

Educator Discussion Guide

Awkward

By Svetlana Chmakova

Louisiana Young Readers' Choice Nominee 2018
Grade 6-8

Submitted by Kaitlyn Westerhaus
School of Library and Information Science, LSU, Baton Rouge

ABOUT THE BOOK

Penelope “Peppi” Torres is new in town and struggling to navigate the social scene at her new middle school. On her first day, she caves to peer pressure and is mean to Jaime, an unpopular boy who had been kind to her. A few weeks later, Peppi is in the art club, while Jamie is in their enemy group—the science club. As times goes on, Peppi continues to feel bad about how she treated Jamie, but she finds it more and more difficult to apologize to him. The book contains themes of friendship, relationships, bullying, peer pressure, mistakes and consequences, and getting along with people who are different from you. The story is thoroughly enjoyable, and the writing has far more depth than the one would think based solely on the cute, quirky style of the artwork. *Awkward* is a compelling, relatable story that belongs in all middle school libraries.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Svetlana Chmakova (1979-) is a Russian-born Canadian comic artist. Her best-known work is the *Dramacon* series of original English-language manga. She received an Eisner Award nomination for *Dramacon* in 2007. She published her own manga online before having various original and adapted titles published by Yen Press and Tokyopop, among others.

Author website: <https://svetlania.com/>

Accessed 23 June 2017.

BOOK AWARDS

2016 Eisner Award nomination

2016 YALSA’s Great Graphic Novels for Teens

2015 *School Library Journal*’s Top 10 Graphic Novels

OTHER TITLES IN SERIES

Brave (2017)

PREREADING ACTIVITIES

Fitting In, Working Together

Ask your students to think about times when they have had a hard time fitting in with a certain group. How did they handle it? Were they eventually able to fit in, or did they find another group? Ask them to think of the various social groups and activities at school. Which groups seem to get along well, and which ones do not? For the ones that do not get along, why do you think this is? What could we do to change this dynamic?

Ask your students to divide themselves into pairs, making sure to pair themselves with someone they do not know well, or at least someone they know less well than other students in the class. Instruct each pair to discuss what groups at school each person feels like they belong to. Try to think of a project that the partners' different groups could work on together to benefit the school. What is it about this project that appeals to the strengths of each partner's group(s)? Have each pair briefly present their idea to the class.

Recreating Memories

Have each student or small group think of a funny or important moment from this school year. Instruct them to find a creative way to present their story to the class. Possible methods include drawing a comic, as the Art Club did in the book; writing a narrative; acting it out; etc.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did Peppi push Jaime when he tried to help her?
2. If you were in Peppi's shoes on the first day of school, would you have done anything differently? Why or why not?
3. When was the last time you felt embarrassed as Peppi felt on her first day of school? How did you handle it? If anything, what might you do differently next time?
4. Peppi is worried what people will think about her if she becomes friends with Jaime. Has anyone ever teased or bullied you because you were friends with a certain person? How did you handle it?
5. How would you define the word "awkward"? Do you think Peppi is awkward? What about Jaime? Would you consider *yourself* to be awkward? Explain.
6. Why do you think the Art Club and Science Club are such bitter rivals?
7. Are you or have you ever been in any sort of rivalry? What was it about? In what ways was/is it similar to the rivalry between the Art Club and Science Club? How did it end, or is it still going on?
8. Peppi is very impressed with Maribella and her home. If you were Peppi, would you want to trade places with Maribella if you could? Why or why not?
9. What do you think drove Maribella to steal the Science Club's remote?

10. Why is Maribella so worried about disappointing her father? What would you do if you were in her shoes?
11. If you were Jaime, would you forgive Peppi so easily? Why or why not? Explain.
12. Do you think the principal handled the rivalry between the Art Club and Science Club in the best way? What other methods could he have tried to ease the tension between the two clubs?
13. What are some other ways an Art Club or Science Club could contribute to the school community? Are you involved in any clubs or activities? How do your clubs and activities contribute to the school?
14. Peppi is conflicted about whether she should tell everyone that Maribella stole the Science Club's remote. Do you think it's always important to tell the truth even if it will get someone in trouble? Explain.
15. Peppi has her "cardinal rules for surviving school." What are your cardinal rules? List at least three.
16. Which character in *Awkward* do you most strongly identify with? Explain.

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Art/Language Arts

Have the students write and draw their own comics based on predetermined prompts. Give the students blank comic strip templates which they can fill in with their own words and artwork. To determine the scene, have each student draw one of your prompts out of a bag. Each prompt should incorporate a recent vocabulary word. Comic strips templates are available in various locations online, including here: <http://picklebums.com/free-printable-comic-book-templates/>.

Science

The Science Club built a plane that runs on solar energy. That project is probably a bit too complicated for the average middle school science class, but you can still teach your students about solar energy in fun and exciting ways.

- Make a solar oven! Using a pizza box, aluminum foil, and a few other supplies you probably have around the classroom, you can harness the energy of the sun to roast marshmallows for the perfect s'mores. Full directions can be found here: <http://kidsactivitiesblog.com/15594/solar-oven>.
- Make a solar updraft tower! All you need is a pinwheel, some tape, and a few metal cans with modifications. Build your tower, set it in the sun, and the pinwheel will start to move! Full directions can be found here: <http://almostunschoolers.blogspot.com/2015/04/simple-solar-thermal-projects-for-kids.html>.

Math/Health and Physical Education

Take your class on a geocaching adventure! Geocaching incorporates the mathematical concept of latitude and longitude coordinates. This project can be as large or small as you

want it to be, from a quick walk around school property to a field trip to multiple locations in your city. Plenty of online resources are available to help make your geocaching adventure fun and easy. Learn how to get started at <https://www.geocaching.com/education/>.

If you make sure that your trip includes a lot of walking, you can tie in health and physical education as well! Make sure you lead your students in a few minutes of stretching before they set off.

Social Studies

Take this opportunity to teach the students about famous rivals in history, emphasizing the terrible things that can happen when rivalries end badly or continue for a long time. Bring the class to the library or computer lab and have the students each research a famous rivalry in history. Once you approve their topics, have them write a one-to-two page report on their chosen rivalries. Examples of historical rivalries include the Hatfields and McCoys, Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton, General Joseph E. Johnston and Jefferson Davis, Edward Drinker Cope and Othniel Charles Marsh, Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison, Al Capone and Bugs Moran, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, etc.

Vocabulary

Aerodynamics	Dilemma	Malfunction
Awkward	Ecosystem	Migratory
Cardinal	Excrement	Sunspot
Cliffhanger	Fiendish	Terrarium
Coordinates	Geocache	Tinkerer
Delinquent	Harass	Velocity

RELATED WEBSITES

Marvel.com's Create Your Own Comic

https://marvel.com/games/play/34/create_your_own_comic

Marvel gives you the tools to practice making your own online comics featuring Marvel characters.

NASA's Solar Science

<https://science.nasa.gov/heliophysics/focus-areas/solar-science>

Learn more about solar science from NASA, including NASA's various missions to study the sun and solar processes.

Interview with Author Svetlana Chmakova

<http://www.kidsreads.com/authors/svetlana-chmakova/news/interview-052217>

Chmakova talks to KidsReads.com about her book.