

Educator Discussion Guide

The Improbable Theory of Ana & Zak

By Brian Katcher

Louisiana Teen Readers' Choice Nominee 2018
Grades 9-12

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ABOUT THE BOOK

The Improbable Theory of Ana and Zak is a contemporary young adult romantic novel about the bad-boy who falls in love with the nerd. Exact opposites in every way, Zak Duquette and Ana Watson find themselves thrown together in the most unsuspecting circumstances, and, in turn, learn some very important lessons about themselves. When the rebellious sci-fi enthusiast Zak Duquette meets obsessive compulsive bookworm Ana Watson, he is inexplicably attracted; unfortunately, Ana, who only has eyes for her studies, takes no notice of Zak. Under intense pressure from her parents, Ana always strives for perfection; the last thing she expects is an accidental first date—and resulting relationship—at a sci-fi convention. Zak is forced by a teacher to join the quiz bowl team with Ana and her genius younger brother, Clayton. Zak is less than happy about his change of plans as the anticipated WashingCon—the sci-fi convention that he looks forward to every year—is taking place the same weekend as the quiz bowl. Zak reluctantly attends the dreaded quiz bowl trip, and innocently reminisces on all of the fun times he had at WashingCon over the years, never expecting Clayton to want to experience it for himself. As Ana discovers that Clayton snuck out to go to the sci-fi convention, she must recruit Zak to help her navigate her way past the costumed Vikings, aliens, and zombies, as well as the sci-fi geeks at WashingCon in order to find her brother before morning comes and she has to tell her controlling and over-protective parents that Clayton is gone. This less-than-dream team of Ana and Zak meet one obstacle after another in this comical search and rescue mission, but find themselves enjoying each other's company and appreciating the other's differences as strengths rather than weaknesses.

This novel of self-discovery, through its very dynamic characters, Ana and Zak with their strong, yet opposing personalities, teaches the audience not to judge a book by its cover. The overall message and theme of the novel is perfect for the intended young adult audience as it teaches the lesson of embracing diversity and finding what one did not know he was looking for in the first place: love and acceptance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Katcher's unique and unconventional writing style is reflected in his autobiographical "About the Author" section found on his website. Though not written in the first person, the same sarcastic

tone of his novels is echoed in the description of the author: “Brian Katcher was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1975.

He attended the University of Missouri, Columbia, before dropping out of society and bumming around Mexico for three years. He’s worked as a fry cook, a market researcher, a welding machine operator, a telemarketer (only lasted one day), and a furniture mover. He lived on an Israeli military base one summer, and once smuggled food into Cuba” (Brian Katcher). Katcher is the author of the Stonewall Book Award-winning novel *Almost Perfect*. He wrote two other quirky and witty novels titled *Playing with Matches* and *Everyone Dies in the End*. Katcher lives in central Missouri with his wife and daughter, and apparently after many years of occupation searching, he finally settled on that of a school librarian when he is not writing young adult novels.

Biographical information taken from the author’s website at

www.briankatcher.com

Accessed 12 June 2017.

BOOK AWARDS

2017-2018 Missouri Gateway Award Nominee

PREREADING ACTIVITIES

Topic Wheel: Break students into groups of three or four. Give each group a large piece of paper on which you’ve already written a topic from a list of general ideas such as a main idea, focus, or theme from *The Improbable Theory of Ana and Zak*. Each group should have a different topic. Topics should include, but are not limited to: Acceptance, Diversity, Manhunt, Romance Genre, Comic Book Conventions, Quiz Bowl Competitions, Overprotective Parents, and Younger Siblings. Give each group 30 seconds to write down everything they know about the topic. Groups then pass the papers in the direction you organize (i.e. like a wheel/clockwise or counterclockwise). Groups have to continue adding to the new paper they receive, but it has to be new information not already listed on the paper. After a couple of passes, extend the time so that the groups have a little more time to discuss (approximately two more minutes). Continue passing the papers around for about five more minutes and make sure the last pass is back to the original group. The original group should then discuss all the statements on the paper, and then circle the three statements that are most essential, most important, or most fundamental to the topic. From this, write the consensus of statements on the board and discuss each paper. Ask the students why they choose those words to describe the topics and why it would be important to the book and lesson. Once each poster is completed, have the students write down each topic and the three most essential statements that were circled under each topic in their notebooks. Students should now respond to the following quick write to get them focusing on the theme of the book.

