

**Educator's Guide**  
**for**  
***Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus***  
**by Dusti Bowling**

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## About the Book

“Whoa! What happened to your arms?” Aven Green gets that question a lot. She loves to tell people that she lost her arms in an alligator wrestling match, or a wildfire in Tanzania, but the truth is she was born without them. And when her parents take a job running Stagecoach Pass, a rundown western theme park in Arizona, Aven moves with them across the country knowing that she’ll have to answer the question over and over again.

Her new life takes an unexpected turn when she bonds with Connor, a classmate who also feels isolated because of his own disability, and they discover a room at Stagecoach Pass that holds bigger secrets than Aven ever could have imagined.

It’s hard to solve a mystery, help a friend, and face your worst fears. But Aven’s about to discover she can do it all . . . even without arms.

*Source: dustibowling.com*

## About the Author

Dusti Bowling grew up in Scottsdale, Arizona, where, as her family will tell you, she always had her nose in a book. But it wasn’t until after starting down a couple of different career paths that Dusti realized her true passion was writing. She currently lives in Carefree, Arizona with her husband, three daughters, one bobcat, a pack of coyotes, a couple of chuckwallas, several rattlesnakes, and a few herds of javelina. Learn more at [www.dustibowling.com](http://www.dustibowling.com)

### Five Fun Facts about Dusti Bowling:

1. She loves punk rock!
2. She can speak German.
3. She has parachuted off a mountain!
4. She has won hula-hooping, bubblegum bubble blowing, and whale-riding contests, though the whale was technically a whale-shaped raft.
5. When she was 10 years old, she saved a baby bunny that was being eaten by a snake in the desert by beating the snake with a stick.

### A Few Words about Dusti Bowling as a Young Reader:

“I was a voracious reader when I was a child. From the time I was eight until about thirteen, I was never caught without a book in my hand, and I easily read 2-3 books daily! Some of my favorite books were *Red the Red Fern Grows*, *The Babysitter's Club* series, the *Sweet Valley High* series, and Nancy Drew. I also loved scary stories, especially books like *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*. Though I loved to read, I didn't really start writing until I was an adult about ten years ago.”

# Getting Started

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## Seven Reading Skills Every Kid Needs: Grades 3 - 5

The following seven reading skill targets are based on the Common Core College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading for grades K-12.

**ONE:** Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text and reference examples and details from the text to support one's answer.

**TWO:** Summarize a text and identify themes in a story.

**THREE:** Describe characters, settings and events in a story using specific details from the text.

**FOUR:** Determine the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases in a text.

**FIVE:** Describe how a story is composed of chapters and how each successive part builds on earlier sections.

**SIX:** Describe how a narrator's or a speaker's point of view changes the way events are described in a text.

**SEVEN:** Compare and contrast stories.

Note: These targets are based on the following Common Core English Language Arts College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading, as applied to grades 3-5: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9.

## Suggested Timeline for a Six-Week Book Study

<i>Week</i>	<i>Chapters</i>	<i>Pages of Reading</i>
1	1 – 7	43
2	8 – 11	45
3	12 - 17	47
4	18 – 25	41
5	26 – 32	41
6	33 – 39	41

## Setting the Stage for a Reading Adventure

Creating a culture of literacy in your classroom goes beyond just reading, it's about inviting the whole group to dive into a journey filled with fun characters, interesting discussions and activities that bring the book to life. Here are some suggestions for incorporating your reading adventure into your classroom space and keeping track of the story as you read:

1. **Bulletin Board Collage** – Make a dedicated space to post student drawings and summaries created for each chapter of book. Add student projects from the activities section too!
2. **Story String Timeline** – Run a string or a long piece of blue painter's tape along a wall in the classroom to create a timeline. Divide the timeline into 39 segments, one for each chapter in *Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus*. As you read, invite students to add drawings and short summaries to the timeline.
3. **Our Reading Scrapbook** – For each chapter in the book and for each YOBOD event students attend, create a scrapbook page (or multiple pages) that combine words and images to record what happened. Scrapbook pages could be made individually by each student in order to create a personal scrapbook to take home at the end of the summer, or the class can work together to create a single book, with students working in small groups to create each entry.
4. **Adventure Journals** – Provide students with notebooks, or create simple paper journals using notebook paper, construction paper and staples. Have students draw pictures and write a few sentences about the important events of each chapter as they read. Students can also use their journals when responding to writing prompts in this guide.
5. **Story Garden** – Capture the essential elements of the story with a garden of paper cacti on a classroom wall or bulletin board. As the class encounters new characters in the story, invite a student to write the character's name and a few facts about him/her on a paper cactus to add to the story garden. For each setting in the story, have students add a paper rock with the name of the place and a few details. Record major events in the story in paper clouds that are added in rows from left to right, top to bottom, above the cactus landscape.
6. **Wonder Board** – Books can be the starting spot for all kinds of enquiry. Create a space to capture your students' "wonders" as they read the book. Examples of wonders could be: "What is the highest number of arms a saguaro can have?" or "How does someone without arms button their pants?" Define and label a section of wall space, a cabinet door or part of the whiteboard. Next, provide students with sticky notes and pencils to add their wonders to the board. As time

allows, read through the class' wonders as a group and select several wonders to investigate or invite students to do their own research and report back to the group.

## **Five Ways to Mix Things Up at Reading Time**

Giving students regular opportunities for quiet reading is essential for helping them develop fluency as a reader, but if regular reading time is starting to feel too repetitive, give one of these alternatives a try:

1. **Listen Along** – Gather the class to listen to the story as you read it aloud or listen to it on audio CD.
2. **I Read, You Read** – Divide students into small groups to take turns reading to each other. Invite students to switch readers after each page of text.
3. **Story Sketchers** – Divide students into pairs and give each pair two sheets of paper and drawing supplies. While one student reads, the other draws what's happening in the story, paying close attention to any details mentioned in the text. Halfway through the reading period, have students swap roles.
4. **Reading Radio** – Using a smartphone or other recording device, invite students to take turns reading a few lines of the text they have practiced ahead of time as you record it. Encourage students to read with enthusiasm and experiment with pacing and even voices. When time allows, playback the recording to hear everyone's voice!
5. **Seating Switcheroo** – Reading can happen anywhere! Could you read outside? Or under the desks? Or swap classrooms with another group? Invite students to brainstorm fun new places to read and then hold a vote to select the seating switcheroo venue.

## **Five Ways to Use the Discussion Questions**

Discussing a text with students allows them to check their understanding of what they read, make connections between the text and themselves and practice important literacy skills. The discussion questions provided in this guide offer a selection of chapter-by-chapter questions to get you started, but you should feel free to add your own questions and invite students to offer their questions to the group too. If desired, questions can be given to students ahead of time so they can look for answers in the text as they read.

As students discuss the book, encourage them to reference passages in the text to support their answer or opinion. Ask: *How do you know this?* Or *What evidence can you find in the text to support your idea?* Model this practice as you engage in the discussion too.

“Dive Deeper” discussion topics and resources invite educators to bring additional context to the story. Books can be an entry point to a whole world of exploration, so encourage your students to be curious about what they read and learn more about words they don’t know or topics that pique their interest. The “Dive Deeper” topics could also be used for small group or individual research projects where students then report back to the group about their findings.

**Educator Tip:** Encourage students to have their books with them during the discussion so they can refer to specific passages in support of their answers.

1. **Educator-Led Class Discussion** – The group works as a whole and the educator poses questions for students to answer.
2. **Small Groups** – Students work in small groups to discuss the questions while the educator circulates from group to group listening in on the discussion and asking follow-up questions.
3. **Task Groups** – Each group of students is given a question (or questions) to answer and then reports back to the entire class with their answer(s).
4. **Written Response** – The discussion questions can also be used as writing prompts and students can answer all or just selected questions as part of a journal assignment.
5. **Discussion Cards** – Invite students to chat about the book as they eat lunch or have independent work time by writing discussion questions on index cards which can be passed around the group for pairs of students to discuss.

## How to Use the Writing Prompts

Just like reading, writing is a skill that improves with practice. Two writing prompts are given for each chapter to allow students some choice regarding what they write. Encourage students to choose the prompt that interests them most. Educators may also ask students to write a summary of the chapter as part of the assignment.

If constrained by time, space or materials, many of the writing prompts could also be competed as an oral storytelling activity in pairs.

Celebrate your students’ writing by allowing time for them to share what they wrote with a classmate, a small group, or the whole class.

## How to Use the Activities

Fun activities in art, English language arts (ELA) and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) bring books to life and enhance learning. In the Activity Instructions section, you'll find dozens of activities that connect to themes in the book. Complete these activities with the suggested chapter or as fits best with your class' schedule and interests.

Educators are also encouraged to incorporate additional activities that connect with the themes found in *Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus*.

## Possible Programming Themes for *Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus*

- Moving to a new city/house/school (Aven's family moves from Kansas to Arizona)
- Desert plant and animal life (Aven looks for tarantulas and loves to visit a tall saguaro cactus on her walks)
- Western history and cowboy life (Aven's family takes over management of a western theme park called Stagecoach Pass)
- Mining history in the west (Stagecoach Pass has a pretend mine where visitors can pan for gold-painted rocks)
- Physical differences (Aven was born without arms)
- Theme parks (Aven's family lives and works at a western theme park)
- Road trips (Aven's family drives from Kansas to Arizona)
- Building community with those who are different from you (Aven has a limb difference, Connor has Tourette syndrome and Zion struggles with his weight)
- Mysteries (Aven, Connor and Zion work to solve a mystery at Stagecoach Pass)
- Sci-fi (Zion's parents are sci-fi fans and name him after a character in *The Matrix*)
- Adaptations (Aven's dad installs a strap on the fridge to make it easier for Aven to open; desert plants must adapt to a dry climate)
- Llamas (Stagecoach Pass has a llama in the petting zoo)
- Regional foods (Stagecoach Pass offers fried rattlesnake and Rocky Mountain oysters)
- Blogging (Aven has her own blog)
- Soccer/sports (Aven plays soccer)
- Music/Guitar (Aven plays the guitar with her feet and writes her own songs)
- Painting (Aven paints in art class and later helps her dad repaint a western-themed cutout for the park)
- Theme parks (Aven's family takes over management of a western theme park)
- Friendships (Aven makes friends with Connor and Zion)

- Running a business (Aven's parents manage Stagecoach Pass and deal with customers and employees)
- Meditation (Andrea leads the Tourette's support group in a guided meditation and breathing exercises)

## Online Resources for Major Themes

### Resources for Learning About Limb Differences

**Overview:** The term *limb differences* is used to refer to the congenital (meaning something a person is born with) absence or malformation of limbs. The cause of this type of limb difference is often unknown. Some limb differences may be acquired as the result of an injury or disease that requires amputation.

Tisha UnArmed – Tisha Shelton shares videos of how she does everyday tasks without arms.

[www.youtube.com/user/tishaunarmed/videos](http://www.youtube.com/user/tishaunarmed/videos)

Jessica Cox – Jessica is a motivational speaker, licensed pilot and holds a black belt in martial arts (and she knows how to use nun chucks too!).

[www.jessicacox.com](http://www.jessicacox.com)

Toe Talks – Tisha Shelton and Jessica Cox team up to host a series of YouTube episodes about life without arms.

### Resources for Learning About Tourette Syndrome

**Overview:** Tourette Syndrome is a neurodevelopmental disorder that is characterized by motor and vocal tics. Tourette Syndrome and other Tic Disorders are not rare. It is estimated that 1 out of every 160 children between the ages of 5-17 in the United States has Tourette Syndrome and that 1 out of every 100 children has Tourette Syndrome or another Tic Disorder. Some Tic Disorders may be transient, while others will persist into adolescence and adulthood. It is common for people with Tourette Syndrome to be affected by another co-occurring condition such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). There is no cure for Tourette Syndrome, but a variety of treatment options do exist.

Source: Tourette Association of America

Tourette Association of America

[www.tourette.org](http://www.tourette.org)

VIDEO: "How Do You Live with Tourette's" Short Documentary by the Tourette Association (12:14)

Six kids and teens discuss life with Tourette Syndrome. They talk candidly about their struggles, the anguish of being “different,” receiving the diagnosis and their often-embarrassing symptoms and tics. They discuss their experiences being bullied because of their uncontrollable movements and sounds, the stigma of having the disorder, and their desire to just fit in at school.

<https://youtu.be/Ch8Jt1Zgnc>

VIDEO: Stand Up for Tourette Syndrome (3:38)

When Luke is being teased in the lunchroom about his tics, his friends encourage him to confront the bullies. With his friends at his side, Luke explains his Tourette Syndrome to the mean kids and answers their questions. By the end of the video the kids apologize for how they’ve treated Luke.

<https://youtu.be/IXLmtTLWnz8>

### **Resources for Learning About the Sonoran Desert**

**Overview:** The Sonoran Desert covers parts of Arizona, California, Baja California and Mexico. It has an area of 100,000 square miles and is home to 60 mammal species, 350 bird species, 20 amphibian species, over 100 reptile species, 30 native fish species, over 1000 native bee species, and more than 2,000 native plant species.

Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum – Explore online exhibits, games, animal videos, fact sheets on desert plants and animals, lesson plans and printable activities.

<https://www.desertmuseum.org>

Saguaro National Park – Watch a live webcam of the park and learn more about the majestic saguaro cactus.

<https://www.nps.gov/sagu/index.htm>

Denver Botanic Gardens Navigator – Explore the many species of cacti that live at the Denver Botanic Gardens.

<http://navigate.botanicgardens.org/>

VIDEO: A Day at the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum! (6:44)

Coyote Peterson, host of Breaking Trail, spends a day at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum with the museum’s curator viewing the animals that live at the museum. Animals include a mountain lion, javelinas and desert big horn sheep.

# READ & DISCUSS

## A Chapter-By-Chapter Discussion Guide

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### Chapter 1

#### Summary

Aven Green was born without arms, but this has never made her feel helpless. In fact, she can do most everything that people with arms can do like eating cereal, getting dressed, brushing her teeth and wiping her own bottom. Aven's parents have always encouraged her to learn to do things for herself even if it takes a little longer or she has to do it differently. When a little kid on the playground shrieks that Aven's arms have fallen off, she recounts that it was the first time she felt different and wished she could have arms like other people. Starting school, Aven got a lot of questions about why she didn't have arms. Since the truth of being born without arms seemed rather boring to her, Aven started making up wild stories about what had happened to her arms. Before long, her friends are always asking her "Hey, Aven! Where'd your arms go?" to hear her latest tale.

#### Discussion Questions

1. How do Aven's parents respond to her lack of arms? Do they feel like she is helpless without arms? What examples can you find in the text?
2. How did Aven feel when a kid on the playground pointed at her and shouted, "Her arms fell off!" before running away in terror? What ideas do you have for how you would react to seeing someone with a limb difference while at the playground?
3. Why does Aven start making up stories about why she has no arms? How do people respond to these stories?
4. What are some of the tasks can Aven do without any help? Did any of these surprise you?
5. What wonders do you have about what life would be like without arms? Do the kids at Aven's school have questions too?

#### Dive Deeper: Limb Differences

The term *limb differences* is used to refer to the congenital (meaning something a person is born with) absence or malformation of limbs. The cause of this type of limb difference is often unknown. Some limb differences may be acquired as the result of an injury or disease that requires amputation.

Students will be curious about the lives of those with limb differences, so provide a space to explore this topic that is factually accurate, supportive and reminds students to

always be kind with their thoughts and words. Whether we have ten fingers or no fingers at all, we all want to lead a life that is full of opportunities, love, friendship and laughter.

There are many excellent online videos of people with limb differences and how they manage their daily lives. In fact, author Dusti Bowling used videos of Tisha UnArmed and Jessica Cox as resources as she wrote *Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus*.

Online Resources:

Tisha UnArmed – Tisha Shelton shares videos of how she does everyday tasks without arms.

