. But after encountering a haunted house, aliens, talking animals, and much, much more, he realizes getting home might be just a little bit harder to do than he thought.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Dan Gutman wrote this story using several types of genre. Is he successful in introducing new readers to the variety of books available? Is the story coherent? Are you surprised by the amount of information he provides in this nightmare?
- Ask your students what their favorite genre is and why.

- What was your favorite easy-reader book? What is the importance of easy readers? For fun, visit the library and have the students read some of their favorite beginner books.
- Are book fairs and book clubs a good way to introduce books to children? What are the pros and cons of book fairs versus trips to the library?
- Trip was so interested in reading about funnel cake he thought he was eating some when in reality he was eating a book. Have you ever been so absorbed in reading a story that you have lost all sense of time and reality? Discuss the genre of the book that pulled you into the story. What genre is the least appealing to you and why?
- Is it necessary for aliens to come to our world and warn us about global warming? Is the author poking fun at our government and its lack of response to global warming?
- Discuss idioms and their use in our language. Have the students make a list of idioms. Are there any in the list that are unfamiliar to some of the students? Are there idioms spoken only in certain geographical places?
- What is a quest? What is the purpose of a quest? Name some famous stories with quests. Compare and contrast the main elements of these stories.
- How does one know what is historical fact and what is fiction in a historical fiction story?
- Do you think this book was difficult to write since it required using so many different writing styles or did it seem as if the author was having fun?

ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH

- Assign all alert apprentices an alliteration assignment.
- Write a story using each letter of the alphabet in order, defining each word as Mr. Gutman did in the chapter entitled “Reference.”
- Pass the story around. Play a game where one student starts a story and stops in the middle of the action. The next student continues the story from where the previous student left off. Continue until all the students have had an opportunity to participate. Once the story is done, go back and check to see if there are different genres in the story. Does the story follow a coherent story line?
- Have the students write an easy-reader story all in rhyme. After they are through, ask the students if it was as easy as they thought it would be. For more of a challenge make a list of the words they are allowed to use.
- Pair up older students with younger students and have them read some favorite easy-reader books. Allow the younger students the opportunity to read to the older students.

GETTING AIR

ABOUT THE BOOK

They can rule the half-pipe, but can they survive this?

Jimmy, David, and Henry are psyched. It’s summer, school’s out, and they are on their way to California, where they will be able to do some major skating. But on the plane, the unthinkable happens: They are hijacked by terrorists. As frightened as they may be, they take action and they succeed. Sort of. They may have beaten the



terrorists, but now their plane has crashed in the middle of nowhere, and all of a sudden their summer vacation is about finding food, shelter, and a rescue. Can three twelve-year-old boys find a way to get by without fast food and skate parks?

DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In this book, despite all precautions and screening some terrorists manage to hijack a plane. Discuss the different ideas for stopping the terrorists. In the end, Jimmy uses his skateboard to overcome one of the terrorists. Is this action part of the plan Jimmy and his friends made? What makes Jimmy decide to attack when he does? Discuss the different reactions people make in emergencies. Consider the amount of time one would have to decide what to do.
- Dan Gutman dedicates this book to Gary Paulsen, author of *Hatchet*. Compare and contrast Jimmy's skateboard to Brian's hatchet.
- After traumatic experiences when there have been fatalities the survivors often feel guilty that they survived. They question why they were spared and what they could have done differently. Discuss the feelings your students have. Offer suggestions for coping with death. Ask a school counselor to come to class to discuss ways to cope.
- Jimmy mentions that he never thought about where food came from. After reading this book do you have a greater or lesser appreciation for our food system? Would you be able to survive in the wilderness?
- After the plane crash, all the survivors decide that there need to be rules. David wants a totalitarian form of government while the others decide they want a democratic form. Discuss the differences between these two kinds of government.
- Under normal conditions would Mrs. Herschel and Arcadia have anything in common? Would the boys and Julia have anything in common with Mrs. Herschel and Arcadia? Would any of them have continued to share their lives together after the flight? Once they have the common experience of having survived the crash, how does this help them work together to stay alive?
- Jimmy admits that he has eaten plenty of animals in his lifetime but he doesn't want to kill any personally. How has our culture changed the way we think about our food? Is it a good thing people are so removed from the process of obtaining food, or are there more chances for contamination the farther one is from the source?
- Knowing survival techniques is helpful in case of emergency. Should schools be required to offer courses in survival? Should students be required to take them?
- After three days the survivors of the plane crash become depressed. There is no sign of any search activity. They are aware that it costs money to continue with searches, and they fear that no one is searching for them anymore. Discuss how long rescue missions should continue. How much money does it take to do a search and rescue mission? Where does the money come from? In this particular case, some passengers make phone calls and say good-bye to their families, so the search parties are aware that terrorists have taken over the plane. Consider also that this is a U.S. flight, but that the survivors were found in Canada.
- Why do the boys decide to skateboard? They construct a half-pipe from the outer layer of the airplane as a place to perform their tricks. Is this a way to reduce stress? What is the importance of relaxation and fun when in stressful situations?
- Is it ethically and morally correct for the survivors to make a profit from their experience? Should the victims' families be given part of the profit? Why or why not?
- When the survivors arrive back in civilization they are considered heroes in the war against terror. Does the time in the wilderness help prepare them for the dramatic changes in their lives once they come home?

ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH

- Each of the main characters has a strength that helps the rest of the group wait for their rescue. Choose a character and write an essay on what this person does to help the group. Share the essays with the class. Do the other members of the class agree with the writer? Make sure all the characters have been chosen.
- In the book, Julia suggests they try entomophagous cuisine. Most countries around the world have some form of diet which includes insects. Research different recipes which use insects.
- Jimmy admits that he has eaten plenty of animals in his life but doesn't want to be the one to kill the animal when the time comes. He insists that he needs protein and a vegetarian diet isn't working for him. Research the difference between vegetarian diets and those which include meat. Discuss which diet is the best and why it is the best. Remember that everyone is an individual with differing opinions.
- Do any of the characters in the book show growth in their personality? If so, which one or ones? Give examples from the book to support the various opinions.
- Many people have said they would like to be stranded on a deserted island. Have the students write an essay on the pros and cons of being stranded. Allow them to choose two items they would have to help them. Suggested items could be a hatchet, a magnifying glass, matches, or a good survival book!
- Have the students experiment by making a solar still. Tie a plastic bag over a branch with leaves and see if water does collect in the bag.
- Mrs. Herschel was related to William Herschel who discovered Uranus. After they all have a good laugh over the name of the planet, Mrs. Herschel points out some constellations. Research some of the planets and constellations that can be readily seen at night. If possible, visit a nearby planetarium or invite a mobile planetarium to the school.

About the Author

DAN GUTMAN is the author of cool books like *The Talent Show* and *The Homework Machine*, which was a *Booklist Editors' Choice* and an *IRA/CBC Children's Choice*. His books offer a terrific balance of humor and curriculum connections. Dan lives in New Jersey with his wife and children. Visit his website at DanGutman.com.

**"I hated to read when I was a kid.
That's why kids who hate to read like my books."**

—Dan Gutman



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BOOKS BY DAN GUTMAN



The Talent Show
(Ages 8-12)
ISBN 9781416990031 (HC)



The Christmas Genie
(Ages 8-12)
Illustrated by Dan Santat
ISBN 9781416990024 (HC)



The Homework Machine
(Ages 8-12)
ISBN 9780689876783 (HC)
ISBN 9780689876790 (PB)

A Booklist Editors' Choice
An IRA/CBC Children's Choice



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(Ages 8-12)
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Nightmare at the Book Fair
(Ages 8-12)
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Getting Air
(Ages 8-12)
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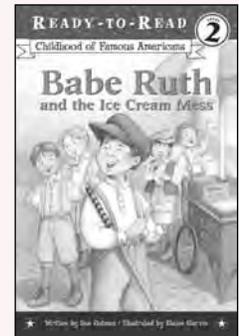
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