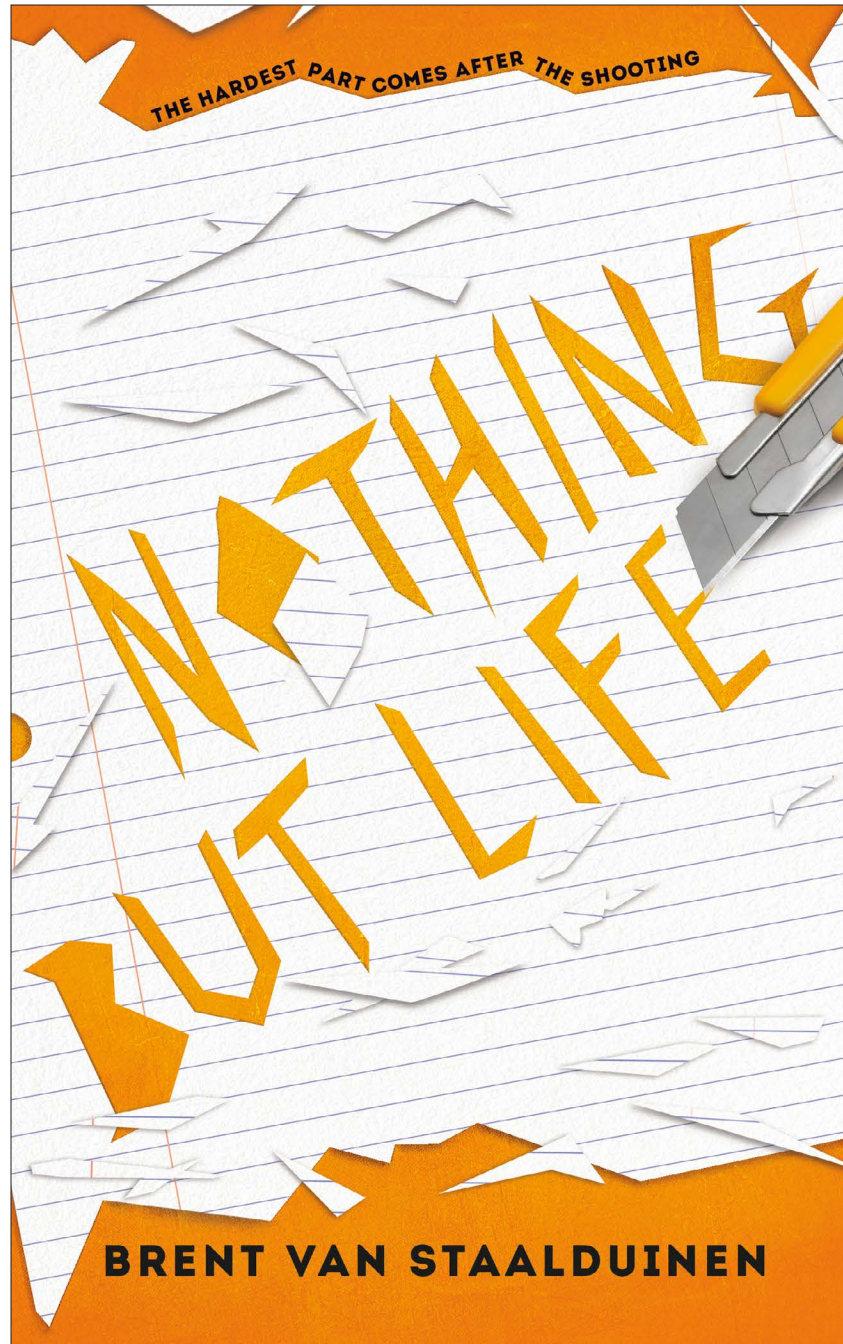


TEACHER'S GUIDE






By Brent van Staalduin





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I • OVERVIEW

About the Novel

Dills and his mom have returned to Hamilton, her hometown, hoping to leave the horrors of Windsor behind. But it's impossible to escape the echoes of tragedy, and trouble always follows trouble.

When Dills hurts a new classmate, it comes out in court that he was in the Windsor High library when the shooter came in. But he won't talk about what he saw, what he still sees whenever he closes his eyes. He can't. He definitely can't tell anyone that the Windsor Shooter is his stepfather, Jesse, that Jesse can speak into his mind from hundreds of kilometres away, and that Dills still loves him even though he committed an unspeakable crime.

Content Considerations

Nothing but Life is a novel about a young man dealing with the aftermath of a school shooting committed by his stepfather. Mass shootings, and in particular school shootings, may present difficult and complex issues for teenagers to navigate. That the crime was committed by a loved one should also be noted as content that might prove challenging.

The novel does not present graphic depictions of the shooting itself, but Dills, the main character, does remember many of his feelings and impressions from the day of the tragedy. These are presented through his eyes, simplified and explained in a manner he is capable of, which in his case avoids detailed descriptions. However, it should be noted that language can be a powerful trigger when it comes to traumatic content, so teachers of the novel are recommended to put in place strategies to process emotional difficulties that the subject matter might generate.

In addition, Dills's stepfather, Jesse, committed the crime, potentially generating concerns of parental/step-parental difficulties, especially given that Dills never gets to confront or talk to Jesse about his motives. This uncertainty is an intentional device intended to mirror that life often lacks clear episodes of closure on difficult issues, in contrast to many prominent narratives that operate along happily-ever-after lines, and may prompt a strong reaction. Here, too, it is recommended that teachers try to anticipate the challenging conversations and reactions that may result from exploring this subject matter.

II • SUMMARY

Wendell (Dills) Sims and his mom, Victoria, have moved back to Hamilton, her hometown, looking to start over. Dills can't talk about the day his stepdad, Jesse, came into the Windsor Middle School library and opened fire. The memories are too raw. Plus, it's hard to think about how many lives Jesse stole, the families he tore apart. Yet Dills doesn't think Jesse's a monster. Before he became the Windsor Shooter, Jesse was just a Hero Stepdad, a haunted combat vet who loved his family as fiercely as he fought his demons. And Dills still loves him.