[www.youtube.com/user/tishaunarmed/videos](http://www.youtube.com/user/tishaunarmed/videos)

Jessica Cox – Jessica is a motivational speaker, licensed pilot and holds a black belt in martial arts (and she knows how to use nun chucks too!).

[www.jessicacox.com](http://www.jessicacox.com)

Toe Talks – Tisha Shelton and Jessica Cox team up to host a series of YouTube episodes about life without arms.

## Chapter 2

### Summary

Aven's dad is offered a job running Stagecoach Pass, a western theme park in Arizona. As he has been out of work for nearly 6 months, this seems like a great opportunity for the family. Aven thinks he's crazy to consider a job that would require leaving the only home she's ever really known. After an interview and visit to the park, Aven's parents accept the job, which turns out to be more of a two-person position, and pack up the family to move. Driving straight through in a single long day, the family arrives in Phoenix, Arizona.

### Discussion Questions

1. When Aven's father is offered a job running a western theme park in Arizona, how does Aven feel about this idea?
2. What does it mean to "butter someone up"? How do Aven's parents butter her up?
3. What connection does Aven already have to Arizona?
4. Why does Aven's Dad think Arizona will be a great place to live?
5. Have you ever moved to a new place? Were you excited, nervous, angry?

### **Dive Deeper: Geography of the Book**

When Aven's parents accept a job at Stagecoach Pass in Arizona, the family packs up their belongings and drives west. Help students envision the places mentioned in the book by using online maps, paper maps and travel guides. Invite students to explore the geography of the book through these activities:

1. Using online maps or paper maps, have students locate the locations mentioned in the book (Kansas, Arizona and Phoenix) in addition to the state of Colorado and the city of Denver.
2. While the book doesn't mention the exact city in Kansas where Aven's family lives, invite students to trace a driving route from Kansas' state capital, Topeka, to Phoenix. Which major cities would they pass through? How long would it take? Is it possible the Green family would have driven through Denver?
3. How far is it from Denver to Phoenix? How long would it take to drive there? How long would it take to walk there?
4. What is the weather like right now in Phoenix? What is the climate like there? Does it ever snow? How hot can it get there? How cold does it get there?
5. Using online resources, look at photos of cities in Kansas and Arizona. What do you notice? What is similar to Denver? What is different? Which places would you like to visit?

Online Resources:

Maps and Directions – [maps.google.com](https://maps.google.com)

Kansas Tourism – [www.travelks.com](http://www.travelks.com)

Arizona Tourism – [www.visitarizona.com](http://www.visitarizona.com)

Colorado Tourism – [www.colorado.com](http://www.colorado.com)

## **Chapter 3**

### **Summary**

The Green family arrives at Stagecoach Pass and is greeted by Gary, the park's accountant who helps them get settled into the small, humble apartment above the theme park's steakhouse. When Aven's Dad asks when he will meet Joe Cavanaugh, the owner of the park, Gary tells him that no one ever meets Joe as he's not around much. It's hot and the park is a dusty expanse of dirt paths and wooden buildings. Escaping the heat, Aven explores the park's small museum and discovers a missing photograph of the Cavanaugh family and wonders why it was taken down.

### Discussion Questions

1. The *setting* in a story is when and where it takes place. What do you know about the setting of this story?
2. What are Aven's initial impressions of Arizona?
3. What does Aven notice is missing from the wall in the Stagecoach Pass museum? Why does this intrigue her?

## Chapter 4

### Summary

After a few days to settle in, Aven has her first day at Desert Ridge Middle School. This new school is much larger than her old school in Kansas and Aven is extremely nervous about making new friends and dreading all the “looks” she knows she’s going to get. Her mom drops her off in front of the school and Aven anchors herself on the small first goal of making it to her first class. She had visited the school that day before and met her teachers, who were all very nice, but who all spoke to her as if they knew she was going to need extra help due to her limb difference, which annoyed Aven. Arriving at her science class, Aven slips her bag onto her desk and uses her foot to get her textbook out. One of the distinct advantages of the Arizona climate is that Aven can wear her favorite kind of shoes, ballet flats, all year long which makes it faster and easier to use her feet to perform all that tasks of her day. When a student in her science class notices Aven’s limb difference, she avoids looking at Aven’s torso and quickly ends their conversation. When Aven asks which page the class is reading in the textbook, the girl offers to help turn the pages for Aven, but Aven quickly shows her how she can use her dexterous toes to do it herself. At lunchtime, Aven decides to sit on a bench outside to avoid having people stare at her as she eats with her feet. When she finds a group of curious onlookers waiting outside too, she puts her lunch back in her bag and decides to just read her science book under a tree. She misses her friends and the days at her old school where no one cared that she ate with her feet.

### Discussion Questions

1. In what ways is Desert Ridge Middle School different than Aven’s school in Kansas?
2. How does Aven feel when her teachers tell her “If there’s anything you need, Aven, don’t be afraid to ask”? What does this reveal about how the teachers view her limb difference versus how Aven feels about herself?
3. Why does Aven love to wear ballet flats?
4. How does the girl in Aven’s science class respond when she notices Aven’s limb difference? How does this reaction make Aven feel?
5. Why does Aven decide to sit outside at lunchtime?
6. On page 22, Aven comments, “I sometimes wondered if people had a tendency not to give me their names or ask me for mine because of their fear of getting too close . . . too close to something so different.” Do you agree with this

observation? Why do you think this might be? Do you think there might be ways to overcome our fear of things that are different?

7. Do you ever notice kids who eat alone at lunchtime? What could you do to include them?

### **Dive Deeper: Medusa/Greek Mythology**

When a girl in Aven's science class first notices Aven's limb differences she tries to avoid looking at Aven's torso. Aven comments: "People were always doing that—like if they looked down at my torso for longer than a split second, they would turn to stone. Like my torso was actually Medusa's head" (21).

Medusa was a monster (or "Gorgon") in Greek mythology that is generally described as a winged woman with living venomous snakes instead of hair. Anyone who looked at her face would turn to stone. Greek mythology is commonly referenced in literature and even everyday language. Invite students to learn more about this topic by reading a few classic myths, learning the Greek and Roman names for the gods and exploring the origins of the names of the planets in our solar system.

Online Resources:

Perseus and the Gorgon Medusa

Find a full-cast audio dramatization of the Greek myth of Perseus and the Gorgon Medusa, as well as other Greek myths at the BBC's School Radio site. Also available at this site are PDF versions of the radio plays which could be read and performed by students.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/learning/schoolradio/subjects/history/ancient\\_greek\\_myths](http://www.bbc.co.uk/learning/schoolradio/subjects/history/ancient_greek_myths)

Recommended Reading: *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths* by Ingri d'Aulaire and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire

## **Chapter 5**

### **Summary**

Aven finds living at Stagecoach Pass not as exciting as it might be to live at a theme park like Disney Land. The restaurant at the park serves only steaks and burgers with sides, plus a fried rattlesnake and Rocky Mountain oysters for the adventurous eater. Many of the dusty old wooden buildings are empty, but the park attractions that are still active include: a shooting gallery; a tiny museum; a gift shop selling cheesy trinkets; a theater showing black-and-white westerns all day; a soda shop staffed by a senile old man named Henry; a jail where you can have your friends locked up for silly offenses; a petting zoo with goats, sheep, rabbits, chickens and an old llama with a tumor growing out of its head named Spaghetti; a gold mine run by a cranky old man named Bob who seems to hate children; a psychic named Madame Myrtle who reads palms; and donkey

and camel rides. On the first day after school, Aven visits the soda shop where Henry mixes up her order as usual. When she comments on the abundance of tarantula pictures on the wall, Henry tells her, with all certainty, that she really likes tarantulas and that she's just trying to fool him by saying otherwise. Following a narrow dirt path behind the theme park buildings, Aven discovers a padlocked shack covered in signs reading "DO NOT ENTER" that contains stacks of boxes and what look like old props.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are some of the features of Stage Coach Pass?
2. Aven decides to try the fried rattlesnake, but passes on the Rocky Mountain oysters (25). What are some new foods that you have tried?
3. On page 27, Aven describes the animals at the park's petting zoo including a llama named Spaghetti that has a tumor growing out of his head. She comments, "Poor Spaghetti—the kids are scared of him and prefer to pet the other animals. But Spaghetti and I have a special connection." Why do you think she feels a special connection with Spaghetti?
4. What do you know about Henry, the man who runs the soda shop?
5. What do you know about Bob, the man who runs the gold mine attraction?
6. At the end of the chapter, what does Aven find that sparks her curiosity?
7. If you were spending the day at Stagecoach Pass, which attraction(s) would you most like to visit?

### **Dive Deeper: Colorado's Western History**

Colorado was once home to cowboys, farmers, gunslingers, fur traders and miners. It was the discovery of gold near present-day Denver in 1858-59 that drew thousands of people to Colorado before it had even become a state. In fact, gold dust was found in Cherry Creek, the South Platte River and Little Dry Creek. Invite students to explore Colorado's fascinating past through online videos and books from your local library. Have them compare the way western history is portrayed at Stagecoach Pass and the reality of western life they find through their research.

Online Resources:

Colorado Experience Videos at Rocky Mountain PBS

Thirty-minute videos of a variety of topics from Colorado's fascinating history

<http://www.rmpbs.org/coloradoexperience/>

History Colorado

Interactive online exhibitions including Colorado's fur trade

<http://exhibits.historycolorado.org>

## Chapter 6

### Summary

When Aven returns home from school, her mom discovers that she hasn't eaten any of her lunch. Aven explains that it was just a case of first-day-of-school nerves, but her mother worries its more than that. Deciding to let go of her worries for the moment, her mother lets the subject drop and Aven gets a snack out of the fridge. Before heading back to work to talk to Bob at the Gold Mine about the way he smacked a 4-year-old on the hand with a gold pan, Aven's mom surprises her with a new computer and her own blog website. Aven is unsure what to write about, so her mom suggests soccer, the sport she began playing in second grade as the only one of her dad's successful father-daughter activity attempts. While she waits for the soccer season at her school to start in the spring, Aven and her dad practice in the old rodeo arena. Aven's mom leaves to manage the park and Aven writes her first blog post about how school sucks and it's so hot in Arizona. Thinking back on her first day, Aven replays a scene from art class where her teacher asked for a volunteer to get her paints even though she could do it herself. As the kids all watched her get her supplies, she reminded herself that curiosity was normal, but that didn't stop missing her friends in Kansas where no one treated her like she was different. Aven works on her math problems and enjoys a sense of pride in how her parents have raised her to be a self-sufficient "problem-solving ninja." At the same time, she wonders how she's going to make friends with kids who think she's a freak.

### Discussion Questions

1. On page 31, Aven explains that she didn't eat her lunch because "she just wasn't hungry today." How would you explain why she didn't eat her lunch? Can you relate to her feelings?
2. What surprise does Aven's mom have for her?
3. If you were advising Aven on the topic of her new blog, what would you suggest she write about? If you had a blog, what would you write about?
4. What kind of "dad" activities has Aven's father tried with her over the years? What are some activities you do with a parent or grandparent?
5. Why does Aven's mom need to talk to Bob, the man who runs the gold mine attraction at Stagecoach Pass?
6. How does Aven feel when her art teacher asked the class for a volunteer to help her get her paints? What evidence can you find in the text? (p. 36)
7. Aven takes pride in being a "problem-solving ninja," but feels there's one problem she's not sure she can solve. What problem is weighing on her mind at the end of the chapter? What advice would you give Aven? Do you think there are kids at your school who also struggle with making new friends? What could you do to help those kids be more included?

## Chapter 7

### Summary

Not wanting to face eating in a lunchroom full of kids staring at her, Aven decides to lock herself in the handicap stall in the bathroom and eat her peanut butter and jelly sandwich and carrots in there. Art class went a little better as her teacher didn't make any more pleas for help on her behalf. On the following day, Aven decides to eat lunch under a tree. At one point a group of three girls walks up to her and after saying hello asks what happened to her arms. Disappointed that they had only come over to satisfy their curiosity, Aven explains that she has an extremely rare genetic disorder that causes malformation of the limbs. Alarmed, one of the girls asks if it's contagious, to which Aven carefully replies that it's a genetic disorder, which means you're born with it. Relieved, the girls say goodbye and walk away without even having asked Aven's name. Not feeling hungry anymore after this exchange, Aven packs up her lunch and waits for the bell to ring.

### Discussion Questions

1. Where does Aven decide to eat lunch on this day?
2. Based on the text, what kinds of details does Aven notice about the three girls who walk over to where she is eating? What does she hope is the reason they have come to say hello?
3. How does it make Aven feel when the girls ask about her arms before asking her name? What do you think might have felt better to Aven?
4. According to the text, what is the cause of Aven's limb difference? What does it mean if a condition is "genetic"?
5. What does Aven feel is the root of the three girls' curiosity? Do you think differences can sometimes make people feel afraid when they don't understand them?

## Chapter 8

### Summary

In the early evening, Aven likes to walk down Main Street, make a quick visit to Spaghetti, the llama with a tumor growing out of its head, and then stroll past the attractions to a trail that winds around a hill behind Stagecoach Pass. She passes a variety of cacti on her climb to the top where an enormous, 7-armed saguaro cactus stands. Sitting on the hard desert dirt, Aven thinks about all that has happened in this saguaro's long life including the Civil War, Arizona's statehood, women's suffrage, Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous speech, and how billions of people have been born and billions of people have died during the more than two centuries this saguaro has stood on this hill. In the presence of such big thoughts, Aven feels that surely her worries about the kids at school are insignificant and shouldn't bother her, but the truth is they do.

### Discussion Questions

1. Where does Aven like to go in the evening? Do you have a special spot that feels like your own too?
2. This chapter contains the line that inspired the title of this book. Can you find it? Why does Aven feel like her life and worries are an “insignificant event in the life of a cactus”?
3. What are the worries that Aven can’t seem to shake? Why might they be hard to let go of even if Aven thinks they shouldn’t be a big deal
4. When you think about the history of our planet and the millions and millions of years plants and animals have lived here, how does that make you feel about your own place in history? How do your feelings change when you just think about yourself as a member of this community? What might this tell us about the way our perspective changes our point of view?

### Dive Deeper: Saguaro Cactus

Saguaros (pronounced "suh-wahr-oh") are the largest cactus species in the United States. They can grow more than 40 feet tall and weigh between 3200-4800 pounds - that’s the about the weight of the average car! A typical saguaro can live between 100-200 years. Saguaros have a special root system to make the most of every drop of rain. The cactus has a single “taproot” (a large, central root that grows directly downward) that grows deep into the ground to access water that’s stored underground, while the rest of its roots grow just a few inches from the surface to collect rainwater before it evaporates in the desert’s dry climate. Saguaros don’t always look like the multi-armed cacti we see in images of the American West. Some saguaros never grow arms and are called *spears* and a very small number develop a fan-like structure on top and are called *crested saguaros*.

Online Resources:

Saguaro National Park

Fact sheets and a live web cam of saguaros in the desert

[https://www.nps.gov/sagu/learn/nature/saguaro\\_q\\_a.htm](https://www.nps.gov/sagu/learn/nature/saguaro_q_a.htm)

Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum

Online exhibits, games, fact sheets, lesson plans and printable activities.

