



Food Freak

Alex Van Tol

Reading Level: 4.0

978-1-4598-1339-7 PB

Book Summary

It really seems like Dani's dad has gone around the bend. Ever since Dani's mother died of cancer, all her dad does is stand around on street corners with his crazy signs, proclaiming that processed foods mean the end of the world. The Food Freak, as he is known, has already scared away all of Dani's friends at her old school. But it's a new year, and Dani is at a new school in a different part of town. Maybe things will be better now. Dani just needs to keep her head down and avoid making any friends. That way, nobody will find out about her dad and his insane protests. The plan seems to be working fine until one day Dani meets a boy who helps her see things in a different light.

Author Biography

Alex Van Tol grew up reading a wide range of books, from Enid Blyton to Stephen King. She taught middle school for eight years, then made the switch to writing for a living. Alex has published numerous titles with Orca including *Chick: Lister* and *Oracle* in the Orca Currents series. Alex lives in Victoria, British Columbia, with her family.

Connecting to the Text***Character and Theme Study***

To engage students with the characters and themes in *Food Freak*, use the following as large group discussion topics, individual novel study or writing and reflection exercises.

1. Dani's father protests in the street. Dani says, "It's embarrassing. It kills me with shame" (ch. 2). Have you ever been embarrassed by someone else's behavior?
 - ◆ In what way was your experience similar, or different, to Dani's?
 - ◆ What expectations did you have for the other person? How did you want them to act?
 - ◆ Were you able to talk about the situation with the person, as Dani did? What happened?
 - ◆ Consider the experience of Gregor's mother in chapter 8. How did she feel about Gregor's father being drunk at work and "ditching" the family?
2. At her new school, Dani decides, "No friends. No complications." Read the paragraphs in chapter 6 where Dani reflects on the crows flying overhead.
 - ◆ What connection can be made between Dani's thoughts about the crows and her attitude about her own situation?
 - ◆ Dani ponders the girl crow and asks three questions. How might she be asking those questions of herself? What answers could Dani give herself?
3. Reflect on how differently Dani and Gregor approach school and making friends. **Prompt:** Dani tries not to make friends, whereas Gregor likes "people of all stripes" (ch. 7).
 - ◆ Imagine yourself as Dani or Gregor. What's in it for you, using your approach?
 - ◆ What does Dani lose out on? Consider that she loves history, and at her old school, she used to have her hand up, ready to answer... "full of ideas and questions" (ch. 4).
4. In chapter 8, Gregor tells Dani about his father; how he showed up for surgery drunk and then left their family. Gregor "opened up and took a chance" by telling his story.
 - ◆ Making friends sometimes involves taking a risk. For Dani, how does the risk outweigh the potential benefit?
 - ◆ Could Gregor's openness be one reason that he's liked by everyone?
 - ◆ What do you think Dani learned about Gregor (and herself) through this conversation?
5. Dani assumes the kids at her new school will make jokes about her and even "shun" her if they find out about her Freakazoid father.
 - ◆ Does this ring true for you? Would kids at your school respond this way?
 - ◆ If Gregor and Dani were at your school, would you want to be friends with them? Why, or why not? Would Dani's Papa and Gregor's dad play a part in you being friends with Dani or Gregor?

The Writer's Craft

1. Foreshadowing is a literary device where the writer “suggests” things early that later escalate or are resolved. This keeps readers interested and wanting to know more. Ask students to find examples—“hints”—in the early chapters about what might come later. Did they pique your curiosity? What questions did you have?
 - ♦ In chapter 1, after talking to Maria, the cashier at the market, Dani takes a look around to make sure she doesn't run into someone she knows. *Why does Dani do this?*
 - ♦ Dani's Papa said, “Do you want more people to get sick? Like that?” (ch. 2) *What could he be hinting at—and why is saving people so important to him?*
 - ♦ Dani said, of her Papa, “I didn't want to see him cry. I had seen enough of that” (ch. 2) *Why would Dani's Papa have cried so much?*
 - ♦ In chapter 3, when Dani is preparing dinner, she looks at the picture of her Mamma: “That was before she got sick and lost all her hair.” *What happened to Dani's mother?*
2. Metaphors and similes connect ideas, giving us pictures that expand our understanding of situations and characters. Read the examples aloud or challenge students to find their own examples in the novel. Discuss the connection that is being made and how it lends meaning to the scene (for example, eye brows + thunder = anger, scary, impactful):
 - ch. 2 *Papa didn't like that. His brow got all thunderous then, and he stood up taller.*
 - ch. 5 *It felt like a giant pair of hands was trying to tear the house apart. Everything was creaking and groaning and shaking.*
 - ch. 7 *When he smiles again, my whole energy field lights up.*
 - ch. 8 *He has just blown this big, fragile bubble of truth in my direction, and I am terrified of catching it the wrong way and making it pop.*
 - ch. 11 *Papa recoils like I've thrown hot water on him.*

The sentences above provide examples of simile use. Ask students to complete the sentences below or encourage them to write their own, using themes from the novel.