But you can't run from tragedy, and trouble always follows trouble. The novel opens in youth court, where Dills is receiving his sentence for hurting one of his new classmates. Ten days earlier, in the final math class of the year, Dills snapped, using a box cutter on Pat, the bully who had been tormenting Dills since his first day at the new school. The judge, having learned about Windsor, goes easy on him, sentencing Dills to 240 hours of community service, to be spent picking up trash in his local park for the rest of the summer.

Reality really sets in for Dills at home the next morning when Sean, the probation officer, arrives with a long list of restrictions and rules, a safety vest, helmet, and a map. And an ankle monitor that Dills will have to wear while he completes his sentence. With little fanfare, Dills gets sent out to work, supervised by Gal, the park manager, a scarred veteran of one of Israel's many conflicts.

The park, which not only has large grassy areas and play fields, also encompasses a huge area of protected forest and wetland full of hiking trails, which Dills is also responsible for. Between the heat, the bugs, and all the gross things that settle in trash when it sits on the ground, it is quickly apparent that 240 hours might not be as light a sentence as everyone thought. And Dills, who is still dealing with the shadows of the Windsor shooting — he survived while so many of his classmates and teachers did not — has far too much time to think.

Plus, Jesse is still alive. He tried to kill himself after the shooting and is now lying comatose in a Windsor hospital bed. Nothing can happen until either he wakes up or dies, so no one knows what to do with him. The strain of waiting and not knowing is bad enough, but Dills can't talk about it with anyone, either. He quickly falls back into the habit of talking to himself, which is what put him on Pat's radar in the first place.

Then Jesse starts talking to Dills. *Come see me*, he says. Dills knows that there's a very real possibility that his bruised psyche is playing tricks on him. But this feels different. Dills often remembers Jesse's sayings and life lessons with great clarity, but here, now, Jesse's voice sounds as real as if he were standing two feet away. And unlike everyone else, Dills has never thought of Jesse as a monster. He understands why they do, of course, but no one knows all the goodness Jesse brought into Dills's and Victoria's lives, either. What if Jesse's voice is real? What if he needs Dills? What if he's reaching out to the only person who could still listen?

Dills wants to go back. There are so many questions he needs answered, like why did Jesse go to Dills's classroom first on the day of the shooting, before heading to the library? But leaving isn't just a matter of dropping his garbage spike and jumping on a bus. There's the ankle monitor to consider, and all the complications that would arise from breaching his court conditions. Plus, how would his mom react? She has gone through hell, too, trying so hard to find again the life they once had.

Life doesn't stop while Dills is sweating his way through bag after bag of garbage, either. They live with Victoria's mother, Gramma Jan, and her sister, Aunt Viv, in the home built by Dill's great-grandfather, an arrangement that brings its own challenges. Gramma Jan has an episode that puts her in the hospital, worrying everyone around her and uncovering a terminal form of cancer. Aunt Viv, a blunt computer consultant (do *not* call her a hacker), somehow ends up in a relationship with Sean, surprising everyone, including herself. And Catherine Walters, a reporter from the local newspaper, is digging around Dills's life to try and figure out why the judge kicked everyone out of the courtroom and gave Dills such a light sentence.

One day, Dills stumbles across a secret space in a park hedge, where Mia, one of his new classmates, goes to escape her own troubles. She's a wrestler, a Muslim, and an independent soul, which chafe against the structures and people in her own life. Dills is both awed and intrigued by her strength, and she seems to be all right with his quirks and foibles, too. Their friendship is immediate and intense.

You can't run from secrets any more than you can tragedy or trouble, and Mia soon finds out about Windsor and why Dills appeared in the middle of the school year. Dills tells her about hearing Jesse's voice; amazingly, she believes him. Even more than that, she agrees to help him try to make the journey back to Windsor, calling in an old favour from Gal, who she covered for when the police came calling some time ago. Aunt Viv surprises Dills by offering to help, too, by using her unique skills to cover the digital evidence leaving town would leave on the online system Sean uses to track the ankle monitors of the youth he oversees.

Late on a Friday night, Dills, Mia, and Gal leave Hamilton and arrive in Windsor so Dills can visit Jesse in the hospital. But nothing can prepare Dills for what he finds in that hospital bed: Jesse, a former warrior of a man, is horribly disfigured and literally wasting away. Though Dills has made the trip and given Jesse the chance to explain everything, it quickly becomes clear that Jesse cannot — or will not — answer Dills's questions. Heartbroken, Dills can only leave the hospital and Windsor wondering if the hole in his life that Jesse tore open can ever be repaired.

As they're leaving, a betrayal by one of the nurses at the hospital lets Dills's secret out: The Windsor Shooter's boy has returned to see his stepfather. Reporters and cameras arrive, and Dills and his friends leave Windsor in a hurry, trying to leave the media circus behind. However, the news is faster; they arrive back in Hamilton to find Walters and a pack of reporters waiting at the house, besieging Victoria, Gramma Jan, and Aunt Viv in their own home. Dills sends his friends away, hoping to spare them the negative publicity by association. The family decides that they will ignore the hungry crowd outside: no comment, no story.

Sean has seen the news coverage, too, and arrives at the house to get some answers. Aunt Viv's role in Dills's parole breach emerges, but rather than let her take the fall — which would bring Sean down, too — Dills, feeling defeated by the failed hospital visit and wanting to reclaim something of himself, steps forward to admit that he left town. Aunt Viv reluctantly agrees to undo her digital cover-up, leaving Sean in the clear but hurting because of Viv's betrayal. Dills returns to work the next day, wondering what the judge will do.

Victoria hears from the family lawyer, who acts as her proxy in Windsor to keep their identity away from the Windsor school shooting's acidic fallout. Jesse's doctors are reporting that in the hours following Dills's visit, his vitals have fallen and his death is now just a matter of time. Victoria immediately leaves for Windsor.

In the days that follow, Dills works the park in daylight and leans on Mia for support when the sun goes down. Everyone now knows that he survived the shooting and that his stepfather has left him with an unbearable legacy, and there has been an outpouring of sympathy and support. Gramma Jan, ever-weakening and refusing her medication, has a bad fall that lands her in hospital once again. The novel ends with Dills and Mia sitting on the patio in the deepening dark. Dills continues to tell her his story and about the horrors of Windsor, revealing details no one knows. Then the phone rings. At the other end of the line is a voice he knows and trusts and loves, telling him there's news.

III • PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Establishing a Reading Journal

Reading Journal

A reading journal is a place where students can interact with what they encounter in a work with visuals and writing. It can be a physical book, pages in their binder, an online journal, a Word/Google document, an Instagram photo and comment essay, a blog, etc. It can be private, public, and/or shared.

Important Note: A number of the activities and learning foci in this teacher’s guide will explicitly state that reading journals are to be used; however, almost all of the sections could be adapted for reading journal responses either in part or the whole. Additionally, the reading journal can be used for impromptu exercises based on in-class discussions or realities.

For the first entry, students will explore the idea of family dynamics and how loyalty affects them and their loved ones.

Guiding Questions

1. What does it mean to be loyal to one’s family?
 2. How important is it to be loyal to family?
 3. What limits are there to family loyalty?
-

First Entry

In class, using a few non-spoiler examples of family dynamics from the novel (Dills-Jesse, Jesse-everyone, Mom-Gamma Jan, Mia-her parents, etc.), you will seed a discussion about family loyalty, attempting to establish a class definition for the term. Then, in their reading journals, students will:

1. Reflect on the idea of family loyalty as it applies to them and their own families
2. Try to predict how some of the family dynamics in the novel might play out

Themes in the Novel

Themes

- Gun violence
- Gun control
- Mass shootings

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
 - Family dynamics
 - Friendship
 - Cultural differences
 - Loyalty and love
 - Misfits and outcasts
 - Imagination and fantasy
-

What Is Theme?

Introduce (or review, for higher grades) the definition of *theme*. A helpful list of common themes can be found at: literarydevices.net/a-huge-list-of-common-themes.

What Does Theme Do?

To explore how theme functions in literature, one option might be to examine previously studied material from the class, or to inspect a current/popular media or entertainment source, such as a movie or TV show, to extract themes.

Heads-Up for Reading

From your own pre-reading of the text, go through the list of *Nothing but Life* themes above and briefly highlight important details, such as relationships and plot events, that the students can look for as they read the novel.

Gun Control

Guiding Questions

1. What is gun control?
 2. What is responsible gun ownership?
 3. How can we respond to issues of gun control in our own communities?
-

The Basics

During a class period or at home, have the students research what gun control is, compiling a brief list of concepts that help explain gun control. Direct them to Canadian firearm laws to find out what gun control looks like in our country. Then, have them share what they've learned with the class in whatever manner you deem appropriate.

The Complications

Hopefully, the students will have also uncovered some of the challenges surrounding firearm laws (urban vs. rural, automatic/assault vs. single-shot, hunting vs. sporting, firearm registries, illegal ownership, etc.). Set the students into compare-prepare-share groups and have them:

1. Compare their findings on the social side of the issue
2. Condense their ideas and prepare 2–3 discussion or conflict points to bring to the class
3. Have the group share their thoughts with the class

You can compile the points in whatever manner is appropriate to the class environment (whiteboard, online, etc.).

The Takeaways

Have each student formulate 2–3 statements that encapsulate what they’ve learned and/or how they feel about the issue. This can be extended into an essay, media writing, or other communication exercise to help students apply what they’ve learned, and can even be presented to the larger community in a way that is appropriate to the students’ surroundings.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Guiding Questions

1. What is PTSD?
 2. Where does PTSD come from?
 3. How does PTSD affect a person?
 4. How has PTSD affected communities?
-

First Class

Nothing but Life deals with PTSD on a number of levels, through the characters of Dills, his mom, and Jesse. Either in a guided, in-class session or as a homework assignment, students will research the causes and symptoms of PTSD. There are a host of excellent, free PTSD resources available online, many of which are tailored for regional and cultural realities. In their reading journals, students will compile a bullet-point list of the signs and symptoms of PTSD to prepare for the following class.

Second Class

In the next class, have students discuss their findings. Then, lead a discussion of the wider effects of PTSD, especially as applied to current events (veteran issues, bullying, terrorist attacks, school shootings, pandemic challenges, etc.). The key takeaways from this exploration are:

- Trauma isn't always dramatic
- PTSD is often hidden, suppressed, or ignored
- PTSD impacts people directly and indirectly
- It can affect anyone

Follow-Up

Have the students write an email or letter to support someone suffering from PTSD (real or imagined), focusing on sensitive, non-judgmental language and avoiding didactic or leading suggestions. This is a letter of support, not for troubleshooting or for offering unsolicited advice.

Gun Violence

Guiding Questions

1. How widespread is gun violence in Canadian communities?
2. Can gun violence be prevented?
3. How has gun violence shifted the landscape in Canadian communities?

Research

Although Canada has relatively low levels of gun violence, it is not immune to it. Students will embark on a web-quest to discover the prevalence and social impact of gun violence in Canadian communities. In class, either with student or communal devices, such as in a library, post the above guiding questions and supervise the students as they research.

Ideally, this search will be done through school/board subscribed databases. It is important that active monitoring takes place while the students are researching this difficult topic, both to promote conversation and good inquiry, but also to reduce the risk of students encountering excessively graphic or disturbing material. If independent or at-home work is to be performed, notifying parents/guardians of the nature of the task is also recommended.

Application

The makeup of the class will determine the best approach to discussing and applying this knowledge. Opinion essays, class discussion, information campaigns, or even involvement in local initiatives may be explored.

Restorative Justice

Guiding Questions

1. What is restorative justice?
 2. How has restorative justice changed the landscape of the Canadian legal system?
 3. What are the considerations for and against using restorative justice in place of traditional penalties for serious crimes?
-

Research

Students will research how community service is used in their province or region as an alternative to more traditional punitive responses to crime. The idea of community service is that a convicted individual can restore something to the community that was affected by their crime(s). Community service is a basic and long-running form of restorative justice.

Extension

But restorative justice is more than having teenagers pick up garbage in their local parks. As an extension, students will look into alternative forms of restorative justice, even in the face of serious and/or violent crimes. More recent initiatives and research have created an entirely new way to view how individuals can restore the physical, emotional, and psychological impacts of their actions and decisions on their communities.

