



Stuff We All Get

K.L. Denman

Reading Level: 2.9

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AR Quiz # 146755

Book Summary

Fifteen-year-old Zack finds a home-made CD with the word *Famous* written on it. Lonely and bored while suspended from school, he plays the CD and loses himself in the music. Zack has sound-color synesthesia. He sees colors when he hears music, and the music on the *Famous* CD causes incredible patterns of color for him. Zack becomes obsessed with the girl on the CD and tries to find her. He tracks down the singer, Jolene, in a café where she works while she dreams of being famous. He convinces her to let him help her achieve her dreams, but soon discovers that in her quest for fame, Jolene has done a lot of damage. *Stuff We All Get* is a gentle critique of celebrity culture in North America.

Author Biography

K. L. Denman was born in Calgary, Alberta, and spent her childhood in a house one street away from the open prairie. When she was eleven, her family moved to Delta, British Columbia, and she got to know life on the coast: tides, clam digging, rain gear, green grass year-round and enormous trees. It was there that Kim and her sisters got their first pony. She continued to live near Vancouver for many years while finishing school, attending college, and eventually getting married and starting a family. She always loved writing and when her teenaged children and their friends provided inspiration and re-kindled memories of this challenging passage, writing for teens became an irresistible venture.

Today she lives on a small farm on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast with her family of people, two dogs, three cats, two horses and an elderly mule. When she's not writing or caring for critters, she's reading, trying to grow vegetables, taking pictures, or volunteering at therapeutic horseback riding.

Connecting to the Text

Plot

Zack's mom tells him that "details are important...get all the facts before you make a decision" (chapter 2). Investigation and getting all the facts are important themes in *Stuff We All Get*. Ask students to choose a scene in the novel where Zack begins an investigation. Did Zack have enough details to make a good decision? What could he have done differently, and how might the story have unfolded differently?

- Zack becomes obsessed with the singer on the CD, *Famous*. He says, "She knows what it feels like to be mocked. She knows what it feels like to want to go." What if he understood the distinction between the songwriter and the singer from the beginning?
- Zack decides to find the singer from the CD. He goes back to the geocache site, looking for clues. What if he had picked something different from the box of swag? The pineapple keychain or the fish lure?

The Writer's Craft

1. Jack's mom is a police officer, and there are several references in *Stuff We All Get* to her unique training and point of view in her conversations with Zack. Have students make a list of examples, noting the scene for each. After students have a list of two or three examples, ask them to consider how the writing would be different if Zack's mom had a different background (a teacher, astronomer, city planner, movie star, park ranger, storyteller, basketball player, etc.).
 - ◆ "Details are important...get all the facts" (chapter 2—a discussion on moving to the new town)
 - ◆ "This is where our detecting skills come in" (chapter 3—looking for the geocache)
 - ◆ "Mom didn't catch that evidence of my jailbreak" (chapter 5—Zack sneaks home while he's grounded)
 - ◆ "You've done your time, Zack. You're free to go" (chapter 6—Zack's grounding is over)
2. Similes connect ideas, giving us images that expand our understanding of situations and characters. Read the following examples aloud, or write them on the board. Discuss the connection that is being made for each, and how it lends meaning to the text. How does it expand our understanding of this situation?
 - ◆ "The office is a windowless gray cell. The vice-principal [is] across the desk from me" (chapter 1)
 - ◆ "The straight trunks of the pine trees are spooky in the fog. Some are almost like the silhouettes of people" (chapter 5)

Encourage students to choose a scene from *Stuff We All Get* and write their own descriptive sentences using similes. Ideas to get students started:

- ◆ Zack has been grounded now for a while. He's getting bored and restless.
- ◆ Zack listens to the songs on the CD. They create powerful images for him.
- ◆ Zack is out in the woods and it's getting dark. He can hear a loon calling in the distance.