Quick Write:

Have students brainstorm in groups of three or four and then reply individually in their notebook to the following prompt: Have you ever underestimated someone or something? Write about a time when things didn’t go as you planned because you underestimated the challenges you had to face or the people you faced those challenges with. Ask if any students would like to share their experience. Give a quick book talk to link the topics from the Topic Wheel activity to the Quick Write theme-based responses.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does Zak feel about Roger? Why do you think he feels this way?
2. Why don't the other characters accept Zak for who he is? Choose two characters from the book and explain how they feel about Zak and his interests and why you think they feel this way.
3. How does Ana feel about the opposite sex? Why do you think she feels this way? Use specific examples from the novel.
4. What does Ana never seem to have enough of? Why do you think this is? Use specific examples from the text.
5. Why does Ana think of herself as a "pathetic little weakling"? Explain.
6. Mrs. Brinkham said she'd have to go to the principal because Zak had done what? How does this incident give the reader insight into Zak's character? Is he misunderstood? Be specific in your response.
7. After talking to James at the preregistration table, Zak noticed that Ana was wearing what? How did this add to Ana's appeal for Zak?
8. List three clever things that Zak and/or Ana did to escape the Vikings and the drug dealer at Washingcon? How does this mark a change in their relationship?
9. Who is Clayton and what is his primary role in the novel?
10. List and explain two examples where the genre of fantasy crosses over into this fiction book. This can be in the form of characters, settings, and/or situations.
11. Look closely at the cover of the book. Choose three images from the cover and explain what part those images play in the novel. Be specific.
12. How would this novel be different if it was set in a different city? Choose another city to compare/contrast with the city depicted in the book. Be sure to use specific examples from the novel in the comparison.
13. Why would the author choose to make the setting of the novel take place over a 24-hour period of time? How would the novel be different if it took place over a longer period of time?
14. What is the overall theme or message of the novel?
15. Are the themes and situations presented in *The Improbable Theory of Ana and Zak* relevant to a regular high school student's everyday life? How so? Be specific.

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Language Arts:

1. In small groups of three or four, have students brainstorm what makes a character more realistic/lifelike. Then, have students:
 - Write down the names of two favorite characters (characters that they saw in a lifelike and/or realistic way) they have encountered in books they have read.
 - Make a list of specific reasons why they designated the characters as "favorites."
 - Make a list of what they remember about how the author developed each of the two characters. You may want to write the above steps on the board.

2. As they brainstorm these characters and what makes them realistic and lifelike, have students consider ways an author makes the characters come to life, including each character's:

- Desires and goals.
- Physical characteristics (or lack thereof).
- Interaction with other characters.
- Interaction with his or her environment.
- Internal thoughts and/or philosophical outlook.
- Revelations about his or her past.
- Dialect or way of speaking.

3. Next, in the same groups, have students discuss and then share their favorite character's name from *The Improbable Theory of Ana and Zak*, rationale for selection, and details about the character that makes him/her come to life. In their groups, have the students develop an in-class written profile of a friend or family member that has similar characteristics of their favorite character from the novel, describing their subject from a range of perspectives to capture as full a description as possible for the reader.

4. Initiate an open discussion of recurring patterns of characterization observed in the students' favorite character and/or techniques used in students' descriptions of a friend or relative. You may want to use a simple graphic organizer (simply writing a list on the board or overhead would work) to help students visualize these characteristics. Ask for volunteers to share "profile" responses.

This lesson taken from Arts Edge at the Kennedy Center and can be found here:

<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/lessons/grade-9-12/Characterization.aspx>

Health:

Ask students what types of foods they like to eat and foods that they try to avoid. Make a list of favorite/least favorite foods on the board. Stress to students that it is important to remember that tastes buds change, and they should be open-minded when trying new foods. Use this nutrition chart to begin whole class discussion about fun ways that kids can begin to live a healthy, nutritious life at an early age.

<https://www.fda.gov/downloads/food/ingredientspackaginglabeling/labelingnutrition/ucm410490.pdf>

This lesson can be modified to fit the state in which the lesson is taught:

<https://www.extension.umn.edu/food/farm-to-school/education/cafeteria/taste-testing/docs/tasting-lesson.pdf>

Art:

1. To begin the lesson, write the word *unique* on the board. Ask students to define the word. Ask: *What is it that makes you unique among your classmates?* Next, draw a simple outline of a person on the board or chart. Draw two horizontal lines across the person's body. One line should divide the person's head (including the neck) and torso (shoulders to waist); the other should divide the torso and leg area (from the waist-down). Talk about one section of the body at a time.

- Discuss some of the features that might make up a person's head/neck. Lead students to understand that people can have blue eyes or brown eyes, small ears or big ears, curly hair or straight hair, dark skin, light skin, or a shade in

between, freckles, glasses, or a hat, and so on. Write students ideas about a person's head on the board or chart next to the head area of the person you drew.