Application

Teachers will have students apply their research to their upcoming reading of the novel and, in writing, discussion, or other guided methods, reflect on the following: In *Nothing but Life*, in response to hurting a classmate, Dills is sent into his neighbourhood to pick up garbage in a nearby public park. Do you think this is an effective response by the courts? Why or why not? What other ways could the courts have responded to Dills's crime?

Restorative Justice: An Alternative

In this task, students will gather and reflect on new and alternative forms of restorative justice.

ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE	
General area for consideration (e.g., criminal, education, family law, young offenders)	Describe the form of restorative justice in your own words. How is it different or innovative?

Literary Elements

A list of elements and how they might be applied in student responses can be found here: hohschools.org/cms/lib/NY01913703/Centricity/Domain/378/LITERARYELEMENTSBESTSHEET.pdf.

Distribute this (or another) list in a way that ensures students can easily reference it in class as the novel study progresses. It might also be helpful to have a list prominently posted in the classroom.

IV • DURING-READING ACTIVITIES

Character Relationships

Nothing but Life is a young adult novel about a young man going through an unimaginably difficult time, and yet it's also a book about a teenager navigating the regular ins and outs of teenage life, including relationships in all their forms: familial, romantic, friendship, intergenerational, and more.

Character Relationship Organizer

For this resource, which will ideally be a part of the reading journal, students will track the progress and dynamics of relationships in the novel. Students can use whichever model of organizer they prefer (brainstorming, mind-mapping, Venn diagrams, idea-webbing, bullet-pointing, etc.). Alternatively, teachers can explore a digital or online organizer of some kind (Canva, Prezi, word maps, etc.).

Quotes and Notables

Students will watch for notable quotes and passages and chronicle them in their journals.

Three quotes and passages will be used on a poster or digital resource, accompanied by a paragraph of why each one is notable and how it functions in the novel.

Seed Examples

1. "Every family argues, right? A good argument is like a pressure valve for all that unconditional love." (p. 98)
2. "Getting older means you figure out what needs to get said, what doesn't." (p. 112)
3. "My glass core should be vaulted in tempered steel rather than this delicate, fragile thing we call a body." (p. 196)

Extension

Students will look for quotes from other authors on similar themes and compare and contrast them.

Tracking Character Development

Characters

- Dills
- Jesse
- Dills's mother
- Gal
- Mia
- Pat
- Aunt Viv
- Sean

Activity

In their reading journals, students will choose three characters from the above list (Dills must be one) and dedicate some space to noting how the character develops. This can be done on an ongoing basis individually or as a pair-share-present activity after the book is done.

Extension

Students will select a character from another book, film, or TV show that mirrors or parallels the development of their favourite *Nothing but Life* character; develop a compare and contrast chart for the two characters (3–4 points in each column); and then present it to their reading group or to the entire class.

Character vs. Character

Gather information for two characters in the novel and note how they compare/contrast with one another.

CHARACTER TRAIT Physical description (height, age, hair colour, etc.)	CHARACTER 1	CHARACTER 2

Performing Community Service

For this activity, students will go into their communities and perform a service (cleaning, helping, etc.) unannounced and unrecognized. They will then record the event in their journals and attach a selfie that documents their service (no posting online). Reflection should include as much detail and impressions of the event itself, as well as the reactions of others, and the impact on the student.

Guiding Questions

1. How did it feel to do something good for others?
2. What was the community response, if any?
3. Why was it important to perform this service unannounced and not seek recognition for it?

Setting and Meaning

Students will look at place (location, weather, etc.) to determine how it contributes to theme and meaning in the novel.

Nothing but Life is set mostly in a Hamilton suburb (much of it in Churchill Park, which is located in the Westdale neighbourhood), but it could have been set in any Canadian city. In their student response journals, students will reflect on setting and how place affects the story. How would it have been different if it had been set in a rural location? In a major city's downtown? In winter? In a juvenile detention facility?

Setting and Meaning Organizer

Distribute the Setting and Meaning handout to students.

Setting and Meaning Handout

Complete the following chart with supporting information from the novel.

SETTING (WITH PAGE #)	HOW DOES THIS SETTING CONTRIBUTE TO THE THEMES AND MEANING ENCOUNTERED IN THE NOVEL?

Chapter Response Questions

Part I: Here

Graduation

1. Describe the scene in one hundred words or less.
 2. How has the judge been moved by Dills's story?
 3. How would you describe Dills's tone as he tells his story?
-

Big Brother's Best

1. Describe Sean's demeanour. Is this what you might expect from a probation officer?
 2. How does wearing an ankle monitor affect Dills's mood?
-

Listen

1. What is causing the tension between Gal and Sean?
 2. Why do you think Dills blurts out his rude question to Gal?
-

Baby

1. Describe the relationship between Pat and Dills without using any form of the word *bully*.
 2. What effect does remembering Jesse's words "Clear as mud" have on the situation?
-

S&C

1. Why are Dills and his mom so hesitant to speak with Walters?
 2. Why is the canteen so important?
-

Hearing Jesse

1. This is the first time Dills hears Jesse's voice. How does he respond? Is this how you'd expect him to respond? Why?
 2. Briefly describe how Dills remembers Jesse's demeanour. Compare and contrast this to what we know about him as the Windsor Shooter.
-

Dependent

1. Dills's mom knows about his dreams. How does Dills feel about this?
2. What startling truth does Dills's mother reveal? How does this affect the tension in this chapter?

Mia

1. Dills and his mom miss Jesse a lot, even though he committed an unspeakable crime. Describe this tension.
2. Why is Dills uncomfortable when he encounters Mia and Gal in the hedge?

Cold Carrots

1. Describe Aunt Viv and her relationship with Dills.

Call Me Dills

1. How is hearing Jesse's voice complicating things for Dills?
2. How well does Dills handle this encounter with Mia?
3. Why is Mia's friendship with Gal unusual?

Metallic

1. Describe Gramma Jan and her relationship with Dills and his mom.
2. What is the role of smell and memory in this chapter?

