

A Curriculum Guide to

Noggin

By John Corey Whaley

About the Book

Sixteen-year-old Travis Ray Coates has died but is now alive again. Learning that he has leukemia and will soon die, he agrees to an innovative medical procedure, one in which his head is frozen and the rest of his body cremated. Five years later, doctors successfully attach his head to another teenager's body, and Travis awakens to learn that everything around him has changed: his best friend is in college, his girlfriend is engaged, and his family has changed in unexpected ways. Transformation is not easy. Somehow the old Travis has to learn how to coexist with his new body and navigate the changes around him.

Prereading Activities

The activities below align with the following ELA Common Core State Standards: (SL.9-10.1) (SL.11-12.1) (W.9-12.10)

1. Ask students to spend ten minutes brainstorming what they know about transplants. Have them discuss their understandings and identify concepts that need further investigation.
2. Have students locate online resources on cryogenics. Discuss promising scientific breakthroughs. Have students list questions and/or take notes on questions or concepts about which they would like to know more.

Discussion Questions

These discussion questions align with the following ELA Common Core State Standards: (RL.9-12.1, 2, 3, 4, 5) (SL.9-12.1)

1. Travis Coates has cancer. Why does he agree to a medical procedure to remove his head? How do his parents respond to the decision? His best friend? His girlfriend? Discuss his reaction when he realizes he has come back to life.
2. Discuss how the world Travis has known has changed since his death. His parents, best friend, and girlfriend must all adjust to having him back. Who has the most difficulty with his return and why? Discuss the challenges any two characters face when Travis returns. Support your responses with evidence from the text.
3. Compare and contrast Kyle with Travis's new friend, Hatton. Choose one of these characters and explain how he changes over the course of the novel.

4. Travis longs to see Cate, his girlfriend; however, she delays their meeting. Discuss how their relationship evolves, beginning with Travis's illness. Describe Cate's conflicting emotions about their relationship using evidence from the text.
5. Travis's doctor connects Travis with Lawrence Ramsey, the only other living cryogenics survivor. This character appears occasionally in the story. How would the story be different without him? Discuss the changes the author would need to make to eliminate this character from the story. What would the story "lose" if he were removed?
6. One theme in the novel is "secrets." Explain how this theme is introduced and how it develops throughout the story. How does the author incorporate secrets in the plot to surprise the reader? Discuss two additional themes and the role they play in the book. How do these themes develop throughout the story? Use specific details from the text to support your answer.
7. Travis's school has been saving letters from people who want to reach out to Travis after he returns to life. Why doesn't Travis want to read the letters? How does Travis's attitude toward the letters change toward the end of the story? Discuss whether Travis is a hero.
8. Travis goes to Arnie's Arcade with Kyle and Hatton, a place he had frequented regularly before his "death." Once they arrive, Travis heads to a familiar game: Space Invaders. Discuss Travis's behavior as he tries to beat the HIGH SCORE. What inferences can you make about the ownership of this score? What details support your inferences? Why is beating the score important to Travis?
9. Despite all the discouragement Travis receives from both Cate and Kyle about the likelihood that he and Cate can resume their former relationship, Travis buys her a ring and even offers it to her when her fiancé is nearby. What does this act say about Travis? What emotions does this scene invoke in readers? Discuss the words and passages the author uses to create these emotions.
10. As Travis works through his new identity he says, "Everyone just outgrew me. Now I think I'm just haunting them." Discuss what Travis means by this statement. What evidence in the story would support Travis's thinking and what evidence would illustrate that his thinking is incorrect?
11. Travis learns that his parents saved his ashes. How does Travis feel about their keeping the ashes? What do he and his friends do with them and why?
12. When Travis and his friends visit the cemetery where Jeremy Pratt is buried, they encounter Jeremy's mother and Jeremy's young sister. Jeremy's mother asks Travis to hold her daughter's hand. Why does she ask him to do so? Discuss how Chapter 3, "From the Neck Down," sets up this scene.

13. At the end of the story, Travis says, “We have to tell people it’s okay even when we know it isn’t.” Discuss Travis’s thinking behind this statement. What does the statement say about Travis’s growth as a character/person? Do you agree or disagree with his comment? Why or why not?

14. The author tells the story through the use of flashback. Discuss why the author uses this technique and the effect this technique creates. How would the story and the story’s structure be different if the author simply narrated the story from beginning to end? What challenges would a straightforward narrative pose?

15. Chapter 20 ends with Travis reflecting on the difficulty he is having adjusting to his new life. He says, “Truth is, I was the past and I had to find some way to exist in the future. It wasn’t going to be easy, that much I knew, but I had to try. That’s what people do in these situations, right? They try even when they know it’s impossible.” Discuss the meaning of this passage. Do you agree with Travis’s perspective? Why or why not?

16. Review the ending of Chapter 6 and the beginning of Chapter 7. Repeat this activity with several additional chapters. What pattern do you notice? Discuss how the ending of each chapter sets up the chapter that follows, and why the author made this stylistic choice. What does this contribute to the content of the chapter?

Activities

These activities align with the following ELA Common Core State Standards: (RL.9-12.2, 4) (SL.9-12.1, 2, 3, 5) (W.9-12.1, 3, 7, 9)

1. *Noggin* is written from a first-person point of view; thus, readers only have access to Kyle’s and Cate’s thoughts through their dialogue and behaviors when they appear in scenes and through what others convey about them. Have students write a scene between Kyle and Cate in which the two have just learned one of the following: a) Travis’s head will be unfrozen and will be transplanted onto Jeremy Pratt’s body; or b) the surgery is successful and Travis will be “returning.”

2. Have students imagine a conversation between Travis Coates and Jeremy Pratt in which both characters know what will happen five years later. What might they say to each other and why? What emotions might each character have? How might each feel about the loved ones who will be left behind and what might they want those individuals to know, given that both Travis and Coates know how they will “return”? Have students work in pairs to write the conversation. The conversation might occur face-to-face or on the phone.

3. Have students read Neal Shusterman’s *Unwind* (2007), a young adult novel that also addresses the issue of harvesting and transplanting human body parts. Discuss this novel in class and compare and contrast the themes, characters, and issues common to both novels. Additional novels to consider are *UnWholly* (2012), Shusterman’s sequel to

Unwind, and Melvin Burgess's *Sara's Face* (2008). Students might also write a literary analysis comparing/contrasting concepts or characters between two of these novels.

4. Cryogenics is a controversial subject and raises the question "What's next?" Divide students into groups and have them gather information on the pros and cons of cryogenics and have them participate in a debate. Prior to the debate, students should establish rules for a collegial discussion.

5. While *Noggin* is a poignant, bittersweet story, it is also laced with humor. Have students identify humorous phrases, conversations, and scenes in preparation for a small group discussion focused on the author's use of humor. As students share their examples, have them discuss the following two questions: a) What purpose does humor serve in the story? b) How would the tone and mood of the story be different if it were absent?

6. The author threads the concept/theme of "secrets" throughout the book and develops it through multiple characters. Have students in small groups closely analyze details about how the author introduces and develops this theme. Have each group prepare a written statement that illustrates the author's message about keeping secrets. Gather all statements and prepare a handout to share with the class as a whole. Allow time for the class to discuss the commonalities and differences in their statements. (E-mail is an efficient way to gather their statements so that statements can be easily pasted into one document.)

7. How is Travis's unusual experience parallel to that of any average teenager's issues while growing up? Is Travis all that different from a "normal" teenager? Have students write a short essay explaining their answer, citing evidence from the book. Students should be encouraged to cite other coming-of-age novels that they may have read to support their answer.

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