Theme

Zack becomes obsessed with the singer on the CD and imagines that she understands his loneliness and his urge to “just go.” In chapter 5, he describes what she must be like in person. She has long, wavy auburn hair and her “skin is perfect...She’s tall, but not as tall as me. And she’s slender, but not skinny.” Later, in chapter 13, Zack says, “It’s freaky how I’d built her up in my mind to be something she isn’t. I was practically in love with her.”

- As a group, discuss concepts of stardom and celebrity. Why do we sometimes assume famous people understand us? Why do we sometimes choose to emulate them?
Prompt: You may wish to share an experience from your own teen years to begin the conversation.
- As Zack learned, Frank had written the songs, not Jolene. His obsession with Jolene got him into a lot of trouble. In what ways might he grow as a person because of his experience? If you were a friend of Zack’s, what would you suggest he do next?

Connecting to the Curriculum**Citizenship**

Within a month of moving to his new town, Zack is the victim of cyber-bullying. Pete takes an embarrassing photo of Zack and posts it online. Cyber-bullying is not a dominant theme in the novel (Zack calls it “immature and annoying”), but is an important issue for students to consider. To raise awareness, have students investigate policies regarding cyber-bullying in your school or district.

- Why is this an important issue? What are the rules in your school? What can a student do if they are being bullied online?
- Pete and Charo’s friend both wanted the “butt of butt jokes” picture of Zack but each handled it differently. Pete posted the picture online and then blackmailed Zack, and Charo’s friend asked Zack if she could use the picture in the yearbook. If you were Zack, which approach would you have used? Which would you have preferred happen to you?

Art

As a synesthete, Zack sees colors when he hears music. In chapter 4, when he first listens to the CD *Famous*, he has a dramatic visual experience. And with each song, the experience is different. Ask students to create an art project that illustrates what Zack sees.

Option: Students may wish to share music they enjoy, and imagine/illustrate how a sound-color synesthete might experience them.

- *First song:* “Blue swirls and ripples of deep green flecked with brown... The melody gives me pink and gold of sunrises as she sings about taking off into the vast unknown”
- *Second song:* “I see muted and misty shades of green, yellow and mauve—the colors an old bruise... There’s something about eternal solitude, about reaching for connection and always missing”
- *Third song:* “Purple and black form a backdrop for flashes of blood red...the music fits the lyrics...It’s about suspicion, about wanting to believe in someone”

Geography

Zack and his mom try a new activity, geocaching, using GPS technology. As Zack's mom notes, "People all over the world are doing this. They put items in a box called a geocache, and they hide it somewhere...Other people can find it using their GPS devices..." (chapter 2). Ask students to find out about geocaching, demonstrating understanding of the following terms from *Stuff We All Get*:

coordinates	navigating	signals
GPS (Global Positioning System)	orbiting earth	
latitude	position	
longitude	satellites	

Option: Challenge students to plan a geocaching field trip. Using the geocache website, ensure students understand their role in respecting the natural environment, participating in an items trade, and using the logbook.

Language Arts

Zack and his mom try a new hobby: geocaching. Using handheld GPS devices, they search for a box of items (a cache) left by others. Invite students to imagine that instead of a music CD, Zack finds something completely different and begins an exciting adventure. Challenge students to write a short story, rap, poem, skit or song about their alternate story. Ideas to get students started:

- He finds a picture of his father sitting beside a Christmas tree with a different family. There are two boys, both about two years younger than Zack!
- He finds the last will and testament of Hermit Joe, an old-timer who lives deep in the woods outside of town.
- He finds a set of car keys. There is a tag on them which says: *Whoever finds the car that goes with these keys can keep the car.*

Science

1. As a punishment, Zack's mom has him dig up their yard so she can plant a vegetable garden. Zack lives in Penticton, British Columbia, Canada. She says, "Anything grows in this climate. It's going to be great. Lettuce, peas, onions. Tomatoes and potatoes" (chapter 2). Encourage students to participate in the following as a science project:
 - ♦ Although it is February, Zack's mom says, "[We] need to prepare the soil now" (chapter 2). Imagine you are preparing a garden in your school yard or community garden. Choose a vegetable to grow. How will you need to prepare your garden? When is the best time for planting, and harvesting?
2. Zack has sound-color synesthesia, which he describes in chapter 2: "I see colors in brilliant flashes or in transparent clouds streaming through the air." For people who have synesthesia, the use of one sense (for example, hearing music) stimulates the involuntary experience of another (in Zack's case, visualizations of color). As Zack notes, there are different forms of synesthesia, such as "color-coded numbers"

or “[tasting] words.”