<https://www.desertmuseum.org>

## Chapter 9

### Summary

Aven decides to spend her next lunch period in the library. She nearly trips over a boy on the sidewalk who is eating lunch by himself, but hurried on after mumbling “Sorry.” The library is empty aside from one other student and a couple of librarians. Aven is just

settling in to read a copy of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, when she hears a dog bark that seems to be coming from the direction from a boy sitting on the far side of the room. Aven discovers it is the boy making the barking sound and decides to go back to her book and ignore him, unsure if something is wrong with him or if he's teasing her in some new way. After a couple minutes of reading, Aven walks toward the boy to ask if he is barking at her. His cheeks turning red, the boy explains that his uncontrollable barking is caused by Tourette Syndrome, a neurological disorder that causes involuntary motor or oral tics. As the boy looks down from Aven's face, he notices she doesn't have arms and asks how she lost them. Making light of the situation, Aven jokes that she must have forgotten her arms somewhere this morning. When the boy enquires again, Aven launches into an elaborate story involving a tragic trapeze accident. Realizing Aven is joking, the boy grins and starts laughing. His name is Connor and he usually spends lunch in the library to enjoy some alone time when kids aren't paying attention to his tics. Aven and Connor chat about Aven's life in Kansas and her recent move to Stagecoach Pass, which is not far from Connor's apartment. When Aven invites him to visit the park, he seems uncomfortable and explains that he doesn't like to go out a lot. Aven asks about Connor's tics and he explains that, like a yawn, they're hard to hold in and that when he does try, it hurts and usually leads to an explosion of tics later. He describes the medications and therapies he has tried and how kids at the school treat him. He wishes more people understood that he's not barking or jerking his head deliberately. Aven and Connor are both struggling to make friends and both understand what it feels like to have people act weird around them in response to their differences. When the bell rings, Aven wishes she could stay in the library chatting with Connor.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What is the source of the barking Aven hears in the library?
2. How are Aven's thoughts about the barking boy in the library similar to the thoughts others have about her?
3. How does Aven feel when the boy in the library asks such direct questions about her limb difference? How does Aven feel when people pretend they don't notice her missing arms?
4. What strategy does Aven use to make light of her limb difference? Do you think this strategy is effective? Why or why not?
5. What is Tourette Syndrome? What are the tics that Connor seems to have?
6. What does Connor wish people understood about his condition? What does he wish people would do when he is ticcing? Do you think all people living with Tourette Syndrome would give the same answer to this question? Why or why not?
7. How would Aven like people to respond to her limb difference?
8. Compare Connor's and Aven's experience living with a disability. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different?
9. In what ways is Connor's conversation with Aven different than the conversation Aven has with the three girls in the previous chapter? How does this connect to

Aven's observation that "no one has talked to me like I'm an actual person" (p. 57)? What do you think it looks like to talk to someone like they are an actual person?

10. Think about a time when someone made you feel important, valuable, happy, confident and like your very best self. How did that person talk to you? Where did they look with their eyes? What body language did they use? What do you think it would look like to greet someone new in a way that made them feel awesome?

### **Dive Deeper: Tourette Syndrome**

Tourette Syndrome is a type of Tic Disorder. Tics are involuntary, repetitive movements and vocalizations. Motor tics can include, but are not limited to: blinking, grimacing, jaw movements, head jerking and shoulder shrugging. More complex motor tics can include hopping, twirling and jumping. Vocal tics can include, but are not limited to: sniffing, throat clearing, grunting, hooting and shouting. Complex vocal tics are words or phrases. Popular media often portrays, mocks and misrepresents the shouting of inappropriate words (a rare type of vocal tic called coprolalia), as a common symptom of Tourette Syndrome.

Students will be curious about this condition and have questions, so provide a space to explore this topic that is factually accurate, supportive and reminds students to always be kind with their thoughts and words. Reinforce the concept that people with Tourette Syndrome cannot control their tics and as such, those around them need to be understanding. Also, remind students that portrayal of this neurologic disorder in TV and movies may not be accurate, so they should question the source of the information they're seeing. Author Dusti Bowling has two daughters with tic disorders and the character of Connor was inspired in part by them.

Online Resources:

Tourette Association of America

[www.tourette.org](http://www.tourette.org)

VIDEO: "How Do You Live with Tourette's" Short Documentary by the Tourette Association (12:14)

Six kids and teens discuss life with Tourette Syndrome. They talk candidly about their struggles, the anguish of being "different," receiving the diagnosis and their often-embarrassing symptoms and tics. They discuss their experiences being bullied because of their uncontrollable movements and sounds, the stigma of having the disorder, and their desire to just fit in at school.

<https://youtu.be/Ch8Jt1Zgnc>

## Chapter 10

### Summary

Aven composes a blog post about the looks she gets due to her limb difference. She explains that the most popular look is the one where people pretend to not even notice her missing arms and avoid looking at her torso. She wishes people would just go ahead and look and then ask questions if they want. Other looks include those from people who are staring out of the corner of their eye, the dreaded pity look and the worst look of all, being stared at like a freak. Aven tries to keep her blog post light and funny, so she leaves out the part describing how hard it is to ignore the looks and that even after 13 years, they still hurt. After finishing her blog post, Aven helps her dad paint wooden cutouts for the theme park. As she paints with her foot, she notices Connor walking over the bridge that connects the parking lot to the park. Aven introduces Connor to her dad and the two head out to explore the park. Connor shares that his mom works two jobs as an ER nurse and he doesn't get to see her that often. Connor is surprised to find out that Aven can play video games and plays the guitar. Not only that, Aven reveals that she writes her own songs and sings. After Aven asks whether Connor sees his dad often, Connor describes how his parents were always fighting about his tic and medical bills before they got divorced and how he feels like he's the reason his father left. Aven and Connor discuss what it feels like to hold in his tics and contemplate what it would be like if Aven got an arm transplant, deciding in the end that living with their differences feels like the best choice. They visit Spaghetti the llama before walking into the soda shop where Henry makes statements about Aven that seem like he is confusing her with someone else. Leaving the soda shop, Aven and Connor head to the padlocked old storage shed Aven found earlier. Connor is able to force the door open and the two go inside where they discover stacks of boxes, old junk, books and papers. A box with the faded letters A, V and N catches their eye. On the top of the box is an image of a tarantula and inside they find an old sketchbook with drawings of tarantulas and a necklace with a blue stone. The date on one of the pictures is 1973.

### Discussion Questions

1. What are the different "looks" Aven describes in her blog post? Have you ever given someone living with a disability one of these looks? Has reading this book changed the way you might handle this situation in the future? How so?
2. This book is written in the first person, from Aven's point of view. Do you notice any differences in the way Aven talks to the reader and the way she writes her blog posts?
3. What is Connor surprised to find out that Aven can do? Has anything surprised you in terms of what Aven can do?
4. How does it make Aven feel when people assume she can't do certain activities due to her limb difference?
5. What does Connor feel is the reason for his parents' divorce? Does Aven agree? What do you think?

6. When Aven asks what it feels like to hold in a tic, what does Connor say to explain it?
7. How does Connor respond when Aven refers to herself as a mutant? What feelings do you have about this word? Is it a negative word or a positive word? Do you think it matters what kind of words we use to talk about ourselves and other people? Why or why not?
8. It seems like a mystery is emerging in the story. What are some of the important clues from this chapter?

## Chapter 11

### Summary

After school, Connor comes over to visit Aven and she takes him to the soda shop to get some free ice cream, but he says he doesn't want any. As Henry scoops ice cream for Aven, she asks about the rodeos Stagecoach Pass used to hold. Suddenly, Henry notices Aven's missing arms and asks if she was in a horse riding accident. Aven remind him that she has always been that way, but Henry doesn't seem to believe her. As Aven eats her ice cream in front of the shop, they discuss Henry's confusing statements and what he may know about the Cavanaugh family, the owners of Stagecoach Pass. The two friends imagine explanations for the Cavanaugh's' secretive behavior, wondering if they had pulled a prank on someone that backfired or they were on the run from someone; perhaps they were no longer living. Reminded of a prank she once played in fourth grade, Aven shares the story of the time she and a friend used mannequin arms to play a prank on a substitute teacher. The prank didn't work out as they had imagined, but her friends still laughed and the substitute teacher didn't send her to the principal's office. Inspired by thoughts of her previous prank, Aven decides to sneak into the steakhouse, grab a couple of steaks from the restaurant refrigerator and stage a new prank during the gun show. With Connor's help, Aven attaches the steaks to her body so they dangle by the spot where her arms would be. They head out to watch the gunfight and Connor's tics increase due to the crowd of people gathering for the daily show. In the performance, one of the cowboys always misses his shot, but today, thanks to Aven, it would appear that he shot off her arms. At just the right moment, Aven shrugs off the cardigan hiding the steaks tied to her T-shirt and screams dramatically. The show is interrupted, some children scream in terror and the crowd disperses. The next day, the cowboys complain to Aven's parents, who in term, ask her not to scare the customers.

### Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the perks Aven enjoys as the daughter of the park managers? Which perk would you enjoy most?
2. Clearly, Henry seems to have Aven confused with someone else. What do we know about the person Henry seems to think Aven is? What are this person's likes and dislikes?
3. What does it mean for a person to have dementia?

4. What kind of ice cream does Aven always ask for? Do you think one day she'll finally get some? Why or why not?
5. What are some of Aven's ideas as to why the Cavanaughs are so secretive? (p.80) What ideas do you have for the explanation?
6. What kind of prank did Aven and her friends play on the substitute teacher back in fourth grade?
7. How do you feel about playing pranks on people? Are there some pranks that are okay or are all pranks a bad idea? Do you think it's fair to scare people just for fun? Why or why not? Can you think of a prank that you enjoyed? What happened?

### **Dive Deeper: Buffalo Bill**

William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody was born in 1846 and gained the nickname "Buffalo Bill" due to his skill as a buffalo hunter in the American West. Buffalo Bill's Wild West exhibitions traveled the world leaving a lasting vision of the American West. These shows featured real cowboys and cowgirls demonstrating bronco riding, roping and other skills that would later become part of the rodeos we know today. Buffalo Bill visited Denver many times and performed here more than 35 times.

Online Resource:

Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave

Photo gallery, biography and information on visiting the museum.

[www.buffalobill.org](http://www.buffalobill.org)

## **Chapter 12**

### **Summary**

As Aven heads to the library to invite Connor over for dinner, she almost trips over the boy sitting on the sidewalk. This time, she decides to stop and talk to him. Aven asks to eat lunch with him and he agrees. His name is Zion (his parents love *The Matrix*) and he eats alone outside because he doesn't want kids staring at him while he eats. He explains that kids always like staring at a fat kid eating. Aven and Connor share items from their lunches while they chat. Connor accepts a Cheeto from Aven's toes without flinching. Aven shares that she often eats in the bathroom because she doesn't want kids watching her eat either. Aven and Zion compare stories of how hard it is to be the kid at school who's different. They eat the rest of their lunch together and decide to eat lunch together again in the future.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Who is the boy Aven meets on the sidewalk as she walks to the library? What details about him can you find in the text?

2. Why did Zion's parents name him Zion? Do you know why your parents gave you your name or nickname?
3. Aven believes that kids will think she's gross if they see her eating with her feet. What makes her think this is true? Might there be other thoughts kids might have when they see her eat?
4. In what ways are Aven's and Zion's experiences at school similar?
5. Do you think Aven will eat lunch in the bathroom stall again? Why or why not?

## Chapter 13

### Summary

Sitting next to Connor on the bus ride home, Aven invites him over for dinner that night. Even though his mom is working late, Connor says he can only come over until dinnertime and then might need to head home. Aven notices that Connor never eats around her. Changing the subject, they chat quietly about the possibility of a murder at Stagecoach Pass as the explanation for the illusive Cavanaugh family. Connor and Aven decide further investigation at the old shed and a visit to Madame Myrtle is required.

### Discussion Questions

1. What is "Steakgate"? (p.97)
2. What does Aven notice about Connor's eating habits?
3. Why does Aven think there might have been a murder at Stagecoach Pass? Does she have any proof?
4. How did Aven once wake up covered in chocolate?

## Chapter 14

### Summary

When Connor and Aven arrive at her apartment her parents are still at work. Connor declines Aven's offer of a snack and soda and the two head to the living room. Spotting her guitar, Connor asks Aven to play, but she says she'll play for him on a different day. Aven suggests they play a racing video game and the two play for a couple of hours. While Connor wins most of the matches, he's impressed by how well Aven can play and she even wins a few times. Aven is distracted by Connor's tics, but figures it must be even harder for him to play while experiencing them directly. Aven notices that Connor's tics get worse when he is stressed or excited and were less frequent when he is calm. Aven's mom returns home and meets Connor for the first time. He barks, which initially surprises Mrs. Green, but she later explains that as a psychology major in college, she knows all about Tourette's. When Mrs. Green mentions dinner, Connor looks uncomfortable and tells her that he can just eat cereal at home by himself. Eventually, he reveals that he sometimes spits while he eats. Mrs. Green give Connor a reassuring smile and jokes that the family can just wear rain gear at dinner. Connor seems relieved that Aven's family is so understanding. Aven's Dad returns home and shares the sad

news that Spaghetti the llama might need to be put down. Aven's parents do their best to help Connor feel relaxed at dinner. When Connor mentions he likes watching movies, Aven's mom offers to take them to the movies this weekend. Remembering a time when he ticed so much during a movie that people complained, Connor says he never goes to the movies anymore. Connor and Aven decide to tell Aven's parents about their theories on the Cavanaugh's; they are unconvinced and remind the young sleuths that some people just want their privacy. When Connor asks about Aven's red hair, Mrs. Green delights in telling the story about Aven's adoption and how they had prepared for her arrival by taking classes so they could help her learn to do things for herself. When Aven arrived, her parents discovered that her foster parents had done everything for her and as a result, she just sat around waiting for people to help her, just like the Queen of Sheba. This is how she got the nickname of Sheebs, though she no longer acts like the Queen of Sheba and can do almost anything herself.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What do Aven and Connor decide to do when they get to Aven's house? Do you ever play video games with your friends?
2. What does Aven notice about what makes Connor's tics worse? What seems to make them better?
3. Do you think Aven is a good friend? What examples can you give to support your opinion?
4. How does Aven's mom know about Tourette's?
5. Why does Connor not want to stay for dinner with Aven's family even though his mom is working late and won't be home to fix dinner at his house?
6. How does Aven's family make Connor more comfortable and relaxed at dinner?
7. Why doesn't Connor want to go see a movie with Aven this weekend? Can you think of a way to overcome this challenge so that Connor could see a movie at a theater?
8. How did Aven's parents decide she was the just the perfect child for them? How did they prepare for her arrival?
9. What connection does this story have to Colorado?
10. What were Aven's parents trying to teach her by telling her to do everything herself? Do you think Aven believes she can do anything she puts her mind to if she tries hard enough? What about you, do you believe this is true for you too?
11. How did Aven get her nickname, Sheebs?

### **Dive Deeper: Queen of Sheba**

The Queen of Sheba is a captivating figure of legend who was first mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, but is also featured in Christian, Islamic and Ethiopian texts. The tale of her visit to the wise King Solomon to test his knowledge has been told and retold in countless texts and artistic forms including paintings, sculpture and music for nearly 3,000 years.

Online Resources:

BBC History: Queen of Sheba

Michael Wood explores the historical background to the legend of the Queen of Sheba, and discusses the role she plays in the cultural traditions of the Red Sea region.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/cultures/sheba\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/cultures/sheba_01.shtml)

## Chapter 15

### Summary

At school, Aven and Connor chat about Spaghetti the llama (named after spaghetti westerns), who thanks to Aven's vigilant care is doing better. Aven introduces Zion to Connor and explains that he has Tourette Syndrome which causes his barking tics. The exchange brief greetings and Aven fills them in on a dead lizard she found on her front step this morning, which she thinks might be a message. Connor thinks it's more likely that the lizard just died due to the harshness of the desert. Aven, Zion and Connor agree to meet at Stagecoach Pass on Saturday to continue investigating the possible murder at the park and the dead lizard Aven found. As the three friends walk down the hall, someone sneaks the word "freaks" into a cough.

### Discussion Questions

1. How did Spaghetti the llama get his name?
2. When Aven finds a dead lizard at the bottom of the stairs to her apartment, why does she think it might be there? Do Zion and Connor agree with her assessment? What do you think?
3. What word does someone hide in a cough as Aven, Zion and Connor walk by?