Scars

1. Discuss the relevance of Dills's words: "My relationship to scars has changed forever."
2. Why is everyone so angry at Sean?

Believed

1. Aunt Viv seems to have all her options open to her, yet she lives simply and frugally. Discuss the difference, as Dills notes, "between want and need."
2. Why is it so important to Dills that Aunt Viv believes him when he says that he hears Jesse talking to him?
3. Is it surprising that Dills doesn't hate Jesse, even after what he did? Why?

Details

1. Why is it so difficult for Dills to talk about Windsor, even with Mia?
2. Dills's therapist advises him to avoid social media. Why? Is this realistic and/or wise?

Surplus

1. Discuss the contrast between the setting of the chapel and what Gal does inside it.
 2. Why is Gal at odds with his past and his heritage?
-

Exiled

1. Is it true that all families argue? Discuss.
 2. How would you describe Gramma Jan's relationship with Jesse and to what he did?
 3. Why has Dills kept the box cutter he used to hurt Pat?
-

Clear

1. How has getting the rash from poison ivy affected Dills, aside from the physical symptoms?
 2. Aunt Viv is clearly on Dills's side. What does it mean to have an ally?
-

Deadlines

1. Should Dills trust Walters? Why or why not?
-

Inbox

1. Discuss the significance of the changed lock-screen picture on Dills's mother's iPhone.
 2. What is a "designated summer friend"?
-

So Grown-Up

1. Why is Dills so excited?
 2. Why does Dills's mother insist he go to the barbeque rather than the hospital?
-

Defiant

1. Describe the tension between Dills and Mia's parents.
 2. Why does Dills have trouble controlling his thoughts and temper?
-

Digging

1. How is Dills affected when he encounters the spent shotgun shells along the trail?
 2. Is Dills pleased about what he discovers about Aunt Viv and Sean? Why or why not?
-

Complicated

1. Why do you think Jesse's voice has become more urgent?
 2. Why does Dills get grumpy with the runner?
-

Terminal

1. What does Gramma Jan reveal to Dills?
 2. Discuss how Gramma Jan shares her big news in terms of setting, character, and tone.
-

Like Normal

1. Discuss Aunt Viv's phobia and how it has impacted the family.
 2. What does Dills mean when he says, "I have a feeling we'll be looking for a new normal."
-

Held Up

1. Why is Dills surprised when Mia apologizes?
2. Through Aunt Viv's protective actions, Mia has learned about Windsor, which stuns Dills. How does Mia help him through the moment?

Part II: There

Go

1. Gal finally shares part of his story with Dills. What does this say about their relationship?
 2. Why is Dills struggling with keeping his mom and family in the dark about the road trip?
-

Involved

1. Dills is helped by Noor, another unexpected person in his life. Describe how new people have affected Dills and his journey.
-

Cooling Glass

1. How does Dills feel about being back in Windsor?
 2. Discuss Dills's words: "Every survivor will stay broken forever." How does it make you feel? Is it true? Why or why not?
 3. Why does Mia's simple thanks have such an impact on Dills?
-

Just Fine

1. Describe Dills's state of mind as he prepares to go to the hospital.
 2. How does Mia respond when she learns about Pat's degrading attack on Dills? Is this a surprise? Why or why not?
-

No Access

1. Imagine for a moment you were the nurse on Jesse's ward. How would you feel about having to care for a mass murderer?
 2. What is Sarah's response to learning Dills's identity?
-

Goodbye

1. In your own words, describe the moment Dills finally sees Jesse.
 2. How does Dills respond?
 3. Does Dills get the answers he's hoping for? Discuss what happens at the end of the chapter.
-

Arranged

1. What happens when Dills leaves Jesse's hospital room?
2. How do Dills and his friends get away?

Told

1. Why doesn't Dills text more information to Aunt Viv?
-

Lovely

1. Having to get the tire changed is such a quotidian thing, especially after the momentous events in the hospital. Describe how this scene builds tension.
 2. Dills finally calls his mom. How does she respond? Why?
-

Recognition

1. Discuss how being recognized on the news could change things for Dills and his family.
-

Siege

1. Why does Dills think he needs to face the news people and his family by himself?
 2. Compare and contrast Dills's mother's relief against her anger and disappointment in him.
-

Dig

1. Describe the atmosphere in Dills's home while the reporters wait outside.
-

No Apology

1. What has Sean realized? How has the road trip affected him?
 2. Discuss how, even though Dills takes responsibility for his actions, the consequences are far from certain.
-

On Your Terms

1. The media attention has faded away. Why?
 2. Dills still has to do his community service. Describe how his return to picking up garbage is/isn't routine.
-

Far from Perfect

1. Discuss Dills's mother's appearance and what this means for the situation and their relationship.
2. What is different about Pat? Why?

Your Story

1. Why doesn't Dills run away from Walters? What has changed?
 2. Can he trust her? Why or why not?
-

Goodbye, Part II

1. Dills's mother gets a phone call. Describe the scene and what she learns.
2. Discuss Gramma Jan's words: "Just come home when you can. This is home now."

Part III: Everywhere

Potential

1. Life has settled into a waiting game. How does this uncertainty affect the family?
2. Dills has decided to tell Mia everything, including details he's never told anyone. Why now?
3. Who do you think is on the other end of the line when Dills answers the call?

Debate on Themes and Social Issues

Themes

- Gun violence
- Gun control
- Mass shootings
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Family dynamics
- Friendship
- Cultural differences
- Loyalty and love
- Misfits and outcasts
- Imagination and fantasy

The Debate

Hold a class discussion and vote on which theme to cover in the debate. (Alternatively, depending on the class composition and social context of the school, you may opt to select the theme[s].) Then, the class will be divided into teams and will prepare for their debate. A proper debate should run between 40–60 minutes in length, so larger classes may have multiple debates across multiple class sessions.

A debate primer can be found here: edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/socstud/frame_found_sr2/tns/tn-13.pdf.

V • AFTER-READING ACTIVITIES

Character Study and Archetypes

With a focus on classic literary archetypes, students will select one character to perform an in-depth character study, or two characters for a compare/contrast study. Key character attributes will be supported by direct material from the text. Possible projects could include formal essays, class presentations, video/online resources, blogs, simulated TikTok videos, and so on.

