

A Curriculum Guide for

Runt

by Nora Raleigh Baskin

About the Book

From wealthy It Girl Maggie to poor wallflower Elizabeth, and from aggressive athlete Stewart to quiet photographer Ethan, *Runt* chronicles the interwoven lives of members of a middle school class. As author Nora Raleigh Baskin describes the events leading up to the suspension of Matthew and the cyberbullying of Elizabeth, she shows how individuals can be both bullies and bullied—both transgressors and victims. Amidst the story’s carefully twisted threads, readers will surely find themselves—and a new way to look at surviving middle school.

Discussion Questions

The questions contained in this section particularly address the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.3.1, 3, 5) (RL.4.1, 2, 3, 6) (RL.5.2, 3, 5, 6) (RL.6.2, 3, 5, 6) (RL.7.2, 3, 6) (SL.3-7.1a-d)

1. The novel begins with Elizabeth sharing some information about the social order of dogs. Why do you think the author chose to start the story in this way? How does Elizabeth’s relationship with the new dog, Sadie, differ from the way she behaves at school?

2. When the story begins, Maggie and Frieda are no longer best friends. How did their friendship unravel? Do you still have the same best friend, or friends, that you had in early grade school? Do you think it is common or uncommon for friendships to undergo changes in middle school? Why do you think this is the case?

3. Who is Allison Robinson, the character featured in the chapter “The Millennial Generation”? What special perspective does this chapter offer readers? What do we learn about Allison’s relationship with Henry Robinson as the story evolves? Does this change the way you think about the future relationships of the other characters in the novel?

4. What is person2person? Do you belong to any social media sites, such as Facebook or Twitter? How much time do you spend chatting with friends or otherwise using such sites? Do you check your profile every day? Often? Do you and your friends have rules of thumb about being polite online? What kind of guidance do your parents, teachers, or other adults offer about online safety and kindness?

5. In the chapter, “The Answering Voice II,” what terrifying incident of dog violence foreshadows the behavior of humans later in the story? Elizabeth’s mom comments, “Thank the

Lord, dogs can't talk." Are dogs the only creatures who find themselves unable to talk in *Runt*? Explain your answer.

6. Imagine you have been called to the principal's office to describe the confrontation between Matthew and Stewart. How would you do so? Who would you tell the principal to punish, how, and why?

7. The novel deals with many acts of bullying, large and small. What do you see as the worst bully behavior described in the novel? Explain why you think it is the worst. Do you imagine others might choose a different scenario as the worst? Defend your choice.

8. Is Maggie a bad kid? Is Stewart? Is Ethan? Is it possible to choose a hero and a villain in this novel? Is everyone, in some way, a runt? Why or why not? In what way does this make *Runt* different from other books you have read?

9. The afterward of *Runt* is narrated in the first person by a dog. Which dog from Mrs. Moon's business do you think is speaking, and why does this matter? What message is this dog sharing that is a good one for human beings to hear?

10. What do you imagine will happen to Elizabeth, Maggie, Matthew, Stewart, and their classmates next year? What do you hope will happen to them? What advice would you give these characters to help them through the rest of middle school?

Activities & Research

LITERARY FORMS

The questions and activities contained in this section particularly address the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.3-7.5, 6) (W.3-5.1) (W.3-7.3a-b) (W.6-7.2)

1. Nora Raleigh Baskin uses many literary forms to share the stories of her characters, including first- and third-person points of view, illustrations, snippets of poetry, and even strings of online dialogue. Make a chart showing the relationships between the literary forms and the way each character's story is told. What do you observe about the completed chart?

2. Write a paragraph explaining why you think a particular form is a good (or bad) choice to depict the life of one of the *Runt* characters.

3. Choose a literary form that appeals to you and write a short book-chapter-style essay describing what you did before school this morning.

4. A discarded "Bully Box" form is found. Reproduce the check-boxes and questions from this form. Complete this form in the characters of Elizabeth, Maggie, Ethan, Stewart, Matthew, Frieda, and Zoe.

SOCIAL BEHAVIORS

The questions and activities contained in this section particularly address the following Common Core State Standards: (RI.3-5.4, 5) (RI.4-7.7) (RI.6-7.1, 4) (W.3.6) (W.3-7.2a-b, 3a-b, 7) (W.4.5) (W.5-7.6) (SL.3-7.1a-d)

1. From dogs to cats, and wild horses to monkeys, the author uses descriptions of animal behavior to create dramatic highlights for some of the human behaviors in the story. Go to the library or online to learn about the social behaviors of your favorite animal. Use your research to create an informative, illustrated poster. Include a few sentences explaining which character from *Runt* behaves similarly to your chosen animal and in what ways.
2. Elizabeth makes a critical social mistake when she brags about how her mother thought her poem was the best one in the classroom anthology. In the character of Miss Robinson, Maggie, Frieda, or Ethan, write a journal entry describing your feelings as you listened to Elizabeth speak. Be sure to include your thoughts on how your parent(s) would have reacted to your entry in the anthology, your opinion of Elizabeth, and what actions you want and/or plan to take as a result of her bragging in class.
3. With friends or classmates, create a brainstorm list of Social Media Golden Rules—ways to be considerate, kind, and safe online. Select and summarize the ideas on your list until you have narrowed it down to ten rules. Using art or graphic design software, create a reproducible bookmark listing the ten rules. If possible, laminate copies of the bookmark to distribute to kids in your grade, or ask your school librarian to share them.
4. Learn more about the No Name-Calling project originally inspired by James Howe’s novel, *The Misfits*. Information can be found online at <http://www.nonamecallingweek.org/cgi-bin/iowa/home.html>. Use the information found at the site to plan a No Name-Calling or Anti-Bullying event for your school or classroom.

STORIES OF CHANGE

The questions and activities contained in this section particularly address the following Common Core State Standards: (W.3.3a-d, 4, 5, 6, 7) (W.4-6.3a-b) (W.4-7.4, 5, 6) (W.7.3a-e)

1. In the novel, readers learn about the way some characters have changed over the years. Do you feel like a different person than you were as a preschooler? As a third grader? Than you were last year? Create a large poster entitled “The Evolution of Me.” Include pictures of yourself as a baby and at other ages, lists of your hobbies, favorite books or movies, and other important details of your life in preschool, early grade school, last year, and now. After completing the poster, write 1 – 2 paragraphs about something surprising you realized about yourself from doing this project.
2. The author describes the history and home life of characters, giving readers deeper perspective not just on victims but on bullies. In the voice of one of the students from the story, write a monologue (a speech given by a single character) in which they *honestly* describe to a

family member their feelings about their family and friends, and the reasons for their in-school actions. Choose a character for whom you feel great compassion. Then repeat the exercise, choosing a character toward whom you feel anger or dislike. Read your monologues aloud to classmates.

3. Several chapters into the novel, readers discover that “The Answering Voice” is the name of the class literary magazine. With friends or classmates, produced your own literary magazine. Collect stories, poems, cartoons, and other writings to fill the pages. Organize the writings by theme, genre, or another method. Vote on a name, create a cover and table of contents, and make copies of the magazine to share with your community. Save a copy to remind your high school self the kind of writer you were in the grade you’re in now.

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