### Dive Deeper: Spaghetti Westerns

Spaghetti Westerns, also known as Italian Westerns or Macaroni Western refer to films about the Old American West made by European and particularly Italian directors. Though Spaghetti Westerns were made throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they enjoyed a surge of popularity in the 1960s. The best-known Spaghetti Westerns were directed by Sergio Leone and scored by Ennio Morricone, and include *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966), and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). Spaghetti Westerns further solidified common stereotypes of life in the Old American West.

Online Resources:

Essential Top 20 Films: Spaghetti Westerns

[https://www.spaghetti-western.net/index.php/Essential\\_Top\\_20\\_Films](https://www.spaghetti-western.net/index.php/Essential_Top_20_Films)

VIDEO: Theme Song from *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (2:55)

While the film is not age appropriate to show in class, students can enjoy listening to the iconic theme song composed by Ennio Morricone in the online video. The only visual element in this video is an image of the poster for the film.

<https://youtu.be/AFa1-kciCb4>

## Chapter 16

### Summary

Aven composes a blog post highlight 20 fantastic things about not having arms including no rough elbows, no fist fighting, no fingernail cleaning, no leaving fingerprints behind, no golf, fewer areas to get a sunburn, no armpits, no thumb wars and an abundance of prank possibilities. As she hits publish, Aven wonders if she's trying to convince the person who had called her a freak, or herself. Connor arrives and they play video games while waiting for Zion to arrive. The doorbell rings and Zion's mother meets Aven and Connor. She seems overjoyed to meet Zion's new friends. After she leaves, the friends play a few more races and then head to the storage shed. While Connor rummages through junk, Zion and Aven sift through old documents. They find a box of books about tarantulas which Aven asks the boys to bring up to the apartment. They also find a locked desk and a guitar with the initials A.B.C. carved on the back.

### Discussion Questions

1. What's the topic of Aven's blog post? Do you have any favorite "fantastic things" from her list?
2. Does it seem like it bothered Aven when someone called her and her friends freaks? How do you know? Do you think sometimes words can hurt just as much as kicks and punches? Why or why not?
3. Who do we meet in this chapter? What details can you find in the text about this person?
4. What do Aven, Connor and Zion find in the old shed?
5. What do you think the initials A.B.C. might stand for?

## Chapter 17

### Summary

While Aven and Connor on their way to class, Aven tells Connor about a social event for kids with Tourette Syndrome at a nearby hospital. Connor is unsure about going, but Aven tells him that it's as much for him as it is for her, because it turns out she really likes kids with Tourette's and it could be great to be someplace where they're not the only kids with differences. Connor eventually agrees to go. Aven's mom drops them off at the hospital at seven-thirty and promises to come back at nine. As the friends enter the meeting, a boy cries out, "Chicken nipple!" In the room, there are 5 boys and 1 girl and a young woman named Andrea who greets Connor and Aven. Andrea also has

Tourette's, but seems to manage most of her tics. Chicken Nipple Boy, as Aven initially calls him, is named Dexter and he has a rare form of Tourette's called coprolalia, which causes him to say words and phrases some people might find offensive. Andrea begins the event by inviting each person to introduce him or herself. Aven introduces herself and Connor. Dexter explains more about the various phrases he sometimes says and how people react to him. Dexter also has Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, a condition that often accompanies Tourette's, which makes it hard for him to leave the house as he's always worried the stove or oven have been left on. Josh's tics include making a whooshing sound, bending over a lot and making an air guitar movement. Rebecca's tics include slapping herself in the face and making grunting and coughing noises. Aven is surprised to learn that Tourette's can be painful for those who have it. Jack rolls his eyes, shakes his head and makes a shrieking sound. Zachary rolls his shoulders so much that he might need surgery to repair the damage. Mason has over fifty tics including making farting noises and pulling his own hair out. Andrea guides the group in discussing how they feel in public places. At the end of the meeting, Aven's mom picks them up and they chat in the car. Both Connor and Aven thought the meeting was great and look forward to going again next month. Connor worries his form of Tourette's will change into the form Dexter has as that he'll start shouting inappropriate words and phrases. Aven's mom reassures him that coprolalia is very rare. When Connor says he'd give up his arms to not have Tourette's, Aven tells him that she likes him just as he is, tics and all.

### Discussion Questions

1. What event does Aven want Connor to attend? How does she think it will help? How does she convince him to go?
2. What percentage of people have Tourette's? (p. 127)
3. Who is Andrea and what details can you find about her in the text?
4. Who is Dexter? What vocal tic does he have? Is his vocal tic common or not? Can you find the term for his form of Tourette's? (p. 131)
5. On page 131, Dexter cries out, "Barbecue chicken sandwiches" and everyone laughs. How does Aven know that it's okay to laugh too? How can we tell if we're laughing *with* someone versus *at* someone?
6. What are some of the motor and vocal tics the kids at the Tourette's Syndrome social event have? How do tics impact these kids' lives? Are there times when having Tourette's can be painful physically?
7. How do the kids at the meeting feel about going to public places like movie theaters and libraries? What ideas do you have for how to make it easier for them to go out even with their tics?
8. How did Aven feel about the meeting? What did Connor think? Do you think they'll go to the next meeting?
9. What additional questions do you have about what you read in this chapter?

### **Dive Deeper: Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder**

Dexter, one of the kids at the Tourette's support group has Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in addition to Tourette's. It's common for people with Tourette's to be affected by a co-occurring condition like Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a mental disorder that can affect people of all ages and walks of life. This disorder is characterized by a pattern of unwanted thoughts and fears (obsessions) that lead that person to do repetitive behaviors (compulsions). Obsessive compulsive disorder and related disorders affect over 500,000 children in the U.S. References in popular culture sometimes trivialize and mock those who are living with OCD. As with any health issue, it's important to use sources of information that are well-researched, and to always treat people with respect.

"A lot of people use the term OCD or the words "obsessive" and "compulsive" in ways that aren't always correct. You've probably heard your friends say they are "sooo OCD" because they have to have things a certain way, or heard someone called obsessive because they talk about the same things a lot. These things are not OCD. Some people think that individuals with OCD are just afraid of germs and wash their hands a lot. This is only one kind of OCD. There are actually many different kinds of OCD, and they can be about almost anything you can imagine." - Fred Penzel, PhD, International Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder Foundation

Online Resources:

International Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder Foundation

Easy-to-understand articles about OCD written for children, a personal story written by a 9-year-old living with OCD and an interactive comic about a 10-year-old girl living with OCD.

<https://kids.iocdf.org/for-kids/>

## **Chapter 18**

### **Summary**

It's fall and the weather is cooling down. Aven has read every book about tarantulas she can get her hands on and has added more posts to her blog. Aven and her dad practice soccer in the arena, but she feels less and less enthusiastic about getting up early to play. Aven hikes up the hill to look out over the park, visit her giant saguaro and hunt for tarantulas and quartz rocks. Kids at school aren't surprised to see her anymore, they mostly just ignore her and business at the park is picking up a little, though it's still barely enough to keep up with expenses. As she walks around to the back side of the small hill, she finds a necklace with a polished turquoise stone. She rushes home to call Connor; they have seen this necklace before.

### Discussion Questions

1. What's Aven's full name?
2. How does Aven's dad try to motivate her to get up in the morning to play soccer?
3. Compare the way the kids at Desert Ridge Middle School treated Aven when she first started school with how they treat her now.
4. What does Aven find on her walk around the dirt hill behind Stagecoach Pass? Why does she think she has seen this necklace before?

## Chapter 19

### Summary

Aven, Connor and Zion sit outside before school examining the necklace and the sketch of a necklace they had found in the old shed. They look like a match. Zion wonders if the necklace was left on the hill after a murder, but Aven says she hasn't seen any evidence of a grave. Connor barks and the trio of friends hears another bark from a nearby group of kids. Aven glares at them and then encourages Connor to confront them. When he isn't sure what to do, Aven stands up and shouts at the group that what they're doing isn't nice and they should be ashamed of themselves.

### Discussion Questions

1. What details about the necklace lead Aven, Connor and Zion to believe it's the same necklace someone sketched in the old sketchbook?
2. What ideas do you have regarding how the necklace ended up on top of the hill?
3. Aven stands up for Connor and confronts the group of kids who are making fun of him by barking. Have you ever stood up for a friend? If so, what did you do? How did it feel?
4. What does the term "bullying" mean? What are examples of bullying? Why do you think the kids in the story bullied Connor? What advice do you have for kids who notice bullying and want to help stop it?

### Dive Deeper: Preventing Bullying

Bullying is defined as the use of one's strength or popularity to injure, threaten, or embarrass another person. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. Examples of physical bullying can include making rude gestures, yelling at someone, breaking someone's things, tripping, hitting, pushing and fighting. Examples of emotional bullying include calling someone names, laughing at someone, starting rumors, sending mean messages and making someone feel bad about who they are. Unfortunately, many students experience bullying at school or witness others being bullied. Create a space for students to discuss bullying and the ways they can help prevent bullying.

## Online Resources:

### Pacer Center's Kids Against Bullying

Approachable articles about bullying and bullying prevention, videos and quizzes

<https://pacerkidsagainstbullying.org>

### NEA: Teaching Students to Prevent Bullying

Curriculum resources to address identifying, confronting and stopping bullying from the National Education Association.

<http://www.nea.org/tools/lessons/teaching-students-to-prevent-bullying.html>

### VIDEO: Stand Up for Tourette Syndrome (3:38)

When Luke is being teased in the lunchroom about his tics, his friends encourage him to confront the bullies. With his friends at his side, Luke explains his Tourette Syndrome to the mean kids and answers their questions. By the end of the video the kids apologize for how they've treated Luke.

<https://youtu.be/IXLmtTLWnz8>

## Chapter 20

### Summary

Connor, Aven and Zion eat lunch together on the sidewalk. Zion mentions his interest in trying out for the school play. Aven shares about the time when she wrote a play called "Down and Dirty in Kansas City" for a school contest. The play centered on a ninja named Harold who fights criminals with his trusty pig, Jarold. The high of the drama was to include an exciting battle where the main villain (played by Aven) has her arms ripped off. Aven's play doesn't win the contest and is not produced at the school. The play that won was called "Desert Moon Over the Desert" and featured a moon that falls in love with a coyote. Aven played the part of the cactus and shares that she loved being up on stage as it made her feel like she could do anything. Connor's face lights up when Aven tells him she'll be able to come over after school even though her mom has yet to meet Connor's mom. Connor explains that his mom will be home sleeping with they get there as she had a 12-hour shift last night. Connor invites Zion to come over too but he has a dentist appointment.

### Discussion Questions

1. What play is Zion considering auditioning for? Have you ever auditioned for a play? Why did you want to be in play?
2. Who are Harold and Jarold?
3. Why might the judges have decided not to produce Aven's play, "Down and Dirty in Kansas City"?

4. How did Aven feel when she was up on stage as part of the “Desert Moon Over the Desert” cast and everyone clapped for the performers at the end of the play? (p. 148) When was a time you felt you could do anything?
5. What do you know about Connor’s mom’s work life? Can you relate to having a busy working parent?

## Chapter 21

### Summary

Aven arrives at the sparse apartment Connor and his mother share. They moved in a little over a year ago, but some of the boxes still need to be unpacked as Connor’s mom has been busy and they hope to eventually live somewhere else. Connor’s mom emerges from the bedroom dressed in a nightgown and robe. She apologizes for the way she looks, greets Aven, mentions a bowl of macaroni and cheese in the fridge for Connor’s dinner and says how nice it is to meet one of Connor’s friends. Without thinking, Aven says she hopes Connor’s mom can come to the next Tourette’s support meeting. It becomes clear she had no idea Connor had attended the first meeting and she furrows her brow as she tells Connor she wishes he had told her about the meeting. Before she heads back to sleep, she asks Connor to wake her up in time to get dressed so she can meet Aven’s mom. Connor tells Aven she shouldn’t have mentioned the support group as it will only cause his mom more stress because she’ll feel bad about not having enough time to go with him. He says his mom would be better off without having to deal with him. Suddenly, Aven realizes what Connor has been saying about his mom’s feelings regarding his Tourette’s weren’t true, and that in fact, Connor feels he is the cause of all his mom’s problems. Aven tries to comfort and reassure Connor, but he tells her to stop trying to fix him. Aven explains that she doesn’t think he’s broken, rather she’s just trying to be a supportive friend. She says she’ll still go to the meetings even if he doesn’t come, at which point he says he’ll still go.

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the setting of this chapter? What details in the text can you find to describe this place?
2. Who do we meet in this chapter?
3. What do you know about the routine at Connor’s house?
4. Why does Connor wish Aven hadn’t told his mom about the Tourette’s support meetings? Do you agree with his reasoning? Why or why not?
5. Connor accuses Aven of trying to fix him, but Aven replies, “I just want to help you. Friends help each other, don’t they?” (p. 154). What do you think? Is Aven trying to fix Connor or is she trying to be a supportive friend?
6. How does Aven’s understanding of Connor shift in this chapter?

## Chapter 22

### Summary

Connor and Aven attend the next Tourette’s support meeting and the only other attendees are Dexter, Jack and Mason. Dexter makes a joke about Rebecca’s absence and Jack and Andrea confront him about it. At today’s meeting, Andrea discusses techniques for staying relaxed when going out. When Connor asks about habit-reversal training, a technique that involves focusing all your attention on doing something that competes with one’s tics, Andrea says that won’t be part of the discussion. Instead, she leads the group through a guided meditation and breathing exercise. When Andrea invites the group to feel warmth traveling down their arms and into their fingertips, Aven starts laughing and soon everyone is too distracted to continue. Andrea mentions other relaxation techniques including visualization, breathing and meditation before moving on to discuss setting goals. Dexter wants to make it through a whole meeting without calling his mom; Jack wants to talk to a girl at school; Mason wants to stop making farting noises; Aven wants to learn to use nunchuks; and Connor wants to try to get out somewhere. The students socialize and Aven demonstrates things she can do with her feet. On the drive home Connor vents about the way Aven thinks Dexter’s funny and the way he calls Aven “Armless Aven.” Aven looks out the window and grins; it’s the first time she has ever made a boy jealous.

### Discussion Questions

1. How does Jack respond when Dexter makes a joke about why Rebecca isn’t at the meeting? What about this joke makes it “not cool”? (p. 156)
2. What is “habit-reversal training”? Has Connor ever tried this technique?
3. Andrea guides the group in a breathing and meditation exercise. Have you ever tried this technique to relax? What do you do to help you feel more relaxed and focused?
4. What goals do the kids in the Tourette’s support meeting share? What are your goals?
5. What do you think is the explanation for Connor’s feelings about Dexter? Do you think he might be jealous?

### Dive Deeper: Guided Breathing and Meditation

Guided meditations focused on one’s breath and body can help people relax, reduce stress and release negative thoughts. Generally, meditations of this type involve sitting or laying down in a comfortable position and then becoming aware of the sensations in one’s body, while releasing any thoughts that come into one’s mind.

## Online Resources:

### Guided Story Meditations

Guided story meditations combine music and a story that guides children in imagining different places while relaxing. Stories cover a variety of themes including whales in the ocean, flying unicorns, dragons, castles and more. Meditations run 15 - 30 minutes long.

<http://www.newhorizonholisticcentre.co.uk/kids-meditation.html>

### Free Guided Mediations from UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center

Each meditation includes an audio tracks in **English and Spanish**, as well as transcripts of the audio should you prefer to read them aloud yourself. Meditations range from 3 minutes to 15 minutes long, with the basic meditation running 5 minutes long.

<http://marc.ucla.edu/mindful-meditations>

### 3 Kid-Friendly Meditations

Directions for 3 meditation activities for children.