Archetypes

- Lover
- Hero
- Outlaw
- Magician
- Explorer
- Sage
- Creator
- Innocent
- Caregiver
- Jester
- Everyman
- Ruler

Personality Types

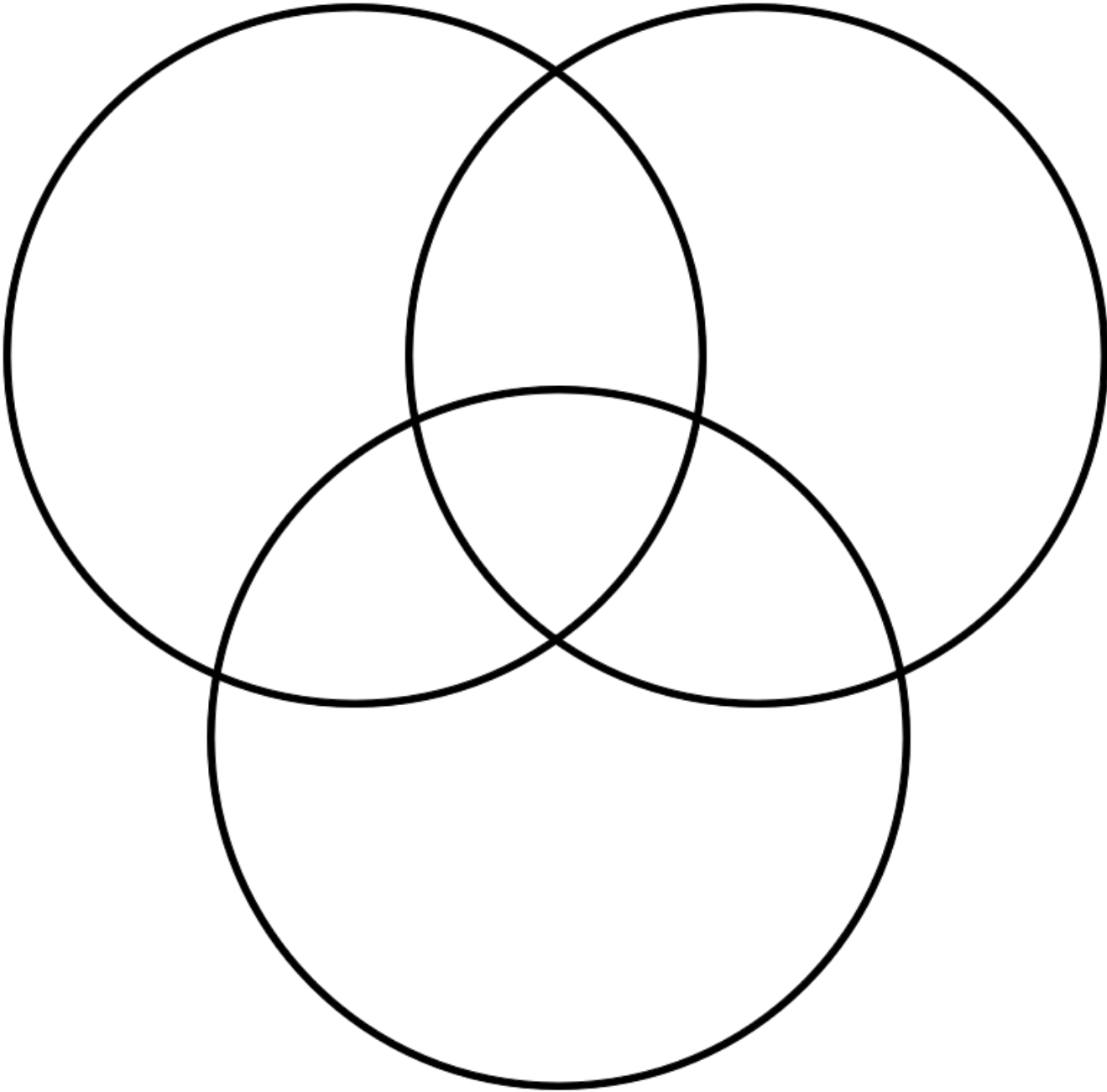
Students will research and apply the sixteen Myers-Briggs personality types (abundant free resources are available online) to one or more of the following characters:

- Dills
- Jesse
- Dills's mother
- Gal
- Mia
- Pat
- Aunt Viv
- Sean

In a TEDx-style presentation (can be done live or pre-recorded/produced online), students will present their findings to their peers. The classroom can be converted to a stage/audience venue, or tech-savvy students could reproduce TEDx with as much technology as they have access to and are comfortable with. This should not be pure analysis, but students should find an “angle” for their presentation that presents their findings in an informative and interesting way. Example: “Jesse: a surprising ISFJ Nurturer.”

Character Intersections and Influences

Choose three characters and complete the Venn diagram based on one aspect of character of your choice (emotion, life choices, interests, etc.):



Studying “26” by Rachel Eliza Griffiths

The title of *Nothing but Life* is taken from “26” by Rachel Eliza Griffiths, a poem written in response to the horrific shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School that occurred on December 14, 2012. The author, Brent van Staaldin, has received permission and encouragement to use her words in the title and epigraph for the novel.

The poem can be found here: poets.org/poem/26.

Students will read and discuss the poem in class, paying particular attention to the lines from where the book’s title and epigraph have been drawn.

Content Warning

The context for this poem is a shooting at an elementary school, where twenty children and six staff members were killed. Given the horrific nature of this crime, care should be taken when discussing and/or researching this topic.

Studying “26” by Rachel Eliza Griffiths Handout

The poem can be found here: poets.org/poem/26.

SIGNIFICANT LINE, PHRASE, OR WORD	WHY IS IT RELEVANT TO THE NOVEL?

Opinion Essay

Students will write an opinion essay on an aspect of the novel that they find interesting and/or worthy of discussion that 1) makes use of quoted/direct material from the text, and 2) incorporates outside material in their essay, such as teacher-assigned supplemental readings or student-supplied material (favourite poems, songs, articles, blogs, Instagram posts, and so on).