- ♦ I used to love bacon, it was my favorite food. Now, it's like _____ .
- ♦ Before Mamma died, I looked forward to talking with Papa, it made me feel happy and proud. Now it's all different. I avoid him as though _____ .
- ♦ Before I knew about additives and preservatives, shopping was easy. Now it's as tricky as _____ .
- ♦ With Mamma here, our house was a home, and everything was orderly and clean. Now it's more like _____ .
- ♦ Gregor is really nice. At first I thought he'd be as judgmental as, but he turned out to be a good friend, and he's as open as _____ .

Connecting to the Students

1. Dani has a lot to handle. She misses her Mamma, and she has to do all the shopping and cooking, plus take care of the house—all while trying to keep kids at her new school from finding out about her weird dad. Ask students to reflect on Dani's situation.
 - ◆ At her old school, Dani's "social capital tanked" when kids found out her Papa wasn't giving up on protesting. Kids made jokes and later she was "shunned" (ch. 2). Does this ring true for you? If Dani was at your school, would kids react in a similar way?
 - ◆ Being new to a school can be challenging, and making friends isn't always easy. What advice would you give Dani, if she was new to your school?
 - ◆ Dani just wants to be in a "normal" family. This means no drama, no issues, no embarrassment. Do you think her wish is realistic—or attainable? Themes to explore:
 - In your experience, is anyone's family really "normal" or "regular"? Who decides what "normal" is?
 - Should Dani keep striving to be "regular," or could she work on other things? (**Prompt:** She could work on her confidence and "take a chance," like Gregor.)
2. Ask students to make a list of ideas and resources for kids who are experiencing loss, feeling alone, or are overwhelmed by home or school (help lines, counselor, etc.). Share these with kids. **Ideas:** posters, flyers, links on the school's website or Facebook page.
3. Dani experiences many emotions in *Food Freak*. Have students list them as they read, noticing how one emotion sometimes leads to—or quickly becomes—another: embarrassment leads to shame; anger leads to frustration; fear becomes loneliness and sadness; anger and sadness lead to guilt; embarrassment becomes panic then relief.
 - ◆ Create an emotion wheel, and include in it scenes where Dani feels a strong emotion. A simple wheel can have six sections: happy, disgust, angry, sad, scared and excited.
 - ◆ Do you experience shifts in emotions, moving from (or through) one to another? Keep a journal for a few days and record when you feel the emotions in the emotion wheel. Did you find that one emotion sometimes leads to another?
 - ◆ Sometimes emotions can feel overwhelming. What are ways to help us feel grounded, even when our emotions (or another's) run high? **Ideas:** yoga, running, working out, journaling, listening to music, reading, watching a movie, hanging with a friend.

Connecting to the Curriculum

Food Sciences

1. Dani does the shopping and prepares the meals. It isn't easy because Papa insists on organic foods with no artificial ingredients, additives, preservatives, sugar or palm oil. Ask students to find a recipe for a dish they enjoy, and then search for all-natural ingredients, as Dani does. While searching online or in-store, consider Dani's challenge.
 - ♦ Which is easier to find, natural/organic or non-organic ingredients? Which has more variety? Is more/less expensive? Comes from farther away?
 - ♦ Preservatives give foods a longer shelf life. How do organic ingredients compare?
 - ♦ If your recipe contains sugar or a prepared food like ketchup, what can you use instead?
2. As a research project, ask students to choose a "weapon of mass destruction" from the novel and find out more about it. Examples: trans fats, excess salt, nitrates, sodium benzoate, pesticides, MSG.
 - ♦ Why are they used in commercial food preparation?
 - ♦ How does this ingredient harm our bodies/environment? Should/can we limit intake?
 - ♦ Has reading *Food Freak* changed how you feel about what's in the foods you eat?

