

Born With: Teacher's Guide

A novel study.

Introduction

Born With is a contemporary novel appropriate for grades seven and up. It is written in two voices so the reader can see how two teens think differently when confronted with the same situation. This guide is to encourage individual reading, literature circles or class novel discussion. The guide will help increase awareness about those who are born with Down syndrome, have ALS or different sexual orientations. It is also a novel that can promote discussion about ALS, hate crimes, family life, and adolescent friendships.

Novel Summary: Born With

Meet Erika and Gianni!

Erika is a fifteen-year-old girl born with Down syndrome. She loves to sing and dance and hang out with friends. Being in three dance numbers in the school production of *Grease* is a big job, but with the help of her Best Buddy, Gianni, Erika knows she can be a star.

Gianni is a sixteen-year-old boy with a secret. Like his Best Buddy, Erika, who was born with Down syndrome, Gianni loves to sing and dance. He also knows that he's different from the other boys in his school- but is he so different from that cool, attractive fellow actor in the school play? Or is he just imagining that the sparks between them are mutual?

Told in the alternating voices of Erika and Gianni, Born With is the story of two teens who help each other to find and accept their own best selves.

Discussion Questions: Prereading

1. What is Down syndrome? What are some of the distinguishing features of Down syndrome, both physically and intellectually?
2. Can a child born with Down syndrome go to school? Learn how to read? What are some jobs that people born with Down syndrome can do later on in life?
3. Are there organizations that help those who are born with Down syndrome?

4. Do you know anyone who was born with Down syndrome? Explain what that person was like? If you don't know someone who was born with Down syndrome tell what you think it is or what that person is like.
5. In your own words what is discrimination. When have you felt that you might have been discriminated against?
6. What does it mean to be gay?
7. What are hate crimes? Historically, where have hate crimes occurred?
8. What does it mean to be racist?
9. What would you do if someone was bullying your friend?
10. What is a bully? How do you feel about bullying? What should you do to help someone who is being bullied?
11. What is the Best Buddies Club? Do you think you could have such a club at your school?
12. What activities could students do that belonged to the Best Buddies Club?
13. What is ALS? How does it affect someone?

Activities: Prereading or Postreading

1. Make a poster or brochure about the Best Buddies club that could be put up on a bulletin board in your school or be handed out to students to encourage them to join.
2. Brainstorm activity ideas that a Best Buddies club in your school could do. How could you make such a club work? Organize a mock schedule of events for a Best Buddies club in your school.
3. Have you ever wanted to audition for something or try out for a team but you felt really nervous? And if you have done a tryout or audition how did you feel before and after? Write about this as a journal entry? Think about this as you read the book.
4. Sometimes, we don't get what we want when we try out for something. Write your feelings in a journal entry. On the flip side write about what it feels like to be successful?
5. Brainstorm other intellectual disabilities that are like Down syndrome and write down how they can affect a person physically and intellectually.
6. Discuss the gay movement rights and where gay marriage is legal. What does this mean? Why has the government become involved in gay marriage? Why is gay marriage a government affair?
7. Discuss what a gay pride parade is, who gets involved and the history of such an event. Where was it started? Who started it? Talk about other events that have been created because of a social consciousness.

Novel Discussion Questions:

Chapter One and Two.

Pages 1- 22

Summary

Erika and Gianni are both trying out for the school musical *Grease* at their high school. Erika auditions first and then it is Gianni's turn. They both feel differently when they finish their audition. Erika is happy that she succeeded. Gianni is nervous that he might not get the lead role, a part he has wanted since he heard that the drama department was putting on *Grease*.

Before Reading

Discuss the Best Buddies program.

Discuss the musical *Grease*.

Discuss being born with Down syndrome.

After Reading

How did Erika react to her audition?

How did Gianni react to his audition?

What do you think Erika's joke means?

What are some of the things that Gianni talked to Erika about before she auditioned? How did he prepare her?

Who are the secondary characters that were introduced? What do you think their roles will be throughout the novel?

Let's talk about the Writing

***Literary Devices**

What literary devices did the author use to create the characters of Erika and Gianni? Can you make a list?

***Voices**

How did the author change the voice of Gianni so he didn't sound like Erika? What distinguishes the two voices?

***Character Description**

In your own words describe Erika, Gianni and Sonya.

Plot Summation

Summarize what has happened in the first two chapters.

Relating to Your Life – Is it wrong to be upset when you do your best but don't get the result you want? When might this become a problem? Write a journal entry about an experience you encountered that might be similar.

Chapter Three and Four

Pages 23-35

Summary

Erika listens to Gianni sing and tells him how “good” he did. Then her sister takes her home from school. At home she has the job of feeding her father who has ALS. Gianni heads home after his audition and doesn't tell his family about the reality of his audition and how he doesn't think he will get the lead role. Then he goes to his bedroom and stares at the ceiling.

