

Educator Discussion Guide

A Blind Guide to Stinkville

By Beth Vrabel

Louisiana Young Readers' Choice Nominee 2018

Grades 6-8

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Moving to a new town or state would be difficult for anyone, but it's especially difficult for Alice, who not only has to deal with the trauma of moving across the country, but also her albinism and the blindness that comes with it. In such a difficult time, Alice would normally turn to her best friend Eliza, her brother James, or her parents. But Eliza is all the way back in Seattle, James is also struggling to cope with the move, her dad is trying to adjust to a new job in a new place, and her mom is suffering from depression. Alice is virtually on her own to learn the ways of her new home—the town of Sinkville, nicknamed “Stinkville” because of the paper mill located there.

Alice finds her new home-away-from-home in the local library, where she also meets a new friend, Kerica. When Alice's parents begin discussing moving Alice to a school for the blind in the fall instead of public school, Alice decides to establish her independence. Not only does she begin to get around town on her own, but she also enters the Sinkville Success Stories essay contest, which will require her to write about a town she still knows little about. In the end, the essay contest proves to be a way in which Alice can learn more about her new home and the people in it, while also reconnecting with the family she seemed to have lost somewhere along the way from Seattle to ‘Stinkville’.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beth Vrabel knew she wanted to be a writer after winning a short-story contest in elementary school. She graduated from Pennsylvania State University with a degree in journalism and wrote for a local newspaper before eventually beginning her career as an author of children's books. She has since published seven books or young people, including *Pack of Dorks*, *Caleb and Kit*, and the sequel to *A Blind Guide to Stinkville*, *A Blind Guide to Normal*.

Biographical information obtained from the author's website at

<https://www.bethvrabel.com/>

Accessed August 2017

BOOK AWARDS

2016 ILA Children's and Young Adults' Book Award for Intermediate Fiction

OTHER TITLES IN SERIES

A Blind Guide to Normal (2016)

PREREADING ACTIVITIES

Albinism

Ask your students to consider the word “albinism” and if they know what it means. If students indicate that it is similar to “albino,” ask them to clarify what they think that word means and to give examples of anything they have seen that would fit the term. With your students, read the Scholastic Science World article by Kelly Milner Halls entitled “Life Without Color” (2012, available [here](#)). Discuss with your students the odds of an animal or a human being born with the characteristics of albinism—how likely or rare is it? Discuss with them the dangers associated with an animal being born albino (i.e., the lack of camouflage, the effects of sun exposure, etc.). Ask them to consider what it would be like to be a human born with albinism; what problems would they have to deal with in their daily lives?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did Alice's family move to Sinkville? How has the move affected Alice and her family?
2. How did “Stinkville” get its nickname?
3. What is Alice's disability? How does she feel about it?
4. In Chapter 1, Alice says that, when they first meet her, people get an expression on their face “like they just ate some bad cheese but are holding it in their mouths instead of spitting it out.” Why do you think people respond to her this way?
5. Is Tooter *really* Alice's Seeing Eye dog? Why does she take him with her everywhere she goes, even if he's not actually helping her?
6. When Alice first meets Sandi, Tooter pulls on his leash and growls at her. Why do you think he does this? What is Sandi's first impression on Alice?
7. In Chapter 3, during “Taco Tuesday”, Alice becomes angry and throws her plate across the room. Why do you think she did this? Why is she so angry?
8. James tells Alice and his parents that he visits the lake most days, but Alice suspects there is more going on. What makes Alice suspicious of her brother?
9. How does Alice's video call with her friend in Seattle, Eliza, go? What does Eliza tell her about her family's old home? How do you think this affects Alice's dream of moving back to Seattle?
10. Kerica and Sandi both mention to Alice that Sandi is at the library for tutoring sessions with Kerica's mom. What kind of tutoring do you think Sandi might be there for? Do you think this affects how she acts toward the other girls? Why?
11. When Alice and her mom visit the library together, Alice learns that her parents are planning to send her to a specialized school for blind children. How does she react to this news? Why? How do you think you would react if you were in her place?
12. Why do you think Alice decides to participate in the Sinkville Success Stories contest?
13. How do you think the fight between Alice and her mom at the library affects her mom's depression?

