

BOOKS MAKE BRAINZ TASTE BAD

Reading Guide

Ages 8-12 ★ Grades 3-7



This guide is intended to enhance your reading of *Books Make Brainz Taste Bad*. It was developed in alignment with the Common Core State Standards. Please feel free to adapt this content to suit the needs and interests of your child, student, or reading group participants.



About *BOOKS MAKE BRAINZ TASTE BAD*:

In this zany, supernatural novel, Eli Cranor drives home the importance of stories. According to twelve-year-old Dash Storey, “zombie teachers” are using screens to fry sixth-graders’ brainz. Armed with a stash of creeptastic books, Dash sets out to save his classmates by getting them to read! *BRAINZ* will have readers reflecting deeply about their dependence on screens along with the importance of truth, friendship, and trust, all while laughing out loud.

“BRAINZ delivers big laughs and a timely message. A perfect fit for kids coping with COVID-19!”

READING LITERATURE

Character Study: FAMILIES AND FRIENDS

As a result of having to move every year the week before Halloween, Dash Storey is often uncertain as to what it means to like, love, and trust other people. Since he is the narrator of the book, Dash’s uncertainty affects readers’ perceptions of the characters he describes. In a reading journal or in class discussion, have students analyze the physical traits, lineage (parents, relationships), motivations, and concerns of major characters in the novel. What is especially important about the idea of family relationships in this book? Does Dash’s view of certain characters change in the course of the book? If so, how and why do the characters evolve?

English Language Arts Common Core Reading Literature Standards RL.3.3-6, 4.3-6, 5.3-6, 6.3-6, 7.3-6

Themes & Motifs: DISCUSSION TOPICS for BRAINZ

Books Make Brainz Taste Bad can be read on many levels, including as adventure stories, as musings on the nature of knowledge, and as fantasies incorporating elements of science fiction and horror. Here are some themes you may want to watch for and explore with your classmates or students.

SCREEN TIME

How is screen time portrayed in the novel? Do students think there is an appropriate balance when it comes to video games and social media? At the start of the book, Dash makes the claim that this book can save the reader’s life. Do students think he’s being honest? Could a book really save their life? If so, how?

CREATIVITY

Toward the end of the book, Izzy urges Dash to write a book of his own, one so good the other students will stop playing video games and read, thus saving their lives from Mr. Underhill, the zombie teacher. Is it believable that a twelve-year-old could really write a book? Have any of your students ever tried to write a book before?

English Language Arts Common Core Speaking and Listening Standards SL.3.1, 4.1, 5.1, 6.1, 7.1
SL.3.3, 4.3, 5.3, 6.3, 7.3

RESEARCH & WRITING PROJECTS

Keep a reading journal. Use the journal to record:

- Favorite quotations, funny lines, exciting scenes (note page numbers)
- Situations in which the main character is in crisis or danger, and notes on what advice readers might offer
- New vocabulary words
- Sketches inspired by the novel and the illustrations
- Questions readers would like to ask the author or characters from the novels

English Language Arts Common Core Writing Standards W.3.1-3, 4.1-3, 5.1-3, 6.1-3, 7.1-3
W.3.7-8, 4.7-9, 5.7-9, 6.7-9

DISCUSSION STARTERS AND WRITING PROMPTS

Who is Dash Storey? What's his biggest weakness, especially at the start of the book? Do you know any other kids who also hate video games? What is your favorite characteristic about Dash?

QUOTES: Explain what each quote means to you.

"This isn't just any story. It's a *book*. A book that could—if you read every page, carefully, if you pay really close attention—save your life!" (Prologue)

"She waited a while before she answered. I kinda hoped she might touch my arm again. It's nice to feel something warm, something soft, when you're stuck in the dark." (Chapter 4)

"Exactly." She squeezed my fingers like she was excited. "There's one thing zombies cannot stand, and that's when kids really *think*. It makes our brainz go sour or something." (Chapter 11)

"Sometimes, it's the stuff parents don't say that hurts the most." (Chapter 18)

"It's a common coping mechanism I see with kids your age, coming up with stories that are easier than the truth. You seem to have taken the move to Haven especially hard." (Chapter 31)

"Rain pattered against the windows, lightning struck nearby and low thunder booms growled. I didn't notice. I was so lost in the words. It was like having the headset on again. Except, I was creating my own world this time, line by line." (Chapter 38)

"Maybe, deep down, I knew Underhill wasn't a zombie all along. But sometimes it's nice to make up stories. Sometimes zombies are easier to defeat than bad teachers, or distracted parents, or moving to a new town and not having any friends." (Epilogue)

WRITING PROMPTS

Literary Analysis: CLIFFHANGERS

"Hooks and cliffhangers should only come at the end of a chapter."

Go to the library or online to find definitions of the terms “hook” and “cliffhanger.” Find examples of these devices as Eli Cranor uses them in this novel. Then, write a one-page essay in which you agree or disagree with the above quotation. Use examples from *Books Make Brainz Taste Bad* and other novels to support your position.

English Language Arts Common Core Standards

RL.3.1-4, 4.1-4, 5.1-4, 6.1-4, 7.1-4

SL.3.3-4, 4.3-4, 5.3-4, 6.3-4, 7.3-4

W.3.1-3, 4.1-3, 5.1-3, 6.1-3, 7.1-3; W.3.7-8, 4.7-9, 5.7-9, 6.7-9, 7.7-9

Technical Study: STRUCTURE & LITERARY DEVICES

Books Make Brainz Taste Bad can be viewed as the author’s exploration of the idea, concept and value of books themselves as both a way information is shared, and the way it is contained. One way Eli Cranor accomplishes this is to question the very structure of the novel. Invite students to look for the following elements in the stories and share their reactions to these literary devices and structures.

POINT OF VIEW

In this book, the point of view through which the reader sees the story is in the first-person voice of Dash Storey. Is Dash Storey a reliable narrator, giving readers an unbiased report of the events of the story, or is Dash an unreliable narrator, making false claims or telling the story in such a way as to leave doubts in the reader’s mind? In what ways is Dash reliable and/ or unreliable? How might the book be different if Izzy or another character were telling the story?

ASIDES

At times, the narrator directly addresses the reader, suggesting how s/he should interpret a comment or how to best enjoy the novel. Does this change the reader’s sense of his or her relationship with the book? If so, how does this relationship feel different?

WORDPLAY IN WORLD BUILDING

To explain the strange world of Haven Middle School, the author uses similes, metaphors, and analogies. To reflect protagonist Dash’s own confusion and frustration, Eli Cranor employs colorful language and vivid (sometimes gross) descriptors. Find examples of these uses of wordplay in the text. How does the use of these literary devices enrich the text?