- Discuss some of the ways in which people's bodies might be different. Lead students to understand that people can be skinny or heavy, muscular or frail, square- or round-shouldered, and so on. Talk about the kinds of clothing people might wear -- a T-shirt, a sweater, a feathered boa. Write down some of the possibilities student's name.
- Finally, focus on the lower body (from the waist down). Point out that people can have skinny or stubby legs and their feet point in, out, or straight ahead. People wear pants, dresses, high-top sneakers, high-heeled shoes, construction boots, ballerina slippers, and so on. Write down students' ideas.

2. When you are satisfied that students have the three parts of the body sorted out, provide each student with a piece of white drawing paper measuring two inches square. Have students write their names on one side of the paper and draw on the other side of the paper the head of a person. Tell students that this should not be somebody they know; this *unique* person should come from their imaginations. Remind them to think first about the features the persons head will have; they can refer to the list they and their classmates created in the first part of the lesson. They should include as much detail as possible in their drawings.

3. When students finish drawing a unique head, provide them with a sheet of paper that measures four inches square. After students write their names on one side of the paper, they should turn the paper over and draw the torso (shoulders to waist) of the person. Before they draw, remind students to imagine the features of the person's torso. How is the body shaped? What clothing is the person wearing? Once again, students should fill the entire space and draw as much detail as possible. *Think unique!*

4. When students finish drawing a torso, hand them a third sheet of paper; this time a 3-inch square. Have students write their names on one side of the paper, and draw the bottom part of their person (waist down to the feet). Remind students to fill up the space and include as much detail as possible. Once again, tell them to *think unique!*

5. As students finish their final square, have them check to be sure their names are on all three parts; then collect them. You might have students put the heads in one box or folder, the torsos in another, and the legs in a third.

6. This part of the lesson might be done the same day or the next day. Distribute to each student a head, a torso, and a set of legs. Students should not get a body part that they drew. Have students tape together the three body parts to create a totally *unique* "friend." The new friends will be pretty unusual-looking people, to say the least! Here's where the main idea of the lesson comes in: *Everybody is different, or unique. What a person looks like on the outside has nothing to do with what is inside! Every person has special talents, special qualities...*

7. After students have had a good laugh about how the three body parts came together to create an unusual-looking person, ask each student to think up a name for his or her new "friend" and to give some thought to some of the characteristics the new friend might have. Ask: *What special qualities does this unique person have? What special talents does the person possess? What do you have in common with your new friend? How are you different?*

8. After students have decided what qualities their new friends have, tell them you would like them to write about their new friends. You might ask each student to begin a story with the words: *I would like you to meet my new friend, [name goes here]....* Then give students the

freedom to choose what they will write as they go on to describe exactly what it is they like so much about their new buddies.

9. When students have finished their stories, invite them to share them with their classmates. You might use this read-aloud session as an opportunity to reinforce the lesson you hope they will take from this activity: *What a person looks like on the outside has nothing to do with what that person is like on the inside!*

This lesson is from EducationalWorld.com and can be found here:

http://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/03/lp294-05.shtml

Social Studies:

Lesson 1: Review the definition of acceptance as a whole class discussion. Then, issue each student a number like this, 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, and so on). Direct each group to a given area by reading the following: All number ones gather here, all number twos meet here, number threes meet here, and all number fours gather here. Observe students' reactions, as some of them may not be in a group with their friends. Ask students how they feel about the group they have been assigned to. Explain that sometimes we have to accept working with people other than our friends. By working with other people, students practice acceptance. Thank students for their cooperation and ask them to return to their desks.

Lesson 2: Discuss the importance of accepting all people, as we accept laws. Sometimes students who have similar characteristics, hobbies, or personalities, join to form cliques and they often do not let others in their select group. Remember, acceptance means not rejecting others. To be accepted, we must accept the differences in ourselves and other groups of people. Think of a time when you have when you have rejected someone or a group that was different from you—even if you didn't do it on purpose. Write a letter to that person explaining why you are now willing to accept them.

These lessons are from Character.org and can be found here:

<http://character.org/lessons/lesson-plans/middle/fort-bend-independent-school-district/>

Vocabulary:

Excavating
Platitudes
Memorabilia
Entropy
Gangly
Hyperventilating
Liberally

Extracurricular
Enigmatic
Improbable
Diphtheria
Depravity
Shenanigans
Malicious

Formidable
Unceremoniously
Impotent
Moderator
Incessantly
Mundane