

# THE BIGGEST POUTINE IN THE WORLD

by **Andrée Poulin**

**Genre:** Fiction

**Themes:** Family, friendship, community, feelings, acceptance, persistence, courage, alcoholism, disabilities

**Suitable for:** Grades 4 – 8

## Summary

On his fifth birthday, Thomas's mother left, and he hasn't seen her since. The last thing he remembers is her making a delicious dish of poutine for his birthday. Into the concoction of French fries, gravy, and melted cheese curds, she stuck five green candles for him to blow out.

On the day of this twelfth birthday, Thomas comes up with the idea of setting a Guinness world record for the biggest poutine in the world. Maybe then, his mother will take notice of his achievement and come back, and his emotionally distant father will pay attention to him.

As he puts together all the pieces of his "Phenomenal Poutine Project," or "PPP" for short, Thomas not only learns why his mother disappeared, but he also comes to realize that Elie, the one person whose help he rejected, turns out to be his most devoted and supportive friend.

Funny and heartbreaking at the same time, *The Biggest Poutine in the World*, was the winner of the French language 2014 TD Canadian Children's Literature Award.

## ACTIVITY IDEAS

The following activity ideas are only a start. There are many possibilities for helping students construct meaning from text.

Comprehension activities:

- help readers to extend their general knowledge from prior experience
- develop reading strategies for comprehension
- bring relevance to the act of reading
- foster discussion and reflection through response to the text

## BEFORE STARTING THE BOOK

Activities to build the context and introduce the topic of the book, and to establish prior knowledge and interest and develop predictions of what the text will be about.

1. What is poutine? Research to find out where poutine originated. Have you ever eaten poutine? What did it taste like?
2. If you were going to set a new world record, what would it be?
3. Do you live in a small town or a big city? How would life be different in either place ?
4. Have you ever taken on a project that you felt was too big for you to handle? How did that feel? Were you able to accomplish the goal you set for yourself?
5. How do you communicate with your friends? Do you talk mostly in person, text, email, or over the phone? Do you prefer to communicate one way more than the others? Why?

## WHILE READING THE BOOK

Activities to check on comprehension, stimulate interest, involve readers in reflection as they read, and encourage consideration of other readers' reactions.

1. How do the chapter titles help or distract your understanding of what will happen in each chapter?
2. On page 19, Thomas describes his father as follows: "Nobody wants a father who's as present as a gust of wind." Why does the author compare Thomas's father to a gust of wind? How does this description add to your understanding of Thomas's feelings about his father?
3. Thomas says that in order to "lecture somebody, you have to at least be interested in him" (page 19). Have you ever felt that your parents weren't interested in what you were doing, or do you feel that they care too much about your life and choices?
4. Thomas feels a "burning emptiness" (page 20) and tries to get rid of that feeling by throwing his birthday cake against a tree. How do you deal with feelings of anger? Do you prefer to talk about it or do you take your feelings out in other ways?
5. Do you think Thomas is being realistic about creating the biggest poutine in the world? Why do you think so? Is trying to break a world record too big a dream for a 12-year-old boy in a small town?
6. Do you think Thomas is right in thinking that his father and mother will become more interested in his life if he can set this world record? Give reasons to support your answer.

7. Thomas feels neglected or alone throughout many parts in the story. On page 38, he describes this feeling as, “the emptiness that makes my insides twist.” How effective are the author’s words in describing this kind of feeling? Have you ever had a similar feeling?
8. When the new cheese shop owner, Irene Ladouceur, arrives in town, the book describes that this event “set the tongues of all Sainte-Alphonsine’s gossips wagging” (page 40). What do you think this expression means?
9. Both Sam and Thomas talk about how uncomfortable they feel around Elie because she has a prosthetic hand. Have you ever met someone with a physical disability? How did you feel around that person?
10. The author includes many different poutine recipes with Thomas’s notes beside some of them (page 72). What does this information add to the story? Can you think of other variations for poutine?
11. Elie sees Thomas’s attempt to break the world record as his way of “throwing a bottle into the sea with a message for your mother” (page 102). Write the message that Thomas could put in the bottle.
12. On page 113, the author writes “phew” four times, and each time the word gets bigger. How does this text feature make you read the words differently?
13. There are many different types of communication in the book. Look at examples of speech bubbles (page 32), text messages (page 74), emails (pg. 85), and real time conversations (page 142). Do you think some work better than others? Why?
14. Thomas describes himself as a zombie because he doesn’t feel anything – no rage or sadness (page 123). Why do you think he’d rather feel angry or sad?
15. Read the email Elie writes Thomas on page 133. What can you say about her character after reading this email? Recall an incident when you tried to comfort a friend during a difficult time, but didn’t know what to say.
16. Why do you think Thomas’s father changes his behavior later in the story? What do you think their relationship will be like in the future?

## AFTER READING THE BOOK

Activities to inspire continued reflection and response to the text, bring conclusion to the experience of reading this particular text, and stimulate further extensions.

1. How does the relationship between Thomas and Elie change throughout the story? What are the events that contribute to their relationship changing?
2. How do you think the first meeting went between Thomas and his mother? Write a short script exploring their first encounter together after so many years apart, and perform it for a small group.
3. How important was the setting of Sainte-Alphonsine, Quebec to the story? Think about all the people and places in the community that influenced Thomas in his mission to set the record for the biggest poutine in the world.
4. How did his mother's alcoholism impact the lives of Thomas and his father? Why is Thomas's father unable to forgive her?
5. Did you find any parts of this story funny? How does humor affect the story?
6. Write a diary entry from Thomas's mother's point of view from the day she was arrested.
7. Discuss some of the story's themes. What is the most important message you take away after reading this book?
8. Form two teams to debate the following proposition: Junk food should be banned from all sporting events.
9. Write a letter to Mayor Tartatcheff to try and convince her to let Thomas use the arena for his "Phenomenal Poutine Project."
10. Post a tweet under the hashtag #thebiggestpoutineintheworld in which you use 140 characters to recommend the book to your friends.