Before Reading

Discuss ALS.

Discuss what it means to be gay.

After Reading

Discuss the family members for both Erika and Gianni. Where does Erika fit in her family? Where does Gianni fit in his family? Who lives in their households?

What are some of Erika's responsibilities in her household? What are some of your responsibilities at home and at school?

What is Gianni's dilemma? How does he think he should handle it? Do you think this is the best way for him to handle his issue? What do you think about keeping secrets?

What is wrong with Erika's father?

Let's Talk about the Writing

***Literary Devices**

List some of the similes the author uses. (Keep a list that you can add on to as you continue to read the book.)

What sayings does Erika like to use? How does the author use these sayings to create Erika's voice?

***Character Description**

In your own words describe Bilal.

Plot Summation

Summarize what has happened in these two chapters.

Relating to Your Life

How would it feel to know that you are different like Gianni? Have you ever felt different?

What do you think might happen to Gianni if he continues to keep his secret a secret? What does it do to a person physically and emotionally to keep a secret? Think of a time when you held on to a secret (even if it was something when you were little) and write about it and what happened when the secret came out.

Chapter Five and Six

Pages 36-61

Summary

Erika knows the cast list for *Grease* is going up on the bulletin board. She doesn't really know what a list is so she is nervous. She goes to school and finds out she has made the cast and will be dancing in three numbers. She really wants to be part of the group. After she finds out about the list, Gianni helps her learn a dance in preparation in the hallway. But when a group of boys harass them, Gianni makes her walk away. Erika knows she doesn't like the boys but doesn't know why. Gianni finds out he is Eugene and this is upsetting for him. Then he sees Bilal and gets up his nerve to talk to him. When the boys harass him and Erika dancing in the hall, he hustles her out of there. When the boys take it one step further and harass him in the parking lot, he manages to get in his car and get away.

Before Reading

Talk about Fetal Alcohol syndrome.

Talk about autism.

After Reading

How does Erika react to being cast in three numbers? How does Gianni react to finding out that he has been cast as Eugene? Why did they react differently?

What is Erika's Groovy Groove? Why do you think she needs to have the same routine every day?

How does Erika react to the boys laughing at them in the hall? How does Gianni react? How would you react? Have you ever witnessed someone being bullied?

How does Erika misinterpret a saying she heard someone say?

Erika has Down syndrome but attends a regular high school. How does she cope so that she can be integrated? Have you been in a class with integration? Write about your experiences.

Let's Talk about the Writing

***Foreshadowing** – Do you think there is an event that might happen that is foreshadowed in these two chapters? Write a paragraph about an event that *might* happen later on in the book.

***Character Description**

In your own words, write a character description for Karina.

Plot Summation

In your own words, summarize the plot in these two chapters.

Relating to Your Life

Have you ever been left out of something that you wanted to be a part of?

Have you ever been bullied? How did it make you feel?

Chapter Seven and Eight

Page 62-83

Summary

Erika goes home from school and her mother wants her to attend a Down Syndrome Society meeting. It is a meeting where the speaker is talking about secrets and keeping secrets. Erika doesn't like the word secrets. She also talks to her mother about taking some other kinds of dance classes. Gianni tries to go to a meeting at the community center but decides not to at the last minute. After school, Gianni takes Erika home and she asks him to come in. He is shocked by Mr. Wheeler's appearance.

After Reading

Discuss Erika's meeting. Look up organizations or websites that can help someone with Down syndrome.

Discuss Gianni's meeting.

Discuss how Gianni felt after seeing Mr. Wheeler. How would you feel finding out your friend's father was really sick?

Who were Erika's friends at the Down Syndrome Society?

Let's Talk about the Writing

***Voice**

Rewrite the scene where Gianni sees Mr. Wheeler and write it from Mr. Wheeler's point of view. Show how he feels to have Gianni see him so sick.

***Setting**

Pick a setting in either chapter and describe it in detail.

Plot Summation

Summarize the plot using your own words.

Relating to Your Life

Have you ever tried to go to something but in the end not gone because you were too nervous or scared? Write about this.

Chapter Nine and Ten

Pages 84-110

Summary

Erika goes to her first rehearsal and finds the dance steps hard to grasp. But she gets to go Starbucks after rehearsal and this makes her happy. Then she goes home and when she tries to feed her father, he chokes. She has an up and down day. Gianni notices that Erika is struggling with the dance steps, so he sets up an extra rehearsal for her. At the rehearsal studio, Sonya flirts with him and Gianni backs off. This hurts Sonya. But Gianni is really attracted to Bilal and not Sonya. He doesn't know how to tell his best friend (Sonya) that he might be gay. Instead he goes home and for some reason tells his brother.