Examples

1. Dills's mom is a hero: how she saved her son
2. Forgiveness is overrated: why it's okay for Dills to hate Jesse
3. Mia could do better: why Dills is an unsuitable best friend
4. Canada isn't immune: how the book sheds light on our own gun problems

Defining the Genre

In terms of general category or genre, *Nothing but Life* is a young adult (or YA) novel. However, the book potentially blurs the lines between other genres, particularly around Dills hearing Jesse's voice.

For the purposes of this task, we will be working on the presumption that Jesse's voice is real, and that somehow he can project it across vast distances into Dills's ears and mind. If so, this takes the book beyond the literal and everyday and into the realm of the fantastic.

Step 1

Students will research genres and the sub-genres online.

Note: Genre is a malleable concept, and the students may note the conflicting and contrasting definitions and explanations for different genres. This is good confusion, and can be used to help the students understand that everyone reads and understands literature differently, even the "experts."

Step 2

Students will work in pairs or small groups to come up with two things:

1. The established genre they think most defines the book
2. Their own genre for the novel, using entirely new terms and their own language

Step 3

The groups will share their ideas with the class, with you keeping track of the terms on the board or other visual means. Are there any trends? Any genres that come up more than others?

Step 4

To coalesce the class work, lead a guided follow-up discussion on genre.

Extension

You may lead an in-depth discussion and in-class exploration of the following genre topic: magical realism vs. fabulism vs. surrealism.

Extensions and New Endings

The ending of the novel is ambiguous in that we're not explicitly told who is on the other end of the line or what the news is. We can certainly make informed theories and predictions, but the author has intentionally left this open to interpretation.

Students will create an extension (a scene that shows what happens next) or an alternate ending (rewriting the final chapter) for the novel. This will be accomplished through creative writing (prose, movie script, playwriting, etc.) and presentation, either in class or through other audio-visual media (video, blogging, staged play, etc.).

Podcast Interview

Students will script and perform an interview either between:

1. Two novel characters,
2. A well-known podcaster and a novel character, or
3. Themselves and a character from the novel.

The presentation can either be done live in class or pre-recorded and produced like an actual podcast.

Extension

A creative extension to make the podcast more fun/informative could be to add other audio material — such as old interviews, movie tie-ins, and music — for the characters to respond to mid-interview.

Community Help Resource

Students may be inspired to find new ways to talk about the numerous social issues presented in the novel (the list of themes can help pinpoint an issue, although the list isn't exhaustive).

One issue will be identified and researched, and using material from the novel, such as character quotes/testimonials (real or imagined) or other language/passages, students will create a resource to help members of their community understand and/or respond to the issue. This could be done in a number of ways, depending on student interests and comfort levels, such as brochures, webpages, posters, or TV/radio PSA scripts (or any combination thereof).

Book Club Meeting

A book club is a setting in which readers can meet and share their ideas and responses to a book-length work. Often lighthearted and fun — although serious subject matter can drive the mood in the other direction — book clubs are a way for book lovers to meet and socialize in a literature-loving atmosphere. A class book club functions in the same way: small groups will get together and discuss key aspects of the book.

Procedure

Break the class into groups composed of 3–4 students (or any other number that works for the class context) and assign a specific assignment to each for the book club meeting next class. This can be done in a number of ways, such as having each group focus on one literary aspect of the work (character, theme, etc.) or prepare a personal conclusion/impression of the work that will be brought to and shared with the group.

During the designated class period, students will meet and present their prepared remarks/writings. It is helpful to give each student a role (timekeeper, discussion moderator, record keeper, etc.) to aid in focus, and to ensure that the time isn't just a hangout. That said, low lighting, beverages, snacks, music, and other “un-academic” touches can promote a fun book club atmosphere.

The key takeaways and assessment foci will be on reading comprehension of the novel and a personal reaction to the work. It is essential that you either attend and monitor group discussions to assess students on how well they know/have interacted with the work, or in larger classrooms, have a written response submitted after the book club to assess student progress.

Write Your Own Back Cover Copy

Have the students write their own back cover copy for *Nothing but Life*. Have them review the book's back cover, and provide a few other examples to serve as inspiration (books they've studied as a class, teacher favourites, popular works, etc.). In a Q&A, ask the students why the examples are effective, focusing on how interest is generated with minimal but dramatic language and a focus on conflict/struggle.

The new back cover copy must:

- Be no longer than 150 words in length
- Briefly describe the main conflict of the novel

- Identify the protagonist and his main struggle (other characters should only be mentioned if essential to this conflict)
- Contain no spoilers other than those necessary to establish dramatic tension
- Act as a gateway into the novel

Here is the book's back cover copy:

Dills and his mom have returned to Hamilton, her hometown, hoping to leave the horrors of Windsor behind. But it's impossible to escape the echoes of tragedy, and trouble always follows trouble.

When Dills hurts a new classmate, it comes out in court that he was in the Windsor High library when the shooter came in. But he won't talk about what he saw, what he still sees whenever he closes his eyes. He can't. He definitely can't tell anyone that the Windsor Shooter is his stepfather, Jesse, that Jesse can speak into his mind from hundreds of kilometres away, and that Dills still loves him even though he committed an unspeakable crime.

Facing Justice

Because of his poor choices, Dills experiences the youth justice system firsthand, from laid charges to sentencing to time served. In researching the novel, the author spent time in a number of courtrooms as well as looking up youth offender procedures and sentencing guidelines for numerous jurisdictions. The result is a hybrid of a number of systems (i.e., you might not see a probation officer who looks like Sean walking around Hamilton, Ontario!) woven together in the novel.

Students who live in places where courtrooms are accessible will visit a local court on their own while it is in session to see the local justice system at work in real time. Alternatively, for students who don't have access to a physical court, virtual or online visits are acceptable. While attending court, students will take notes using the Facing Justice Handout.

Students will then make a brief, prepared presentation (1–2 minutes) to their class about what was observed and learned.

Note: Courts are generally accessible to the public, but specific local guidelines will vary in terms of access and timings. Ideally, students should visit the court individually (they may be permitted to attend in pairs, but courts will not allow groups without special permission). Encourage them to dress up for the occasion and make sure to follow all posted rules and guidelines.