History

Dani enjoys history and learns a lot from her Papa, a history professor. In chapter 8, Dani describes a chain of events that links Steve Jobs, her iPad and unrest in the Middle East. She says, "Our world now was totally shaped by everything people did before."

Ask students to create a history mind map (or chain or web) for themselves or a celebrity, athlete, scientist or public figure they're curious about. Ideas to get students started:

- *Melania Knave/Knauss (Trump)*. She grew up in Novo Mesto, Slovenia, which is famous for arts and culture. She met Donald Trump while modelling in the US. In her life, she went from Slovene to Washington, DC, and is one of the most famous women in the world.
- *Zach Randolph*. He's a Memphis Grizzlies forward who participates in the Angel Tree program, which brings gifts to kids with a parent who is incarcerated. He also does food and toy drives and helps young athletes stay on track. In his life, he went from growing up very poor and twice being in juvenile detention to becoming a star athlete and role model.

Civics, Social Studies

Dani's Papa protests in public about the danger in foods. He wears "signs about doom and destruction" (ch. 2) to inform others. What are the most effective ways to reach others when we have a message or cause to share? Use the following topics to explore this theme.

1. In chapter 13, Dani says, “The way you’re telling people makes you look crazy... People end up avoiding you...your message doesn’t get through.” Consider the methods Dani suggests, and Ms. Kirstein’s thoughts about how to raise interest.
 - ♦ Is there a movement, cause or charity you feel strongly about? Create a short presentation for the class/group. How did you learn about it? What got you interested?
 - ♦ Include methods to engage others, such as a YouTube documentary, Facebook or Twitter accounts, flash mob or protest footage, etc. Would sign holding work?
 - ♦ Consider how using words, images, photos and video can help get a message across.
2. Dani’s Papa can hold signs by the grocery store because he has freedom of speech, a civil liberty in the US. Invite students to find out more about civil liberties, using the questions below to prompt discussion or as research topics.
 - ♦ Make a list of at least three civil liberties, and include a short description of each. (i.e., *speech, privacy, fair trial, right to vote, right to marry, no unreasonable search*)
 - ♦ Find and describe two examples of civil liberties demonstrated in *Food Freak*.
 - ♦ Find two instances where a civil liberty occurs in your daily life. For example,
 - *The US has a federal election every 4 years. This is an example of freedom to vote.*
 - *I saw video footage of an Occupy event. Many people found out about it through social media, and they gathered in a city square. They held signs, chanted, sang and marched. This is an example of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.*
 - *Two families in our building demonstrate freedom of religion. One family is Catholic. They celebrate Christmas and go to a Catholic church on Sundays. The other family is Sikh. Some members of the family wear a steel bracelet called a Kara, on their right arms. Their place of worship is called a gurdwara.*

Art

1. Invite students to choose an image or scene from the novel to illustrate. Explore different textures and colors, and different media, such as collage, origami, word art, etc. **Ideas:**
 - ch. 2 *I almost never cry. But, oh, man, I was crying that night.* Everyone was making fun of you, *I sobbed.*
 - ch. 6 Dani watches the crows “doing their twilight flyover.”
 - ch. 8 Gregor blows a “big, fragile bubble of truth” in Dani’s direction.
 - ch. 12 Dani is looking at her reflection in the mirror and realizes she can’t run away.
2. Invite students to note pejorative words used to describe Papa, such as *freakomatic, stupid, weird, freakazoid wack-job, idiot, embarrassment*. Then, lead a discussion on how it can be easy to view someone as one “way,” rather than multi-layered and complex. Ask students to “reframe” Papa. Think of positive words that also describe him, such as *eccentric, committed, caring, conscientious*. Use mirror or word art to illustrate this contrast.

Connecting to the Wider World

Stages of Grieving

Dani's mother died from bowel cancer. Dani misses her and sometimes talks to a photo of her Mamma in the kitchen. Dani's father is "stuck in a permanent state of grief" (ch. 8). He began protesting because he needed something to blame.

We know that people grieve in different ways and at their own unique pace. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a famous psychiatrist, wrote about grieving in her book *On Death and Dying*. She described the five stages people go through when they're faced with death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

After learning about the stages of grieving, ask students to make connections to the novel.

- Imagine you're Dani or her Papa. Describe a feeling they might have at each stage.
- Which stage do you think Papa was at when he started protesting?
- At the end of the novel, do you think Dani is at the stage of acceptance?
- Gregor experienced loss when his dad left their family. What stage could he be at?