<https://chopra.com/articles/3-kid-friendly-meditations-your-children-will-love>

## Chapter 23

### Summary

Christmas arrives at Stagecoach Pass and Aven's parents decide to decorate the park with lights and old decorations they found in storage. Aven finds that winter in the Arizona desert can get pretty cold. Connor and Aven roast marshmallows over a fire in an old metal trashcan. Zion's family travels to New Zealand to see where *Lord of the Rings* was filmed. The park is busier than usual and Connor begins to get nervous about the crowd, but Aven reminds him that if the park doesn't stay busy, her parents will lose their job. The Green family hosts a big Christmas Eve dinner for any employees who don't have family nearby. Connor and his mom are also invited. In the kitchen, Josephine is busy orchestrating the preparation of the meal. She hands Aven a potato masher and sets her up with a big bowl on the floor. Josephine is utterly shocked with Henry comes into the kitchen and calls Aven, Aven Cavanaugh. She shoos him away calling him a crazy old kook. Peering through the doors of the kitchen, Aven sees Connor and his mom sitting with her mom; she's happy Connor seems so relaxed. Over dinner, Aven and Connor discuss whether Aven might look like a member of the Cavanaugh family and how they could find out for sure. That evening, Aven's parents give her a set of silver and turquoise earrings they purchased from a Navajo woman. Later that night, Aven and her dad search for tarantulas but don't find any.

### Discussion Questions

1. What is Christmastime like at Stagecoach Pass?
2. Why did Zion's family decide to go to New Zealand? Is there someplace you've seen in a movie or read about in a book that you'd like to visit one day?

3. What causes Aven to say, “I don’t think Josephine could have looked more shocked than if a tarantula the size of a horse had trampled through the room”? (p.165) Why do you think Josephine was so shocked?
4. What do Connor and Aven decide they need to find in order to understand Henry’s unusual behavior?
5. What activity does Aven drag her dad out to do late that night?

## Chapter 24

### Summary

After the fun and success of Christmas at Stagecoach Pass, Aven can’t stop thinking about ideas to refresh the park and keep people coming back. She tells her parents her ideas over dinner and they discuss the feasibility of them. Aven has kept a notebook of ideas for the park and they include: lighter food options, offering coffees and smoothies and increasing the shopping options. Her parents agree these are great ideas, but explain that it’s complicated to find new vendors. In response, Aven suggests they go to an art festival her art teacher told her about. Aven’s parents agree to go to the art festival and Aven begins to dream of having her own art festival at Stagecoach Pass. She convinces her parents to get approval for a festival from the park owners and to start getting the necessary permits. Aven’s parents enquire about her ongoing investigation and she tells them about Henry calling her Aven Cavanaugh on Christmas Eve. They are intrigued, but Aven’s mom mentions that he called her Elizabeth Taylor one day. After dinner, Aven’s dad says he needs to find a key to one of the buildings at the park, but many of the keys are unlabeled. Aven tells him she’s looking for a key too.

### Discussion Questions

1. What are the challenges Aven believes are facing Stagecoach Pass?
2. What are Aven’s ideas for bringing more people to visit the park? How do her parents respond to her ideas?
3. What ideas do you have for ways to improve Stagecoach Pass?
4. How can visiting an art festival in Fountain Hills help make Stagecoach Pass more profitable?
5. Have you ever thought about running your own business or selling crafts you make? What have you tried? How did it go? If not, what kind of business do you think you’d like to have?
6. Why is Aven looking for a key?

## Chapter 25

### Summary

It’s an icy cold day as Aven, Connor and Zion sit outside on the sidewalk eating their lunch together. Aven tells her friends about the unidentified keys her dad plans to give her after he organizes the office. Aven hopes one of the keys unlock the desk in the old

shed and they discover a murder weapon inside, which causes them all to become famous for having solved a murder. Connor and Zion hope that's not the case and that they're not in the newspaper. Aven changes the subject and says the park has had hundreds of calls about their upcoming art festival. When Aven says they now need to book a band for the event, Connor suggests she perform. Aven says she won't perform in public, which causes Connor to tell her that if she won't play, then he won't come. When Zion asks why she won't play for anyone, she says that doing stuff with her feet in front of a crowd makes her feel like she's in a circus.

### Discussion Questions

1. Would you like to join Aven, Connor and Zion out in the sidewalk for lunch on this day? Why or why not?
2. What does Aven hope to find inside the locked desk?
3. Why doesn't Connor want to come to the art festival Aven is helping to organize at Stagecoach Pass? Is there anything that might change his mind?
4. Why doesn't Aven want to play the guitar in front of anyone?
5. What do you think will happen? Will Aven play at the festival so that Connor will come? Will Connor decide to come even if Aven doesn't play? How has this situation forced both Connor and Aven to confront their fears?

## Chapter 26

### Summary

Spring is approaching and preparations for the festival are going well. Connor and Aven have gone to two more support group meetings and Aven feels like Connor is starting to enjoy them. When Aven is visiting Spaghetti, she asks Denise about tarantulas and she tells Aven that there haven't been any tarantulas at Stagecoach Pass in years. Henry says they disappeared from the area in 2004 and "left with her." As Aven presses for more details, Henry's confusion returns. Madame Myrtle says maybe an exterminator came in 2004. Aven, Connor and Zion spend hours in looking through old pictures and junk and try fifteen keys without any luck. Suddenly, Zion holds up an old black-and-white photo. It looks like a photo of Aven, but with arms, wearing the turquoise necklace. It was taken in 1973.

### Discussion Questions

1. In preparation for the festival, Aven and her parents have to select a band. What group or artist would you want to invite?
2. What might explain the disappearance of the tarantulas around Stagecoach Pass?
3. When Aven is sorting through old papers she finds some that have "a lot of numbers and words like *deduction* and *revenue* and *net*" (p. 182). What do you think these papers might be about? What do the italicized words mean? How could you find out their meaning if you didn't know?

4. What causes Zion to say, “Whoa.”? (p. 183) What do you think this photograph means?

## Chapter 27

### Summary

When Aven shows her mom the photograph that evening, she says the resemblance might just be a coincidence, like a doppelgänger. She explains to Aven that doppelgängers are just two people who look alike, but aren't related at all. Before she could say more, Aven's dad comes in to announce that Mean Bob has left. Aven's dad looks at the photo a long time and finally comments that it's odd. He asks Aven if she found it in the desk and she explains they found it in a book in a box. Aven notices her parents giving each other an odd look that didn't seem very happy.

### Discussion Questions

1. What's a doppelgänger? Would you want to meet your doppelgänger? Why or why not? In what ways could it be fun to have a doppelgänger?
2. On page 185, we read, “He didn't say anything more, but I did notice the way he and Mom looked at each other. And their faces weren't very happy.” What kind of look do you think they gave each other? What do you think it might mean?

### Dive Deeper: Doppelgängers

Doppelgängers (or doppelgängers) are people who look alike, but are not related.

Online Resources:

#### “I'm Not a Look-Alike” Doppelgänger Photography Project

Canadian photographer Francois Brunelle spent 12 years tracking down real life Doppelgängers — two individuals who are not related but could pass for identical twins — and photographing them. He calls his project “I'm Not a Look-Alike.”

<http://www.chasejarvis.com/blog/me-myself-and-i-francois-brunelle-and-his-doppelganger-project-find-your-look-alike/>

VIDEO: Canadian Photographer Snaps Lookalikes (2:17)

Short video about Francois Brunelle's project finding look-alikes and photographing them.

VIDEO: The Paradox that makes us equal | François Brunelle | TEDxCibeles (15:52)

Artist Francois Brunelle talks about his project photographing look-alikes and what he learned through the process.

<https://youtu.be/sqjH1H0Up5o>

## Chapter 28

### Summary

Zion's mom drops him off at Stagecoach Pass and then Aven's mom takes them to pick up Connor. Aven's mom is excited about the outing, but Connor complains that Aven and Zion haven't told him where they're going. The three friends chat as Aven's mom drives. When they pull up in front of a movie theater, Connor quickly becomes angry and his tics increase as he tells Aven he won't go into the theater. Aven's mom asks Connor to calm down as they have a special surprise that means he won't have to worry about upsetting any other moviegoers with his tics. She buys the tickets. As they enter the lobby, Connor barks a lot, but there are only a few bystanders to notice. When they enter the theater, it's empty; Aven's mom has arranged to have the whole theater to themselves. Connor is relived and so happy he even asks if they can have popcorn. Aven requests gummy bears. The three friends buy popcorn, sodas and gummy bears at the concession stand while Aven's mom settles into a seat in the back row. Forgetting to bring a jacket, she covers herself in a blanket of napkins to keep warm in the air-conditioned theater. Connor asks if Aven learned anything from her parents regarding the photo. Aven says they seemed surprised and thought it might just be a coincidence. Connor is unconvinced. Connor suggests there's a portal up on the hill that Aven went through while wearing the necklace and while she's in the past, she has her photo taken. Connor proudly declares that he has solved the case, but is a bit crestfallen when Aven reminds him that the person in the photo has arms. To which Zion chimes in that one never knows what magical portals might do. Taking advantage of his good mood, Aven asks Connor if he'll come to the festival. He tells her that the only way he would go is if someone tied him up and dragged him there.

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the big surprise waiting for Connor? How does he react to this surprise?
2. How can Aven tell that Connor is feeling relaxed?
3. What kind of snacks do the three friends want to eat at the theater? What are some of your favorite movie snacks?
4. Why is Aven's mom covered in napkins in the back row?
5. Of all the explanations of the mysterious photo you've read so far, which one makes the most sense to you? What clues lead you to this conclusion?

## Chapter 29

### Summary

When Connor arrives at Aven's front door, it's clear he's feeling sad. He shrugs when Aven asks if everything is okay and he avoids eye contact. Aven shares updates about the festival in an attempt to cheer him up, but he continues to mope. Trying a new idea, Aven lures him into the living room where she sits on the couch, picks up her guitar and plays "Moon River" for him. Connor is completely quiet as she plays and doesn't tic

once. Thinking he'll be so happy to have finally heard her play, Aven is surprised to see tears in Connor's eyes as he suggests she follow him around playing music so he can stop being a freak. Aven wishes desperately that she had arms so she could wipe away the tear rolling down his cheek. Breaking down, Connor says he feels like it doesn't even matter to Aven that she doesn't have arms, that she plays the guitar, goes out places and does all kinds of things. And that he can't do anything and can't even go out in public. Aven tries to comfort and encourage him, but Connor continues to vent his frustrations about the limitations he feels. Finally, he tells Aven that before he arrived at her house, he went to buy her some gummy bears, but that someone started filming him on their phone like he was a freak. He's sure it will be posted online for everyone to mock. He yells that he never wants to go out in public again. Aven tries to stay calm and tells him that he's not a freak and can do anything he wants in his life. Connor continues crying and ticcing as he tells her there are limits on what she can do too because of her disability. When Connor calls her disabled, Aven finds it infuriating and declares that she is not disabled, but abled! The two argue and Aven finally yells at him to leave. He throws the bag of gummy bears at her feet and departs. Aven suddenly feels sorry.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How can Aven tell that Connor is unhappy? What does she do to cheer him up?
2. When Aven plays the guitar for Connor, she notices he is "completely quiet." (p. 195) Why is this significant?
3. Why does Aven wish she had arms?
4. Both Connor and Aven are living with a disability. Compare the way Aven feels about her limb difference and what it means for her life with the way Connor feels about his Tourette's. Do you feel that one person is truly more limited by their disability or is the biggest difference their individual perspectives?
5. What happened at the store when Connor was buying gummy bears for Aven? Do you think it's okay to film people out in public without asking them? Why or why not? What about sharing photos and videos online of other people?
6. How does Aven feel about the term "disabled"? (Educator Note: The term disabled is offensive to those living with a disability and should not be used to describe people.)
7. Do you think Aven and Connor could have communicated their feelings to each other in a better way? What do you do when a friend hurts your feelings? How do you think Connor and Aven might be able to patch things up?
8. This book is written in the first person, from Aven's perspective. How do you think this chapter would have been different if it were written in the third-person? How has the first-person perspective helped you relate to, and understand, Aven?

### **Dive Deeper: Disability Etiquette**

A basic understanding of disability etiquette can help both children and adults feel more comfortable when interacting with people living with disabilities and help prevent unintended offenses.

Online Resources:

#### Tips for Interacting with People with Disabilities

This extensive, but straightforward, guide includes information on terminology, basic etiquette for common daily interactions and specific etiquette information for variety of disabilities.

<https://www.unitedspinal.org/disability-etiquette/>

## Chapter 30

### Summary

At school the next day, Aven avoids Connor and Zion, choosing to eat lunch in a bathroom stall. When she gets home from school, she finds that none of her old friends have left comments on her recent blog posts. She types a new post about the twenty worst things about not having arms including: no smacking people, no boxing, it's hard to do one's hair, strappy tank tops don't look right, no shaking hands, everything takes longer, sore feet, no wiping away a friend's tear, no hugging him to make him feel better, and no reaching out for him when he leaves.

### Discussion Questions

1. How does Aven feel in this chapter? What clues can you find?
2. What's the topic of Aven's blog post? How is it different from most of what Aven writes?
3. Compare the first few entries with the last few entries. How does Aven's tone change from the beginning of the blog post to the end?
4. Did any of the twenty things on Aven's list surprise you? If so, which ones?
5. Did you notice any items on the list that you could help make better for someone without arms like Aven? Which ones? What could you do?

## Chapter 31

### Summary

Aven tells her mom about how angry it made her to have Connor call her disabled. She says she doesn't need to be reminded about her disability and doesn't want people to only see her as the girl with no arms. Aven's mom reminds her that she does have extra challenges and it does take her longer to do things, but there's a big difference between being disabled and being incapable. When Aven says Connor told her she could never be an astronaut, her mom says it might be extra challenging, but not impossible with robot arms. Her mom does a robot dance and reminds Aven that she doesn't think anything is impossible for Aven. Aven continues that Connor feels like everything is impossible for him, so he just wants Aven to feel that way too. Aven's mom encourages her to be more supportive of her friend and moves on to share the big idea that brought her into Aven's

room in the first place. She spoke with The Flap-Jackeroos, the band that will play at the festival, and they would love to have Aven join them on stage with her guitar for a song. Aven says she doesn't want to feel like a circus freak on stage, to which her mom replies that she wants her to perform at the festival because she is so proud of Aven and wants everyone to see how amazing she is. Aven storms out of the apartment and sulks about everything as she walks down Main Street. Her thoughts growing more and more negative, she decides to hide out in a wagon and not go home for dinner. Her dad comes to find her. He sits beside her and tries to break the tension with a joke and a discussion of soccer tryouts. Aven says she doesn't want to play and does her best to keep her dad from disrupting her terrible mood. When Aven reveals that she wishes she were just like everyone else, her dad tells her that she is like a bright star with its own beautiful light to shine; it would be a shame to hide that light. While Aven finds her dad's words cheesy, she does start to feel better. Her dad heads back to the apartment and Aven hunches down in the wagon out of sight. Carved into the side of the wagon, Aven discovers a what looks like a heart with the words "Aven was here." Aven thinks back to the box they found with the letters A, V, N on it and realizes Connor was right. The letters were part of the word Aven, not Cavanaugh.

### Discussion Questions

1. What's bothering Aven?
2. On page 207, Aven says, "I don't want to just be Aven Green, that girl with no arms. I don't want to be labeled like that." How does labeling people change the way we see them? If people only saw Aven as a "disabled person," what would they be missing about who she really is?
3. Can you relate to Aven's desire to not be limited by others based on the body she was born with? Do you think people ever make assumptions about what you can and can't do based on the way you look (skin color, gender, height, weight, disability, glasses, hair color, etc.)? How does this make you feel? What ideas do you have for how can we avoid doing this to others?
4. How does Aven respond to the idea of laying on stage with The Flap-Jackeroos? What does her mom say in response?
5. As Aven walks down Main Street, her negative thoughts build and build (pp. 209-210). Do you ever have times when your negative thoughts get the best of you? How do you move through those times?
6. When Aven doesn't come home for dinner, who comes to find her? How does her dad try to shift her terrible mood?
7. On page 212, Aven tells her dad, "I wish my life was simple like everyone else's." Have you ever felt this way? Do you think anyone has a simple life even if it looks like it from the outside? Why or why not?
8. When Aven says she wishes she was like everyone else, her dad says, "Now that's a terrible thought." (p. 212). Why does he say that? What does he encourage her to do with her uniqueness? How does he explain that it's a gift to the world for her to be herself?
9. What does Aven find carved into the side of the wagon? (p. 214)

**Educator Note:** The term “disabled person” is used in the text, but most disability etiquette guides encourage a “person first” approach.