- ♦ Have students choose a form of synesthesia from the list below, research it, and imagine what it would be like. Ask students to prepare short presentations, incorporating music, food or colors, if possible.
- ♦ After the presentations, lead a group discussion. Why do you think synesthesia is more common in artists and poets than with other people? Synesthesia forms are below:
 - *Grapheme* → *Color* (experiencing numbers or letters with colors)
 - *Sound* → *Color* (certain sounds trigger particular color sensations)
 - *Number form* (thinking of numbers brings about a mental image of numbers, or a “map”)
 - *Personification* (numbers, letters, months or other sequences are given personalities or traits)
 - *Lexical* → *Gustatory* (certain spoken words can bring about a taste sensation)

Vocabulary

1. Have students visit the Glossary of Terms section at www.geocaching.com or make available a list of Geocaching terms and descriptions. Ask students to write a short story about Zack (or themselves), imagining that he has taken up geocaching as a hobby and is now introducing a friend to it. Encourage students to use terms used in *Stuff We All Get*, as well as new ones.
2. Have students make a list on the board or a flipchart of terms used in *Stuff We All Get*, from the gardening, geocaching or music/song-writing themes. Once students have finished, ask them to prepare a short skit or write a descriptive paragraph of a scene from the novel, using four or more words from one of the lists.

- ♦ Gardening

blisters	markers	prepare	tomatoes
climate	onions	shovel	
digging	plot	stakes	
gloves	potatoes	string	

- ♦ Geocaching

cache	GPS	navigating	satellite
computer	handheld	orbiting	treasure
coordinates	latitude	planet	
devices	longitude	position	

♦ Song-writing

composer	listening	quality	vocals
guitar	lyrics	record	
inspired	melody	singer	
famous	music	tone	

Connecting to the Students—Ideas for Exploration

1. Zack and his mom have moved five times in twelve years. Now he finds himself friendless, lonely and “the butt of butt jokes” (chapter 1). Encourage students to look at things from Zack’s point of view, and imagine that he is a new student at your school. What would make life easier for Zack? Encourage students to put their ideas into practice. One example is to prepare a welcome package for new students, including neighborhood maps, brochures about clubs and activities, coupons to a local hang-out coffee shop, etc.
2. In his new town, Zack says making friends “seems harder” (chapter 2) and Charo has “that pack mentality.” He reflects: “What’s with that group-think stuff? I wish I knew.” Ask students to discuss this topic as a group or in teams, making reference to the novel while drawing comparisons to their own experiences. You may wish to introduce this topic with a discussion on culture and group think. An informative worksheet can be found in the Web Resources below.
 - ♦ When did you notice that distinct groups formed in your school? Did it happen in the early grades, or later?
 - ♦ Why do cliques or exclusive groups form? What’s in it for students in the group?
 - ♦ How open are groups in your school to including new students? How can you tell?
 - ♦ Have you ever been the new kid? What advice would you have for Zack on how to make friends?

Web Resources

Cyberbullying worksheets

http://cybersmartcurriculum.org/assets/files/activitysheets/4-5/Group_Think.pdf

Geocaching

www.geocaching.com

On-line documentaries and websites on synesthesia

www.bluecatsandchartreusekittens.com/Blue_Cats_and_Chartreuse_Kittens_Rel.html

www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4P1VAy6RAY

www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rSbtg7wohs&feature=related