After Reading

Describe Erika's reaction to missing some of the steps in the rehearsal. Why do you think she reacted the way she did?

Do you think Gianni is a good friend to Erika and why? What does it mean to be a good friend?

Do you think Sonya has a reason to be upset with Gianni?

Gianni talks to his brother, Rob, about his secret. Discuss Rob's reaction.

Let's Talk about the Writing

***Descriptive writing**

The author has described a dance studio in chapter ten. Describe a setting that you are familiar with. This can be a hockey arena, lacrosse field, favourite holiday place or even your bedroom. When you are writing, use your senses.

***Dialogue**

Dialogue is important in writing fiction. The author has a scene at the end where Gianni is talking to his brother. Write a scene between two people that has a lot of dialogue. It can be two people talking about the topic of your choice.

Plot Summation

Summarize the plot in your own words.

Relating to Your Life

Have you ever hurt one of your friends or a family member when you really didn't mean to? Write about this.

Have you been hurt by someone who in turn told you they didn't mean to hurt you?

Have you ever not been able to do something that you wanted to do (like Erika with the dance steps) and practiced to become better?

Chapter Eleven and Twelve

Pages 111-138

Summary

Erika goes to her first hip hop dance class and just loves the moves and teacher. After the class she is off to her extra dance rehearsal and she notices that Gianni isn't talking to Sonya very much. On Monday morning she wakes up and her Groovy Grove is off because her father has to go to the hospital. She goes to dance rehearsal at school and is fine with the moves she learned on the weekend but when new steps are introduced she can't follow. After rehearsal she goes to visit her father in the hospital. Meanwhile Gianni gets a flat tire and Sonya agrees to take Erika to the hospital. Bilal shows up to help Gianni so he drives him home. The next morning he drops his car off to get fixed and finds out his tire has been slashed. Bilal agrees to go bowling with him and Erika for a Best Buddies outing.

After Reading

How does Erika cope when her Groovy Grove is off? Do you have ways of coping when something makes you anxious?

Why was Erika's father in the hospital? Look up what a feeding tube would do help Mr. Wheeler.

How did Erika react to going to the hospital? Have you ever done something for the first time that made you anxious?

Let's Talk about the Writing

***Foreshadowing** - The author foreshadowed an event. What do you think it is? Think of a movie you've watched that foreshadows an event. Write about it.

***Descriptive writing** – Write a paragraph about changing a tire, or having to do something outside, in the winter. Use your senses. Try to feel the cold.

Plot Summation

Summarize, in your own word, these two chapters.

Relating to Your Life

Hospitals can be scary and uncomfortable for a lot of people. Can you remember the first time you visited someone in a hospital? Write about it using all your senses.

Chapter Thirteen and Fourteen

Summary

Erika sees Gianni touching Bilal's face and she knows it is a touch that means more than just friends. Outside, after bowling, they make snow angels. Erika is happy until she gets home and finds out that her father is sick and can't breathe very well. By morning he is feeling a little better so Erika heads off to her hip hop class. She still wonders about Gianni and Bilal and mentions something to Sonya. After school on Monday Erika goes to rehearsal and gets her costumes for the show. Then Miss Clark wants to rehearse but she gets upset because the dance is not working. Erika tells her they should add some hip hop and it works! Gianni is so shocked when Erika tells Miss Clark she has an idea on how to make the dance better. And he worries it won't be a good idea. But it is. Bilal is acting cool to Gianni and it hurts him. After Gianni helps Richard with his singing, he sees Bilal and chases after him. As they are standing at the bus station a car goes by and someone throws a drink at Bilal and makes a racial slur. Gianni is shocked. In the Best Buddies meeting, they talk about the Hooping it Up event.

Before Reading

Discuss what a hate crime is.

Discuss historical hate crimes and recent hate crimes.

After Reading

What did you think about Erika saying that she had a good idea? Would you have thought that she could have a good idea?

What did you think about how the boys in the car threw something at Bilal?

Gianni and Sonya finally talk. Do you think he should have talked to her earlier? Have you ever had a fight with a friend that lasted too long and you wished you could have talked earlier?

Let's Talk about the Writing

***Symbolism** – Authors sometimes use symbolism when writing. Can you find anything in these two chapters that is symbolic? Write a paragraph about what you think is symbolic?

***Dialogue** – Rewrite the scene between Sonya and Gianni where he is telling her he is sorry from Sonya’s point of view.

Plot Summation

Summarize, in your own words, these two chapters.