*Say “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person.” Say “people with disabilities” rather than “the disabled.” For specific disabilities, saying “person with Tourette Syndrome” or “person who has cerebral palsy” is usually a safe bet. Still, individuals do have their own preferences. If you are not sure what words to use, ask.*

*Avoid outdated terms like “handicapped”, “crippled”, or “retarded.” Be aware that many people with disabilities dislike jargony, euphemistic terms like “physically challenged” and “differently abled.” Say “person who uses a wheelchair” rather than “confined to a wheelchair” or “wheelchair bound.”*

From the United Spinal Association Disability Etiquette Guide  
<https://www.unitedspinal.org/disability-etiquette/>

## Chapter 32

### Summary

Aven and Zion eat lunch and discuss Connor’s absence. Aven eventually reveals that she and Connor had a fight. Zion tells her she should make things right when Connor comes back to school. Later that day, Aven gets a sarsaparilla with extra cherries at the Saloon and Steakhouse at Stagecoach Pass. The bartender, Charlie, notices she looks forlorn. Aven finishes her drink and makes dramatic slurping sounds that attract the attention of Josephine, who comes over to talk to her. Noticing something is the matter, Josephine sits down with Aven and asks her to tell her what’s the matter. Aven tells Josephine about the fight with Connor and Josephine says she’s sure Aven and Connor will find a way to work things out. Realizing she never gets time to chat with Josephine, Aven asks her questions about her past and learns that she has worked a variety of jobs at the park over the last 60 years, has never been married and doesn’t have any family. When Aven asks if she knew a girl who looked just like her back in 1973, Josephine looks uncomfortable and says she doesn’t really recall and needs to get back to work.

### Discussion Questions

1. A person’s body language can tell us a lot about how they are feeling. What about Aven’s body language tells Charlie and Josephine that something’s wrong?
2. What drink does Aven order at the Saloon and Steakhouse? Have you ever tried a sarsaparilla?
3. What do we learn about Josephine in this chapter?
4. Do you think Josephine might know something about the girl in the photograph? What details can you find in the text to support your opinion?

Definition: Sarsaparilla is a carbonated soft drink originally made from the *smilax ornate* plant, a vine native to Mexico and Central America. Classic American sarsaparilla was made using a blend of birch oil and sassafras. It was a popular beverage in the United States during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some people consider sarsaparilla a form of root beer.

## Chapter 33

### Summary

After school Aven looks for Connor at the bus stop, but finds her dad instead. He has brought her a bag of soccer gear and tells her she can either get changed for soccer tryouts or carry her bag of gear home on the bus. Aven reminisces about the role soccer has played in her family's life and how it has brought them together. The bus driver asks Aven if she plans to get on, but she tells him not today. Deciding to face the challenge of joining a new team and putting herself out there even though everyone will be watching her, Aven walks away from the bus stop.

### Discussion Questions

1. Who is waiting for Aven when she arrives at the bus stop? What does he have for her?
2. How has soccer helped Aven and her dad connect? If you play a sport, has it helped you connect with people in your life? How so?
3. What does Aven's dad think people should call American football?
4. Do you think sports are a positive thing in people's lives? Why or why not? Do you think everyone should play a sport? Why or why not?
5. What does Aven say about what it's like to try out for a new team? What are some things you have done even though they were hard? What made you keep going?

### Dive Deeper: Soccer

Soccer, called football in many countries, is a team sport played with a round ball between two teams of eleven players who try to score points by kicking the ball into the opposing team's goal. Played by an estimated 250 million people all over the world and adored by an estimated 3.5 billion fans (source: CNN), soccer is the world's most popular sport.

Online Resources:

Biography: Soccer Players

Biographies and short video bios of famous soccer players including Hope Solo, Pelé, David Beckham Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, among others.

<https://www.biography.com/people/groups/athletes-soccer-players>

## FIFA World Cup

The 2018 FIFA world cup will be played in Russia June 14 – July 15. Follow the competition with team stats, rankings, schedules and videos.

<http://www.fifa.com/worldcup/>

## Colorado Rapids

The Colorado Rapids are a professional soccer team that plays home games at Dick's Sporting Goods Park in north Denver. Team information, schedule, history and match videos.

<https://www.coloradorapids.com>

## VIDEO: Soccer Drills: 3 Beginner Drills for Youth Players (4:02)

A coach explains and demonstrates 3 basic soccer drills that don't require much space.

Materials needed: cones and soccer balls

[https://youtu.be/QGhTpL\\_R1Lo](https://youtu.be/QGhTpL_R1Lo)

# Chapter 34

## Summary

Aven arrives at the soccer field and finds a ball to dribble. A girl she had met in science class on her first day of school says hello and introduces herself. She compliments Aven on her soccer skills and the two chat about how long they're been playing. Jessica tells Aven she'll love being on the soccer team because they have so much fun on away games as they do makeovers on the bus and once prank called the coach until she finally screamed into her phone that she was going to call the cops. She also tells Aven about team pizza parties and sleepovers. Coach Fuller calls the players to get started and Jessica and Aven walk over together. Aven is so happy to be included.

## Discussion Questions

1. Who says "hi" to Aven at the soccer tryouts?
2. What causes Aven to tell the reader, "I hoped my smile wasn't so big that I looked spastic" (p.225)? Why was she feeling so happy?
3. Why does Jessica think Aven will enjoy being on the soccer team?
4. How might the whole story have been different if Jessica and the other students at Desert Ridge Middle School treated Aven like they do in this chapter, on her first day at school?
5. Was it difficult for Jessica to make Aven feel welcome and included? What are some basic things you can do to make people feel included every day? Do you think it could be as simple as saying hello?

## Chapter 35

### Summary

Aven's dad picks her up after soccer tryouts and asks her a million questions on the drive home. When they pull up to Stagecoach Pass, he hands her an envelope marked "desk" and says the keys inside don't fit the desk in the office. Aven runs to the storage shed and tries one of the keys in the desk. The desk drawer opens and inside she finds a stack of papers and a framed photo of two red-haired women standing in front of the steakhouse, one of whom is pregnant. Aven recognizes the older woman in the photo; it's Josephine. Aven takes the photo home to show her mom. They walk to the museum and her mom holds the photo up to the wall in the empty space above the label "The Cavanaughs, 2004." Aven was born in 2004. Aven's mom explains that she and Aven's dad had worried this might be the truth but didn't have a way to get more information on Aven's birth parents as her records were sealed. Aven decides to talk to Josephine about the photo. The steakhouse is busy, but Aven insists she needs to talk. Josephine finally agrees and they head to the back office where Aven shows her the photo. Josephine's eyes fill with tears as she looks at the image and confirms that her daughter was Aven's mother. As Aven's grandmother, she had wanted to meet her, so she arranged for the Green family to take over management of the park. Josephine tells Aven that her mother, also named Aven, was a firecracker who always insisted on taking charge and doing things on her own. In fact, Aven had decided to be a single parent and never told Josephine who was the father of her baby. When Aven's mother died just a few weeks after little Aven was born, Josephine decided to put her up for adoption. Some years back she hired a detective to find Aven and send her regular reports. When she finds out that Aven's family might lose their house, she reaches out to Mr. Green and invites him to apply for the management position at the park. Not wanting to deal with management herself, Josephine keeps her true identity a secret; only Gary and Henry know she's "Joe Cavanaugh," the owner of the park. She tells Aven that she plans to retire to a nearby retirement community and give Stagecoach Pass to her, though her parents will manage it until she turns eighteen.

### Discussion Questions

1. What does Aven find in the locked desk drawer?
2. Why do you think Aven decides to speak to Josephine alone?
3. Who is Josephine in relation to Aven? Did Josephine intend for Aven to find out her true identity?
4. Why did Josephine put Aven up for adoption? Why did Aven think she had been given away by her birth family?
5. What similarities does Aven share with her birth mother? Do you ever notice you have more in common with your relatives than just your physical appearance?
6. Why did Josephine want the Green family to come to Stagecoach Pass? How did she make that happen?
7. Who is Joe Cavanaugh and why do people never meet him?

8. What does Josephine plan to do next in her life? Who will look after Stagecoach Pass? Do you think Aven will eventually sell it? Why or why not?
9. How do you think Aven is feeling after learning so much about her own past?
10. Does this chapter solve all the mysteries of Stagecoach Pass or are there unexplained occurrences yet to be understood?

## Chapter 36

### Summary

Aven practices soccer with her team on a beautiful evening. She is really starting to like living in Arizona. Jessica invites Aven to a team kick-off party at her house this weekend. Aven accepts and asks if Jessica is planning to come to the festival. She mentions that most of the team is planning to be there. On the sidelines, Connor is waiting to greet Aven. She tells him about making the soccer team, her new friend Jessica and how she has missed him. He explains that he had decided not to go to school and had just been at home until yesterday when his mom surprised him by taking a day off work to spend it with him. Aven tells Connor about what she learned from Josephine. Aven reveals that she's unsure about what kind of relationship she wants to have with Josephine as she was the one who gave her up for adoption. Connor tries to help Aven see that Josephine thought she was doing the best thing for Aven at the time and that she deserves a second chance. The two friends discuss the festival, the next Tourette's support group meeting and possible guitar lessons.

### Discussion Questions

1. How has Aven's attitude toward living in Arizona changed over the course of the book? How did she feel about it when her family first arrived? What does she say about it now?
2. Who is waiting on the sidelines after soccer practice? What made Connor decide to return to school?
3. How does Aven feel about her relationship with Josephine? In what ways is it complicated? How does Connor help Aven see Josephine's perspective?
4. How has Connor and his mother's relationship changed? What examples can you find in the text to support your opinion?
5. How do Aven and Connor support and encourage each other as friends? Can you find specific examples of how their words show care and encouragement?

## Chapter 37

### Summary

It's the day of the festival and Aven wakes up early. She dashes off a blog post highlighting the fun times to be had at the festival before heading out of the apartment. Her parents are already working on preparations and Aven pitches in by running errands, delivering messages and making phone calls. Finally stopping to have some

breakfast, Aven has a bowl of beans at the steak house where she asks Josephine about the necklace she found. Josephine tells Aven they released her mother's ashes at the top of the hill and then hung her favorite necklace on a little wooden cross. As the morning wears on, people start flowing into the park for the festival and by afternoon the parking lot is more full than it has ever been. The Flap-Jackeroos play as Aven and Zion entertain themselves in the park. Connor is nowhere to be found. At six o'clock, Aven returns to her apartment to get ready for the evening events. Aven changes into a new dress and her mom surprises her with the freshly-polished turquoise necklace. Before leaving the room, Aven's mom mentions that a lot of people came to the festival because of her blog. Aven makes her way to the stage and passes friends from her soccer teams who she introduces to Zion. When Aven walks on stage to join the Flap-Jackeroos, she finds her mother's guitar waiting for her. It has been cleaned, repaired and restrung. From the stage, Aven sees all the important people in her life looking back at her as she plays her mother's guitar. As she scans the crowd, she spots Connor making his way to the front. He seems relaxed and isn't ticcig. The song ends and Aven takes a bow as the audience claps. Aven, Connor and Zion race to the top of the small hill to watch the fireworks. When they're almost to the top, Aven thinks she spots a tarantula scurrying into its hole. The three friend sit down by the saguaro and watch the fireworks together. This time, Aven doesn't feel so insignificant, rather she feels as big as the giant saguaro beside her.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What does Aven write about in her blog post today?
2. How did the turquoise necklace end up on top of the hill near Stagecoach Pass? What's special about this necklace?
3. Aven decides to wear a strappy dress for her performance at the festival. Did this choice surprise you? Why or why not?
4. When Aven's mom offers her a cardigan to wear over her dress, what is Aven's reply? (p. 248) In what ways does the Aven we see in this chapter seem different than the one we met at the beginning of the book?
5. What's special about the guitar Aven plays during her performance with the Flap-Jackeroos? How does it make her feel to play her mother's guitar while wearing her mother's necklace?
6. As she looks out at the crowd, what does Aven notice? How does she feel when she sees Josephine's face in the crowd? What decision does she make right then and there regarding her relationship with Josephine?
7. Were you surprised that Connor decided to come? Why or why not?
8. How does Aven's actual performance experience compare with what she had imagined it would be like?
9. What did Aven see out of the corner of her eye as she and her friends climbed up the hill? What have you noticed about the role of tarantulas in the story? Are they connected to other elements of the plot?

10. Aven has spent a lot of time on top of the hill next to her giant saguaro. What is different about this time? How has her perspective changed since she first sat at this spot?

### **Dive Deeper: Western Music**

Western music is a form of country and hillbilly music composed by and about the people who settled in the western regions of the United States and Canada. This type of music celebrates the life of the cowboy on the open range, as well as the beauty of the Rocky Mountains and the prairies. Examples of popular songs in this genre include: "Ballad of the Alamo", "Happy Trails", "Home on the Range", "Red River Valley" and "Tumbling Tumbleweeds", among others. Examples of well-known artists in this genre include: Patsy Montana, Lynne Anderson, Gene Autry, Johnny Cash, John Denver, Roy Rogers, The Quebe Sisters Band and Sons of the Pioneers, among others.

Online Resources:

Wikipedia: Western Music

Overview of the topic and a helpful list of western songs and artists.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western\\_music\\_\(North\\_America\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_music_(North_America))

VIDEO: "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" – Roy Rogers & Sons of the Pioneers (2:33)

Video features a static image of a western cowboy band with music.

<https://youtu.be/JQc5gDXQGI>

## **Chapter 38**

### **Summary**

Aven writes a blog post thanking people for coming to the festival. She shares that many kids without arms have emailed her asking for advice about school topics ranging from making friends, to handling homework and dealing with mean looks and comments. She shares a list of twenty supplies you need to survive middle school when you don't have arms. Her list includes: good shoes, a sense of humor, a good breakfast, easy-to-eat lunches, a convenient book bag, cute shirts, bully spray (not yet invented), thick skin, an e-reader, a sport or e recreational activity, pants that button easily, a handy hook, nail polishes, nunchuks, an open heart and eyes, awesome parents and good friends. Aven looks up to find her mom has slipped into her room and has read her post. She comments that she likes it. Aven tells her that she has finally come up with a good name for her blog, "The Unarmed Middle Schooler's Guide to Survival."

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are some of Aven's suggestions for the things kids without arms need to survive middle school? Do you think any items on her list apply to kids with arms too? Which ones?

2. What things would be on your list for things kids need to survive elementary or middle school?
3. What does Aven decide to name her blog? What do you think of the new name? What would you name your own blog if you had one? What would it be about?

## Chapter 39

### Summary

Connor, Zion and Aven walk down the crowded school sidewalk at lunchtime. They talk about their weekend plans which include creating memorial on the hill for Aven's mother. Aven talks about her ideas for the hot summer days at Stagecoach Pass and how installing a western-themed splash pad might be just the perfect thing to keep visitors coming. Connor and Zion agree. Aven mentions that she plans to learn to ride a horse and her friends aren't even surprised. As they pass the cafeteria, Aven stops, gives her friend and look and walks to the doors inviting Connor and Zion to join her. Connor opens the door and Aven walks through into a place she's never seen before. She's got places to see, things to try, new friends to meet and a light to shine.