Facing Justice Handout

COURT LOCATION AND TYPE:		
WHAT KIND OF CASE WAS IT?	WHAT DID I OBSERVE?	WHAT WAS UNUSUAL OR UNEXPECTED?

Character Playlist and Presentation

Have the students choose one of the characters from the novel:

- Dills
- Jesse
- Dills's mother
- Gal
- Mia
- Pat
- Aunt Viv
- Sean

For their chosen character, have the students create a small music playlist (9–10 songs) that encapsulates the character's personality and other attributes. Students will choose a Highlight Tune (1 song) to focus on and, in a classroom/online presentation, will:

1. Play the song;
2. Provide lyrics; and
3. Share a 2–3 minute prepared analysis of the song and why it's appropriate for the character. The analysis must make 3–4 direct references to the novel (with page numbers) by summarizing or relaying quoted material.

Is Jesse's Voice Real?

In a guided class discussion, students will discuss whether Jesse's voice is real or whether it's a product of Dills's bruised psyche and an extension of his PTSD.

Procedure

Students will be told to look into the guiding question "Is Jesse's voice real, or is it all in Dills's mind?" focusing on two areas: magical realism/fabulism/fantasy (Jesse is actually speaking to him from hundreds of kilometres away), and PTSD (Jesse's voice is just in Dills's mind). They will come up with their own hypothesis/opinion and choose 2–3 passages from the novel to back up their ideas. This will be done in preparation for a guided discussion in the next class.

For smaller classes, a class-wide discussion, where every student has a chance to present their ideas, is an excellent way for all students to see and hear different ideas about the novel. Larger classes can be divided into sub-groups for more focused discussions. As each student presents, other students will take notes in their class notes or reading journals in preparation for the next step.

Students will then write a brief follow-up passage in their reading journals (or other written response that can be assessed by you) that either maintains their first assertion about the topic or states a changed opinion based on their peers' presentations. Students will reflect on theirs and their classmates' ideas and how they reached this conclusion.

General Discussion Questions

1. Hate is an incredibly powerful emotion. Respond to Dills's statement that he can't hate Jesse, even after what he's done. Is this realistic? Reasonable? Why?
2. Dills isn't a violent person, but he still makes the extreme decision to lash out at Pat with a box cutter. What has pushed him so far, and why?
3. How important was it for Dills's mom to return to her Hamilton home?
4. Do you feel that Dills has received the support he needs to heal from the incredible tragedy that now defines his everyday existence? Why or why not?
5. Describe how Mia and Gal's relationship is unique in terms of age and their cultural backgrounds.
6. How is Dills affected by the strong women in his life?
7. A school shooting is an incredibly tragic and traumatic event. School boards and governments spend a lot of time preparing for the unthinkable through lockdowns and even active shooter drills. Is this enough? In terms of your own experiences, do you feel like you'd know what to do in such a situation? Why or why not?
8. Imagine for a moment you were in Dills's position. Would you go back to Windsor? Why or why not?
9. How well has the family responded to the tragedy, both toward Dills and Jesse as victim and perpetrator, but also in general?
10. Do you feel Dills has changed by the end of the novel? Why or why not? What about his mother? Mia? Gal? Jesse?
11. How would you describe the women in Dills's family?
12. The "road trip" is a classic trope in literature. Beyond the obvious reality that they drive to Windsor, describe how the trip taken by Dills and his friends fits into this device.
13. Of all the characters we encounter in the novel, who stands out to you as an example of strength? Why?
14. Would you describe Dills as a hero? Why or why not?
15. We hear a lot in media and entertainment about the idea of *closure*; define the term *closure* and explain whether you feel Dills has reached it by the end of the novel.

VI • ONTARIO CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

English: Grade 9-12 Curriculum Expectations

Oral Communication

■ OVERALL EXPECTATIONS

1. Listen in order to understand and respond appropriately in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes.
2. Use speaking skills and strategies appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
3. Reflect on and identify their strengths as listeners and speakers, areas for improvement, and the strategies they found most helpful in oral communication situations.

Applies to: Gun Control; Debate on Themes and Social Issues; Personality Types; Book Club Meeting; Character Playlist and Presentation; Facing Justice

Reading and Literature Studies

■ OVERALL EXPECTATIONS

1. Read and demonstrate an understanding of a variety of literary, informational, and graphic texts, using a range of strategies to construct meaning.
2. Recognize a variety of text forms, text features, and stylistic elements and demonstrate understanding of how they help communicate meaning.
3. Use knowledge of words and cueing systems to read fluently.
4. Reflect on and identify their strengths as readers, areas for improvement, and the strategies they found most helpful before, during, and after reading.

Applies to: Themes in the Novel; Literary Elements; Chapter Response Questions; Studying “26” by Rachel Eliza Griffiths; Book Club Meeting; General Discussion Questions

Writing

■ OVERALL EXPECTATIONS

1. Generate, gather, and organize ideas and information to write for an intended purpose and audience.
2. Draft and revise their writing, using a variety of literary, informational, and graphic forms and stylistic elements appropriate for the purpose and audience.
3. Use editing, proofreading, and publishing skills and strategies, and knowledge of language conventions, to correct errors, refine expression, and present their work effectively.

4. Reflect on and identify their strengths as writers, areas for improvement, and the strategies they found most helpful at different stages in the writing process.

Applies to: Establishing a Reading Journal; Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); Restorative Justice; Tracking Character Development; Performing Community Service; Opinion Essay; Extensions and New Endings; Is Jesse’s Voice Real?

Media Studies

■ **OVERALL EXPECTATIONS**

1. Demonstrate an understanding of a variety of media texts.
2. Identify some media forms and explain how the conventions and techniques associated with them are used to create meaning.
3. Create a variety of media texts for different purposes and audiences, using appropriate forms, conventions, and techniques.
4. Reflect on and identify their strengths as media interpreters and creators, areas for improvement, and the strategies they found most helpful in understanding and creating media texts.

Applies to: Themes in the Novel; Gun Violence; Character Relationships; Character Study and Archetypes; Personality Types; Extensions and New Endings; Podcast Interview; Community Help Resource; Character Playlist and Presentation