Relating to Your Life

Being bullied is hard. Have you ever been bullied? How did you feel? Have you ever bullied anyone? How did you feel afterwards?

What did you think about how Gianni apologized to Sonya?

Chapter Fifteen and Sixteen

Summary

Erika goes home and watches television with Karina and her father. When she says something to Karina about Gianni and Bilal liking each other, Karina asks her why she said that. Then she talks to her about keeping other people’s secrets. Erika has a great time at the Hooping it Up Best Buddies event but notices that the “mean” boys are lurking around. In the parking lot, the mean boys circle them and Gianni tells Erika to get in the car. Gianni doesn’t want Erika hurt. She gets in, but from Gianni’s phone she calls the police when the boys start beating Gianni up. Thankfully, Richard and Bilal show up. Gianni has to go to the hospital. While in the hospital, he finds out that Erika has told both of his secrets. At home, Gianni’s parents talk to him.

After Reading

Did you think that Erika would be able to do what she did when she called the police?

Did you know that the “R” word is no longer acceptable?

How does Erika use her focus to help Gianni?

Why were Gianni’s parents worried about him? What are they still worried about?

Let’s Talk about the Writing

***Action Scenes** – There is an action scene in Chapter Fourteen. List the verbs used to create this scene. Now, think of a scene you’d like to write about (hockey game, historical battle, survival story) and try to use as many verbs as possible.

Plot Summation

Summarize the plot in these two chapters.

Relating to Your Life

Have you ever witnessed something where you think you should have helped? What is the best way to help?

Do you think you would be prepared to help someone if you saw they were in trouble?

Chapter Seventeen and Eighteen

Summary

Erika's mother tells her that she can have a phone because she used it so wisely. At the last rehearsal before the show, Erika is upset that Gianni might not dance with her. At rehearsal she dances with Bilal but Gianni is there and tells her he will be able to dance with her. Erika has a moment with her father, and she realizes he might not be able to come to her performance. Gianni has to go to school after everyone knows that he is gay. He attends tech rehearsal and dress rehearsal because he is determined to be in the production. After one of the rehearsals he drives Erika home and ends up going in her house and talking to her father.

After Reading

How did Erika feel to know that Gianni might not dance with her? Why would she feel like that?

Gianni has to go to school after everyone has found out his secret, how did the other students react?

Gianni sees Erika's father again. How does he feel when he sees him?

What idea does Gianni have for allowing Mr. Wheeler to see the show?

Let's Talk about the Writing

***Story Arc** – In every story there should be an arc. Each story follows steps to get it to the top. These two chapters are at the top of the arc. Can you describe how the author has brought the story up to this point? Draw an arc and put the chapters from 1-18 on the arc with 18 being at the very top. Write one sentence beside each chapter about the most important event from that chapter.

Plot Summation

Summarize the plot of these two chapters.

Relating to Your Life

Have you ever had to face a group of people after someone has said something about you? How did you feel? How did you handle it?

Have you ever had to walk into a room and know that everyone is staring at you? How did it make you feel?

Chapter Nineteen

Summary

Erika is excited to be part of the show and it is finally show time. She loves backstage and being part of a production. She is disappointed that her father is not going to be there but is happy that it will be videotaped. After the show is over, Erika sees her father in the crowd. She runs to him and gives him a big hug. In the theatre lobby, she poses for photos taken with her very own camera on her phone.

After Reading

Erika is born with Down syndrome. She does something in this chapter that someone without Down syndrome might not do. What do you think that is?

Mr. Wheeler does end up coming to the show. How did you feel when you read that he has made it?

Let's Talk about the Writing

***Story Arc** – The author has concluded the story in this final chapter. A story arc goes upwards until it hits the climatic part (chapters 17 and 18) then it concludes. How did the author end the story? Were you expecting this ending?

***Descriptive writing** – The author has described the backstage scene. Did you feel that you were back there? Write a descriptive paragraph about being at an event, an event of your choice.

Plot Summation

Summarize the plot of these final chapters in your own words.

Relating to Your Life

Have you ever been surprised by something and was it a good surprise?

Activities – Postreading

- 1) Write an informative essay about being born with Down syndrome. What are the distinguishing characteristics? What are the limitations? How can those born with Down syndrome function in the real world?
- 2) Research shows how the treatment of those born with Down syndrome has changed over the years. What happened in the 1950's to those who were born with Down syndrome? How have they been included in schools since that time? How has the inclusion helped their and their classmate's learning abilities? Write an essay about this.
- 3) Write an essay about hate crimes.
- 4) Write an informative essay on ALS.
- 5) Write an essay on the Best Buddies program.
- 6) Drama idea - Take your favourite scene and rewrite it in script form. Then act it out. Perhaps it is a scene with two people talking.