### Discussion Questions

1. What is Aven planning to do as a nice surprise for Josephine?
2. How does Aven think she can increase the number of visitors to Stagecoach Pass during the hot summer months? What do you think of her idea? What ideas do you have?
3. How do Connor and Zion react when Aven tells them she plans to learn to ride a horse? How might they have reacted to this news when they first met Aven? What has changed?
4. Where do the three friends eat lunch? Had Aven ever eaten there before? What do you think helped her feel confident enough to go into the cafeteria?
5. Think about the Aven we met at the beginning of the book and the Aven we see now. In what ways has Aven changed? In what ways is she the same?
6. How has Connor grown and changed over the course of the book? What about Zion? Are there other characters who have changed over the course of the book? If so, who are they and what changes did you notice?
7. How has this book impacted the way you think about people with disabilities? Do you think it's possible you have changed while reading this book? In what way?
8. What are you curious to learn more about as a result of reading this book?
9. What would you like to share about your experience reading this book? Did you have a favorite character? A favorite part? Do you hope the author writes a sequel?
10. What thoughts do you have about the Youth One Book, One Denver program? What did you like? Were there parts you didn't like? What kind of book do you hope the city picks for next year?

**Educator Note:** Please send student and educator feedback about the Youth One Book, One Denver program to Brooke Dilling: [Brooke.Dilling@denvergov.org](mailto:Brooke.Dilling@denvergov.org). Thank you!

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## WRITE & RESPOND

### Writing Prompts for Each Chapter and Anytime

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#### Anytime Writing Prompts:

1. Write a short summary of the chapter you just read.
2. Choose one of the following quotes and write about what it means to you:
  - a. *Kind words do not cost much. Yet they accomplish much.* —Blaise Pascal
  - b. *When given the choice between being right or being kind, choose kind.* —Dr. Wayne W. Dyer
  - c. *Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can.* —John Wesley’s Rule
  - d. *Audentes fortuna invat. (Fortune favors the bold.)* —Virgil
  - e. *Have no friends not equal to yourself.* —Confucius
3. Write a letter to one of the characters in the book. What questions would you want to ask about their life?
4. Write a series of text messages that tell about your week so far.
5. Draw a comic strip about the super powers you wish you had.
6. Grab the nearest book and open it to a random page. Choose a sentence from the page as the first line in a dialogue between two characters. Write what the characters say next and try to find a way for the opening sentence to make sense.
7. Compose a haiku about what you see around you. A haiku is a poem that has three lines. The first line and third line have 5 syllables, while the second line has 7 syllables.
8. Design your own code. Then, use your code to write a positive message for a friend to decode.
9. Write a list of twenty great things about summertime or a topic of your choice.

## Chapter 1

1. Imagine you were born without arms just like Aven. Write about how your life would be different. What are some of the ways it would be the same?
2. Aven’s friends love to hear her ridiculous stories about what happened to her arms. Make up your own wild backstory.

## Chapter 2

1. Aven’s favorite food is buttered noodles. Make a restaurant-style menu that includes your favorite foods. Be sure to include a short description of each item.
2. As the family gets ready to move, Aven’s dad describes all the reasons Arizona will be a great new home. If you were trying to convince someone to move to Colorado, what would you say? Write a paragraph with your top reasons.

## Chapter 3

1. When Aven tours the small museum at Stagecoach Pass, she finds an assortment of “artifacts” on display. If you created a museum all about your life, hobbies, interests and achievements, what would you include? Write a list (the longer, the better!) of the things that would be in your museum.
2. Imagine someone has just moved to your neighborhood. What do you think they would notice about the buildings, yards, trees, cars, streets and sidewalks? Write a postcard that this person might send to their family back at home describing what they notice about your city.

## Chapter 4

1. Think back to your first day of school last year. What was it like? What did you think of your teachers when you first met them? Did you meet anyone new on the first day?
2. Aven’s favorite kind of shoe is a ballet flat because she can quickly and easily slide her foot in and out. Make a sales poster advertising the “best shoe ever” (either real or made up). Be sure to describe all the shoe’s features and materials, as well as why buyers would love this shoe.

## Chapter 5

1. While wandering through Stagecoach Pass, Aven stops by Madame Myrtle’s shop and asks to have her fortune told. Write your own fortune. What do you hope will happen in your future?

2. Aven tries the fried rattlesnake, but decides she can't bring herself to try Rocky Mountain oysters. Think about an unusual food you have eaten and write about how it looked and tasted. Use as many descriptive words as you can!

## Chapter 6

1. Aven's mom surprises her with her own blog and she writes her first post. What would you write as your first post if you had your own blog?
2. Aven misses her friends back in Kansas, especially her friend Emily (p. 37). Write a letter to one of your best friends. Share a memory of something you two have done together and include an idea for something to do together in the future.

## Chapter 7

1. After the three girls walk away, Aven comments, "The girls hadn't met me at all. They hadn't even asked me my name. No, what they had met were my missing arms" (p. 42). Write a new version of the girls' conversation with Aven that would still satisfy their curiosity, but would be more respectful to Aven.
2. As three girls walk over to talk to Aven, she notices what they're wearing. Choose a person in the room and write a detailed description of his or her physical appearance. Be thoughtful and let that person know why you might be staring and offer to let him/her read your description once it's done.

## Chapter 8

1. In the evening, Aven likes to climb a hill near Stagecoach Pass and sit next to a saguaro cactus. Write about a place that's special to you.
2. As Aven looks at the lights of Scottsdale and Phoenix, she thinks to herself, "So, after all, did it really matter that the kids at school didn't talk to me? That they probably wished I wasn't there making them uncomfortable? That they were afraid of me?" (p. 46). She tries to convince herself that it shouldn't matter, but the truth is that it really does matter. Write a letter to Aven giving her advice on how to tackle these problems.

## Chapter 9

1. Connor comments that the librarian Ms. Wright is "super nice" (p. 52). Who is a teacher in your life who is super nice? Write about this special teacher and how he/she has made a difference in your life at school.
2. When Connor meets someone new, he's ready with a well-rehearsed explanation of his tics. Even without a genetic condition to explain, it's useful to have a self-introduction prepared. Write a paragraph introducing yourself.

## Chapter 10

1. Aven says she and Spaghetti the llama are, “like, cool X-Men mutants” (p. 70). Create a short comic strip about Spaghetti’s special powers.
2. Aven and Connor discover an old box in the padlocked shed that seems to contain items that belonged to someone who lived 40 years ago. If you were going to leave a box of items that would show someone in the future who you are as a person, what would you include? Choose 5-10 items and write a couple of sentences about each item explaining why you chose it.

## Chapter 11

1. Why do you think the Cavanaugh family is so secretive? Write down your best ideas.
2. Aven enjoys using her limb difference to her advantage when it comes to playing pranks on others. Imagine a new prank she could play, and then write a letter to Aven sharing your idea.

## Chapter 12

1. Can you relate to any of the tough times Zion and Aven have had at school? Sometimes kids can be pretty mean. Write a journal entry about a time when you had a rough day at school.
2. Aven lists some of the many questions she gets about her limb difference and whether she can do certain activities. What are you curious to know about living life without arms? Make a list of 10 questions you’d like to ask Aven.

## Chapter 13

1. Write about a mystery you’ve solved, like Aven’s mystery of the Hershey’s Kiss. If you’ve never solved a mystery, choose an unusual occurrence and write an explanation for it.
2. Aven thinks someone might have taken revenge on the Cavanaugh family. Create a backstory explaining what happened to cause this person to take revenge.

## Chapter 14

1. Connor and Aven play video games for a couple of hours before its time for dinner. Plan out the perfect evening with a friend. What would you do? What would you eat? Where would you go?
2. Aven and Connor play a car racing game together, but there are many other types of video games available. Create a mini poster advertising the kind of game

you would make. Be sure to include a title, exciting images and a paragraph describing the storyline of the game.

## Chapter 15

1. When Aven finds a dead lizard at the foot of the stairs to her apartment, she thinks it might be a message (p. 116). Compose a newspaper-style article about the discovery of the lizard and some analysis on what it might mean.
2. When Connor asks Aven about Spaghetti the Llama, she happily reports that thanks to her vigilant care, he's doing better (p. 114). Write about a time when you cared for animal.

## Chapter 16

1. Aven writes a list of 20 fantastic things about not having arms (pp. 118 – 121). Continue her list and write 10 more ways it might be a benefit to not have arms.
2. What are 20 fantastic things about your life? Write up a list of the things you love most about yourself, your family, your friends and your school.

## Chapter 17

1. In this chapter, we meet a group of kids living with Tourette's and learn about the variety of tics they have as a result of their condition. What questions do you have about Tourette Syndrome? Write down a list of your questions.
2. Aven is a caring friend who accepts Connor just the way he is, "tics and all" (p. 136). Think about your best friend. What are some ways he/she shows he/she cares? Create a series of comic book-style frames with drawings and text celebrating the many ways your friend shows he/she cares.

## Chapter 18

1. Aven's full name is Aven Laura Green. Write an acrostic poem using the letters of your whole name. Try to highlight your best qualities and fun facts about yourself. An acrostic poem is the kind where you write each letter of a word on a separate line and then think of a word or phrase that begins with each letter. For example: CATS → **C**ute; **A**lways eat cat food; **T**rap mice; **S**oft to hold.
2. At this point, Aven has read every book about tarantulas she can get her hands on. What animal have you researched either at school or at home? Write a paragraph about this animal sharing what you've learned.

## Chapter 19

1. When a group of kids is bullying Connor, Aven confronts them about their behavior. Have you ever stood up for a friend? Write about a time when you stood up for a friend or write about what you would do if someone was bullying someone like Connor.
2. What can you do when you see someone being bullied? Write a short guide for students your age that includes 10 tips for dealing with bullies. Don't have 10 ideas? Ask your teacher if you can ask other people in the class for ideas.

## Chapter 20

1. Harold the ninja and his trusty pig Jarold seem like an unlikely crime-fighting duo. Make up your own unlikely duo and make a short comic about their first adventure.
2. Aven writes a play for her school's playwright contest. Write the first scene of your own play. Who are the characters? What is the setting? What is going to happen?

## Chapter 21

1. As a writer, Dusti Bowling uses words to help her audience imagine the people, places and things in her stories. Choose a room in your house and describe it using as many details as you can. How can you help your reader "see" this room in his or her mind?
2. Connor accuses Aven of trying to fix him, but Aven replies, "I just want to help you. Friends help each other, don't they?" (p. 154). Create a mini guide about how to be a good friend. What do good friends do? What don't they do? How do you know if someone is being a good friend versus a not-so-good friend?

## Chapter 22

1. Andrea encourages each kid at the Tourette's support meeting to set a small goal for him or herself. Write about the goals you have for the different areas of your life (self, school, family, friends, hobbies).
2. At the Tourette's support meeting, the group learns relaxation techniques to calm their tics. Everyone can benefit from feeling less stressed though! Write a letter to yourself to read when you feel stressed. Include suggestions for ways to relax as well as some words of encouragement.

## Chapter 23

1. When Connor pops a roasted marshmallow into Aven's mouth, it makes it difficult for her to speak clearly. When she means "I don't want it to go back to normal," it comes out "Ah doh wah go nanahol." Imagine a whole dialogue where one character is always speaking with a marshmallow in his/her mouth.
2. At Stagecoach Pass, Christmas is a time for festive decorations, lights and a community dinner. Write about a holiday your family celebrates and what traditions you have.

## Chapter 24

1. Aven identifies 17 empty storefronts at Stagecoach Pass (p.169). If you were the manager of the park, what type of businesses would you put in these locations and why? Write a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Green telling them about your ideas.
2. Have you ever thought about running your own business? What do you enjoy doing or making? Do you make artwork? Do you bake cookies? Are you good at gardening? Write down your ideas for a business you'd like to start.

## Chapter 25

1. When Aven says she will not perform at the festival, Connor declares that he won't come (p. 178). Write a series of text messages you would send to each person to convince them to reconsider their decision.
2. Even though it's an icy cold day, the three friends still decide to eat outside at their usual spot. Think about wintertime in Colorado and write a poem about how it feels to be outside on a cold day.

## Chapter 26

1. Zion finds an old black-and-white photograph in the storage building that looks just like Aven, but with arm and wearing the turquoise necklace. Write a short biography about the woman in the photo. Where did she come from? What was her name? How did she get that necklace? Where is she now?
2. Aven, Zion and Connor are shocked to find a photograph of someone who looks so much like Aven. What if there was another you who lived during a different time period? Write about which time period you would want your time-traveling twin to explore and why.

## Chapter 27

1. Aven's mom says the photo might just be Aven's doppelganger (someone who looks like someone else, but is not related). Imagine you've just gotten a letter telling you that your doppelganger has been found. Write a letter to your doppelganger inviting him/her to come spend the day with you. What would you do? What would you want to know about this person?
2. Aven and the young woman in the photo look eerily alike, but perhaps that's all they have in common. What if they were opposites in every other way? Create a profile for your opposite. Start by creating an "opposite name" by rearranging the letters in your name, next think about your favorite foods, classes, colors, hobbies and come up with "opposite answers" to include in your opposite's profile.

## Chapter 28

1. Aven, Connor and Zion head to the movie theater to see a new sci-fi movie. What was the last movie you saw? Would you recommend it to others? How many stars would you give it? Write a movie review about a movie you saw recently.
2. Aven's mom puts a lot of effort into coordinating the movie theater surprise for Connor. Write about a big surprise you would want someone to make happen for you.

## Chapter 29

1. Aven's parents book a band called the Flap-Jackeroos to play at the festival. Design an advertisement for the Flap-Jackeroos' latest album that includes a list of their songs and a brief introduction to the members of the band.
2. In this chapter, Aven and Connor have a big fight. Imagine the series of text messages they might send to each other the next day as they try to heal their friendship.

## Chapter 30

1. Aven writes a blog post about the twenty worst things about not having arms. Pick a topic and write out your top twenty worst things about it.
2. The day after Aven and Connor's big fight, she avoids him at school. If Aven had come to you as a friend that day, what would you have told her to do to make up after the fight? Write down what you would say.

## Chapter 31

1. When Aven doesn't come home for dinner, her dad comes to find her (p. 210). She is in a terrible mood and he does his best to help shift it. Write about a time when a parent or friend helped turn your day around. How did they do it?
2. Aven's dad encourages her to be herself and be a "light who shines for all to see" (p. 214). Write a poem inspired by this idea.

## Chapter 32

1. Charlie is the bartender at the Saloon and Steakhouse at Stagecoach Pass. While he's dressed like a cowboy, he's actually a college student (p. 216). Write a journal entry from Charlie's perspective about a day at Stagecoach Pass. What customers does he meet? What does he think about his job? What is he studying in college?
2. When Aven has the chance to chat with Josephine, she asks her questions about her life (p. 219). Write a list of 10 questions you would ask Josephine.

## Chapter 33

1. Aven's dad thinks it makes sense to call soccer football and that American football should be called "man smash" (p. 222) Write a list of new names for common sports and challenge a friend to identify them.
2. Aven feels soccer has been a good bonding experience for her family (p. 222). Write about the role of sports in your life. What sport do you play? Do you play on a team or only at recess? Do you think there's a benefit to playing sports, why or why not?

## Chapter 34

1. Jessica met Aven on her first day in science class, but they only spoke briefly then (p. 224). Write a journal entry from Jessica's perspective about how and why her opinion of Aven has changed since that day. Does Jessica think she and Aven will hang out friends?
2. Jessica tells Aven that last year the soccer team had pizza parties and a team slumber party (p. 226). Create an invitation for either type of team party. Be sure to include the date, time, a location and plenty of details about what guests will do at the party.

## Chapter 35

1. Aven discovers that Josephine is actually her grandmother (p. 232). Do you have living grandparents? If so, write them a letter about your summer. If not, choose another member of your family to write to.
2. Aven and her birth mother have many things in common from their red hair to their independent personalities, to their ability to play the guitar (pp. 233-237). Make a list of 10 things you have in common with one of your family members.