14. How had Alice's dependence on Eliza's help affected both girls' relationships with other students back in Seattle?
15. How does Alice's cane help her navigate through Sinkville? Why do you think she decided to start using it again?
16. At one point, Alice says she felt like she was "posing as a blind person, holding a cane and a dog's leash." Why do you think she feels this way?
17. How does her friendship with Mr. Hamlin change Alice's opinion on living in Sinkville?
18. Who do you think has the greater challenge: Alice with her albinism or Sandi with dyslexia? How does dyslexia make learning more difficult for Sandi?
19. Gretel and Kerica tell Alice stories about what life was like in Sinkville during the civil rights movement. What kinds of challenges did the town face during that time?
20. Why do you think Alice decided to help Sandi type her essay for the contest? Would you have done the same thing?
21. After Alice visits the Addison School for the Blind with her parents, she changes her mind about attending. What made her change her mind?

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Science/Health:

- PBS' website offers the lesson plan "The Probabilities of Problems: A Look at Inheritance" (http://www.pbs.org/inthebalance/archives/ourgenes/lesson_probabilities.html), which offers an activity using paper bags and poker chips (or a similar small item) to illustrate the probabilities of inheriting four different genetic disorders. Although albinism is not one of the diseases/disorders mentioned in the activity, students will better understand the concept of dominant, recessive, and sex-linked forms of inheritance through it.
- Ask students to consider the problems that a student with the same or similar disabilities as Alice would face if they came to your school. Have students write up a plan of action to either assist that student, or ways that things in the school could be changed to best accommodate them.

Social Studies:

- Have students find Washington state (where Alice is originally from) and South Carolina (where she moves to) on a map of the United States. Have them also look up information about the climate in both places, the average income of residents, etc., and discuss the differences between the two locations. Ask students how difficult they think it would be to adjust to life in South Carolina after having been raised in Washington state? Why?
- Kerica and Gretel tell Alice about the segregation that existed in Sinkville before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Have students read and learn about the Civil Rights Act and the Civil Rights Movement. PBS provides two lesson plan activities and an interactive timeline on their website (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/lessons_plans/the-50th-anniversary-of-the-march-on-washington-lesson-plan-a-time-for-change/).

Language Arts:

- In the book, the young students in Sinkville are invited to participate in an essay contest: the Sinkville Success Stories Contest. Assign a town success stories essay to the class; encourage them to interview local town "celebrities" (i.e., the mayor, city council men

and women, local business owners, etc.). What makes their town a success? This can also be adapted to be a school success stories essay, in which students interview the principal, teachers, coaches, and other students about why their school is successful.

- In *A Blind Guide to Stinkville*, Alice’s mom struggles with depression. Alice meets two other mothers in the story: Kerica’s and Sandi’s. Ask students to choose one of these other mothers and compare her with Alice’s using a Venn diagram.

Art:

In the book, Kerica recreates a mural on the windows of the diner that Mayor Hank originally painted during the Civil Rights Movement. The painting was of two hands, one black and one white, shaking, and represented the equality that Mayor Hank felt should exist in the town, instead of the segregation. Have students brainstorm ideas for a mural that could be painted to represent equality among all races and genders represented in your school. They can draw, paint, or color their mural ideas for everyone to see, and vote on the best idea. All of the students can then work collaboratively to recreate the winning idea on a bigger scale, which can then be displayed in the classroom or somewhere in the school for everyone to enjoy.

Vocabulary:

putrid	concoction	crux
hearth	bungalow	freelance
skittish	sycamore	camaraderie
masquerading	quarantine	flak
infliction	imminent	dyslexia

RELATED WEBSITES

American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus

<https://aapos.org/terms/conditions/12>

This website explains what albinism is, how common it is, different types of it, etc.

History Channel

<http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement>

This website explains the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

Possible Worlds

<http://possibleworlds.edc.org/games/heredity/digitalgame>

This links to a free online game that can be used in tandem with a lesson on dominant and recessive genes.