## Chapter 36

1. Aven isn't sure she can forgive Josephine for putting her up for adoption (p. 241). Has there ever been a time when you thought you couldn't possibly forgive someone? What happened? Did you end up forgiving that person or not? Write about what happened and your thoughts on forgiveness.
2. Connor tells Aven, "you are even smart enough to be an astronaut" (p. 243). What possible careers would you like to have as adult? Write about your plans for the future.

## Chapter 37

1. Make a mini poster advertising the festival at Stagecoach Pass. Refer to the book as you work so you're sure to include all the event details.
2. As the three friends sit on the small hill behind Stagecoach Pass, Aven says this spot helps her see things clearly and that what she sees is two of the best friends she's ever had (p. 252). Write a poem about friendship.

## Chapter 38

1. Aven compiles a list of twenty supplies kids without arms need to survive middle school (pp. 255-258). Make your own list of twenty supplies you think any kids need to do well at school.
2. Aven writes in her blog that many kids like her have sent her emails with questions (pp. 254-255). As she herself has a limb difference, she is a great resource for others. What topics do you know a lot about? Are you good at math? Do you always know the best books or movies to recommend? What are your hobbies? Are there certain life experiences you know a lot about (growing up in a bilingual household, having 5 sisters, raising chickens, etc.)? Create an advertisement inviting kids to write to you with their questions about this topic. Give a few samples of questions you could answer.

## Chapter 39

1. On the last page of the story, Aven says, “there was a lot I needed to do with my life. I had places to see, things to try, new friends to meet. And a light to shine” (262). What places do you hope to see? What new activities do you want to try? What new foods do you want to eat? Are there people you hope to meet one day? Write about your big dreams, hope and plans for the future.
2. Aven imagines installing a splash pad oasis at Stagecoach Pass to increase the number of summertime visitors to the park (pp. 260-261). Imagine you are a travel blogger visiting this new attraction. Write about what you see, hear, taste and experience.

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# CREATE, DO & EXPLORE

## Activities to Bring the Book to Life STEM, Art, English Language Arts and More

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## Science, Technology, Engineering & Math (STEM)

### Desert Adaptations

**Suggested Chapter Pairing(s):** Any chapter 3 - 39

**Materials:** Paper towels, waxed paper, water, cookie sheet

**Background:** In the Arizona desert, plants and animals have adapted to survive high temperatures and dry conditions.

**Instructions:** Share with students that the Arizona desert has a very hot and dry climate with little rainfall and plants and animals that live there have had to adapt in order to thrive in this climate. To explore one way cacti have adapted, the class will do a simple experiment. Working in small groups or as an educator-led demonstration, first wet three pieces of paper towel with water. Lay one of the paper towels flat on a cookie sheet. Roll up the second piece of paper towel and secure it with a paper clip. Put the third piece of paper towel on top of a piece of waxed paper that is the same size as the paper towel. The waxed paper will act like the waxy coating on the skin of a cactus. Roll up the paper towel and waxed paper together and secure with a paper clip. Place the

two rolls on the cookie sheet. Leave all three paper towels for 24 hours. Ask students: *What do you notice about each paper towel? Which one was still damp? What does this tell us about one strategy plants use to keep from losing the water they need to survive?*

Extend the lesson by learning more about cacti at these online resources:

Saguaro National Park

Fact sheets and a live web cam of saguaros in the desert

[https://www.nps.gov/sagu/learn/nature/saguaro\\_q\\_a.htm](https://www.nps.gov/sagu/learn/nature/saguaro_q_a.htm)

Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum

Online exhibits, games, fact sheets, lesson plans and printable activities.

<https://www.desertmuseum.org>

## Tornado in a Bottle

### Suggested Chapter Pairing(s): 9

**Materials:** 2 soda bottles, a washer, duct tape, dish soap, food coloring and water

**Background:** When Connor learns that Aven used to live in Kansas, he asks if she has seen a tornado. She replies that she has and that her house, like many homes in the region of the United States known as “tornado alley,” had an underground storm cellar where her family could shelter during a tornado warning.

**Instructions:** Share with students that a tornado is a spinning column of air that touches both the clouds and the earth. If possible, share this short video about how tornadoes form from TedEd: <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/how-do-tornadoes-form-james-spann>.

To create a water “tornado” in a bottle: First, fill one soda bottle 2/3 full with water and add a few drops of dish soap and food coloring. Next, place a washer on the mouth of the bottle with the water. Line up the opening of the second soda bottle with the opening of the first bottle and connect the bottles by tightly wrapping them with duct tape. To create a vortex, quickly turn the bottle over so the bottle containing the water is on the top and swirl it around in a circular motion. Students should see a tornado-like vortex as the water moves through the washer from the top bottle to the one on the bottom.

## Cool Plants on the Block

**Suggested Chapter Pairing(s): 8, 28**

**Materials:** Leaf shape chart (found on page 10 of the free downloadable 2018 Youth One Book, One Denver Adventure Guide at [artsandvenues.com/yobod](http://artsandvenues.com/yobod)), internet access

**Background:** Saguaro cacti, like the one Aven visits on her evening walks, are native to southwestern Arizona and parts of Mexico. These tree-like cacti can grow up to 50 feet tall and live for more than 150 years.

**Instructions:** Share with student that leaf shapes and growth patterns are a useful tool in identifying tree types. Give each student a copy of the leaf shape chart and head outside to identify nearby trees. Which types did you find?

## Gold Fever

**Suggested Chapter Pairing(s): 5**

**Materials:** A gold panning pan or an old pie plate or skillet pan, river sand or a bag of sand from a hardware store, a large container (a baby swimming pool or a large plastic bin), water, clear tape, notecards

**Background:** At Stagecoach Pass, visitors can pan for gold-painted rocks to keep as souvenirs.

**Instructions:** Share with students that the discovery of gold near present-day Denver in 1858-59 drew thousands of people to Colorado before it had even become a state. In fact, gold dust was found in Cherry Creek, the South Platte River and Little Dry Creek. One common way to mine for gold was to “pan” for it.

Set up a gold panning station by filling a baby swimming pool or large plastic bin with water and then adding a bucketful of river sand or hardware store sand. To pan for gold, have students follow these steps:

1. Put about 4 handfuls of river sand into the pan.
2. While holding the gold pan under water, move the pan in a circular motion so that the lighter materials will be carried out of the gold pan. Remember, gold is heavy, so it will sink!
3. When about half of the river sand is gone, lift the pan out of the water and hold it so that it is slightly tipped. Keep swirling the water and let the larger rocks and lighter material wash out of the pan.
4. Add more water and keep swirling until the pan is almost empty.

5. Take a look at what's left! They may find tiny garnets, quartz, pyrite and perhaps even a few flecks of gold.

Use tape to affix the gems and gold flecks students find to a notecard.

## Visual Arts

### Art Another Way

**Suggested Chapter Pairing(s):** 6, 10

**Materials:** Paper, paints or markers

**Background:** Aven uses her feet to paint.

**Instructions:** Challenge students to paint or draw using a part of the body other than their hands. Can they paint a rainbow using their elbow? Or bring a landscape to life with their feet?

### Theme Park Designer

**Suggested Chapter Pairing(s):** 5

**Materials:** Large sheets of paper, and markers or colored pencils

**Background:** When her parents take a job running Stagecoach Pass, a rundown Western theme park in Arizona, Aven discovers that living in a theme park has some drawbacks, but also the opportunity for adventure.

**Instructions:** Divide students into small group and give each group a large sheet of paper and markers or colored pencils. Challenge each team to work together to create their own unique theme park concept and then map it out on the paper. Ask: *What would the theme be? Would there be rides? Would there be animals? What would the restaurants serve?*

Once the designs are complete, invite each group to present their theme park concept to the class along with a short pitch explaining why everyone should want to come for a visit.

## Uniquely You

**Suggested Chapter Pairing(s):** Any chapter

**Materials:** Construction paper, scissors, glue sticks and pencils or pens

**Background:** When people meet Aven, they often notice her limb difference first, but just like everyone, there's so much more to her than her physical appearance.

**Instructions:** What are the many layers that make you, YOU? As a group, brainstorm a word bank full of positive personality traits people might have and write them on the board. Ask students to consider which of these traits they possess. Next, ask students to consider skills and talents they have like riding a bike, solving math problems or speaking a second language. Share with students that none of these attributes can be seen when a person first meets them. In fact, their physical appearance is only a part of who they are.

Celebrate the many layers that make up each person with a simple craft project. Have students cut out 7 rectangles of different sizes from colorful paper. Using a glue stick, have students glue ONE SIDE of the smallest rectangular pieces of paper to the center of a sheet of construction paper. Next, have students open the flap like a door and write something unique about themselves under the flap. Have students glue the next largest rectangular piece of paper on top of the first flap to create a second flap and then write a different unique fact under that flap. Students should repeat this process until they have glued all 7 pieces to create a series of layered flaps. Have students write their name on the top flap. Invite students to swap projects and flip through the flaps and learn more about their classmates' unique talents, interests and personality traits.

## DIY Desert

**Suggested Chapter Pairing(s):** Any chapter 3 - 39

**Materials:** 8 cups whole wheat or white flour, 1 cup baby oil, 1 packet lemon powdered drink mix for scent and color (optional), large shallow plastic bin with lid, scissors, glue sticks, colored pencils, copies of "Your Own Desert Landscape in Bloom" activity pages (found on pages 6-7 of the free downloadable 2018 Youth One Book, One Denver Adventure Guide at [artsandvenues.com/yobod](http://artsandvenues.com/yobod))

**Background:** Aven's first impression of the Arizona landscape is how brown it is. She remarks, "The dirt. Never. Ended" (p. 12). Before long, she finds a favorite spot in the desert near a saguaro cactus and learns to see the beauty of this unique landscape.

**Instructions:** Begin by looking at images of the Arizona desert online. Invite students to share what they notice. Do they spot any saguaro cacti? Or prickly pear cacti? Give each student a copy of the “Your Own Desert Landscape in Bloom” activity pages, as well as colored pencils, scissors and glue. Following the instructions on the pages, have students color in, cut out and assemble three different type of cacti.

To make the “sand” for your interactive desert diorama, mix 8 cups of whole wheat or white flour, 1 cup of baby oil and the packet of drink mix (if desired) together in a shallow plastic bin. Keep the lid on the bin when not in use. If the “sand” ever seems a bit dry when you open the container again, add a couple tablespoons of water.

Once the cacti are made, allow students to take turns arranging the desert diorama scene and playing with the “sand.”

If desired, educators may make multiple batches of “sand” and give each student a small container of “sand” to use in creating their own personal desert scene to take home.

NOTE: For younger students, it may be easiest to have them color in the two illustrated parts of each cacti, cut them out and then play with them as simple flat cutouts using the “sand” in the interactive desert diorama to hold them upright.

## English Language Arts (ELA)

### Blog It

**Suggested Chapter Pairing(s):** 6, 10,

**Materials:** Paper, pencils, markers, scissors, glue sticks, magazines to cut up

**Background:** Aven shares her thoughts and advice for others through a blog she calls *Aven’s Random Thoughts*, which she later changes to *The Unarmed Middle Schooler’s Guide to Survival*.

**Instructions:** If you had your own blog, what would it be about? Invite students to brainstorm a list of possible titles and then write out their first post on a computer or a piece of paper. If creating paper blog posts, encourage students to add some images to their “blogs” using photos cut from magazines.

## So That's How It Happened

**Suggested Chapter Pairing(s):** 1, 9

**Materials:** Paper and pencils

**Background:** Aven loves to entertain her friends with ridiculous stories about how she lost her arms, even though the truth is that she was simply born without them.

**Instructions:** Invite students to let their imaginations run wild as they come up with an outrageous backstory for Aven.

## What's in a Name?

**Suggested Chapter Pairing(s):** 12, 14

**Materials:** Paper and pencils

**Background:** Zion's parents named him after a fictional place in the movie *The Matrix*. As he explains to Aven, his parents are big fans of sci-fi films and thought he looked like one of the movie's main characters, Morpheus. Aven's nickname is Sheebz because her parents thought she acted like the Queen of Sheba when they first adopted her; she would sit around and wait for people to do things for her.

**Instructions:** How did you get your name? If possible, have students interview their parents about how they chose their name or how they got their nickname. If time doesn't allow for research, invite students to write their own backstory for their name or nickname.

## Community Building

### Pep Talk Postcards

**Suggested Chapter Pairing(s):** Any

**Materials:** Blank index cards, markers or colored pencils

**Background:** It may take Aven longer to do something than a person who has arms, but her parents have always encouraged her to figure things out for herself and to keep trying even when it's a challenge. Sometimes a little pep talk can make all the difference when facing a tough day or a difficult task.

**Instructions:** Using index cards or plain paper and markers, invite students to create a stack of mini postcards with positive messages like “You’ve got this!” or “You’re capable of anything!” to share with friends and family members. Have students reflect on how it feels to have their friends encourage them.

## Share a Talent

**Suggested Chapter Pairing(s):** 37

**Materials:** Whiteboard and markers

**Background:** When Aven plays her guitar at the Stagecoach Pass art festival, it brings people together and deepens her friendship with Connor. What talent can your students share with others?

**Instructions:** Divide the board into thirds. Label the first section “Our Skills,” the next section “Who We Want to Help,” and the last section “Project Ideas.” As a group, compile a list of talents and skills in the first section. These could include the ability to play an instrument or speak a second language, or academic skills like reading, writing and math. Next, consider who in your community might need help and what type of challenge they are facing. Are there assisted living facilities nearby? Are there younger students who might need help reading? Or maybe there are recently-arrived immigrants who are getting used to life in the United States. In the Project Ideas section, brainstorm project ideas that combine the group’s skills with a way to benefit those in need. Invite students to complete a project idea with their family outside of class or plan a group service project to complete as a class.

## Community Mural

**Suggested Chapter Pairing(s):** Any chapter 4 - 39

**Materials:** Large sheet of paper, plain paper, pencils and paints or markers

**Background:** At first, Aven simply walks by the boy sitting on the sidewalk eating his lunch alone. Later, she stops and says hello. His name is Zion and before long, he’s one of Aven’s best friends.

**Instructions:** Invite students to consider what it means to be an inclusive community. If they were to show this idea in a visual form, what symbols, images and words would they use? How could they create a mural that helped people feel like they belonged? Working in small groups, have students sketch out their ideas for a mural. Next, have each student present their concept to the group and vote on a favorite design or work together to combine elements from several designs. Use a grid system to scale the

smaller image to a larger image on a sheet of butcher paper. To do this, draw an even grid on the concept sketch artwork with a pencil. Next, use a pencil to draw a grid containing the same number of squares, in the same proportions, as the smaller grid on the larger piece of paper. Using the grid as a guide, students will then recreate the shapes/lines in each smaller box on the concept sketch in the corresponding larger box on the mural paper.

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## Check Out These Great Reads

If you enjoyed reading *Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus*, the children's librarians at Denver Public Library think you'll enjoy reading these books too.

*El Deafo* by Cece Bell

*Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper

*Forget Me Not* by Ellie Terry

*Under the Egg* by Laura Marx Fitzgerald

*Chasing Vermeer* by Blue Balliett

*The Wild Robot* by Peter Brown

*Liar and Spy* by Rebecca Stead

*A Boy Called Bat* by Elana K. Arnold

*Hello, Universe* by Erin Entrada Kelly

*Clayton Byrd Goes Underground* by Rita Williams-Garcia

*Beyond the Bright Sea* by Lauren Wolk

*Wishtree* by Katherine Applegate

*The Shadow Cipher* by Laura Ruby

*The First Rule of Punk* by Celia C. Pérez

*Family Game Night and Other Catastrophes* by Mary E. Lambert

*See You in the Cosmos* by Jack Cheng

*Tic Talk: Living with Tourette Syndrome, A 9-Year-Old Boy's Story in His Own Words* by Dylan Peters

*Not So Different: What You Really Want to Ask About Having a Disability* by Shane Burcaw