

# EDUCATORS' GUIDE

INCLUDES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS,  
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES, AND  
AN EXCLUSIVE AUTHOR LETTER



AUTHOR OF MS. BIXBY'S LAST DAY AND POSTED  
**JOHN DAVID ANDERSON**



**From the beloved author of *Posted* comes the story of Zeke Stahls—a thoroughly average twelve-year-old who somehow finds himself in a competition to be named the World's Greatest Kid.**

Zeke Stahls is not the *best* kid in the world. Some days he struggles just to be *good*. He'd rather be pulling pranks than doing extra credit, and he's too busy performing experiments on his little brother, Nate, or tormenting his older sister, Jackie, to volunteer for charity. Which is why Zeke and his entire family are shocked when they receive word that he has been selected as a contestant in an online competition to find the World's Greatest Kid. Zeke has no idea how he was chosen for this, and he knows that measuring up to the other nominees—a saintly lineup of selfless, charming and talented do-gooders with photogenic smiles and hearts of gold—is hopeless. Still, with a \$10,000 cash prize on the line, and Zeke's mom struggling to hold the family together on her single-parent salary, he decides to give it his best shot. As Zeke concocts various plots to show the world just how "great" he is, however, he finds himself wondering what that word even means, and who gets to decide. And what kind of kid he wants—and needs—to be.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



John David Anderson is the author of many highly acclaimed books for kids, including the *New York Times* Notable Book *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*, *Posted*, *Granted*, *One Last Shot*, and *Stowaway*. A dedicated root beer connoisseur and chocolate fiend, he lives with his wonderful wife, two frawesome kids, and clumsy cat, Smudge, in Indianapolis, Indiana. You can visit him online at

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



## A LETTER FROM JOHN DAVID ANDERSON TO READERS OF THE GREATEST KID IN THE WORLD



IMAGINE you walk out to your mailbox today to find a letter informing you that you might be the greatest kid in the world. What would you think? *Yeah, I can see that.* Or: *This has to be some kind of a joke.* Or maybe: *Did my grandmother write this?* As a storyteller, I spend a lot of time asking *what if*, and then imagining all the possible answers. What if I suddenly had to be a good person (or at least a better one)? What if I could win my family ten thousand bucks? What if I tried to eat an entire bowl of applesauce while doing pushups and humming the National Anthem? All important questions that storytellers have been grappling with for centuries.

In asking these questions of our characters, of course, we are also asking them of ourselves. What should I change about myself? What mistakes have I made that could use correcting, or at least apologizing for? What could I do to make a positive impact in my community?

I wrote this novel because I think young readers grapple with these questions, as well as some of the others asked in the book. What can I do to get noticed, to get people to like me? What is the difference between being *good* and being *great*? Or between being *great* and being *popular*?

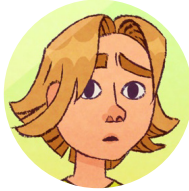
And of course: how do I cope with a loss so deep that it makes my very soul ache?

These are all questions asked in this book. And I think (or at least I hope), the book has some answers, but I don't know if they're the right ones. Just asking the questions is an excellent first step, though. I think humanity's curiosity and its constant quest for self-awareness and self-improvement are some of its best traits. They are some of the things that make us—that make you—great.

So, go. Keep reading. Keep asking. Keep growing. Keep being great.

JOHN DAVID ANDERSON





## PRE-READING ACTIVITY:

What do you think it takes to be The Greatest Kid in the World? Share your thoughts with someone else. Do you agree or disagree with each other?

## CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Each chapter has a clever name, hinting at what is to come, but certainly not giving anything away. Keep a list of the chapter titles. As you finish reading each chapter, write down your ideas of the significance behind its name.

### 1. A FOILED PLAN

**Vocabulary:** impervious, ludicrous, erroneous, adequate, campy

- We learn in this chapter that Zeke's father has been gone for more than three years. What are some possible explanations for this?
- Zeke says that his little brother Nate is always willing to be his "guinea pig." What does this tell you about their relationship?
- After reading the first chapter, how would you describe Zeke's character?

### 2. A CHEESY PRANK

**Vocabulary:** blissful, begrudge, condescending

- How many broken things in Zeke's home can you list? What does this list tell you about Zeke's life?
- Does Zeke seem bothered by the amount of things that need replacing or repairing around his home? How can you tell?
- In this chapter, we meet Zeke's older sister, Jackie. How would you describe their relationship at this point?

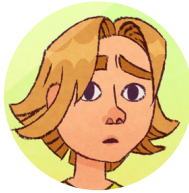
- What is revealed about Zeke's family's financial situation in this chapter?
- Ideas for pranks and mischief often pop into Zeke's head. What ideas does he come up with and/or act upon in this chapter?

### 3. GOING COMMANDO

**Vocabulary:** malevolent, revolution, charismatic

- For the past few years, Zeke has been described as a schemer at school. What clue explains why Zeke continues to pull off his various stunts at school, despite getting in trouble time and time again?
- From what you know about Zeke at this point, does it seem like he is a good candidate for The Greatest Kid in the World competition? What is your prediction about why he was sent the letter?
- At the end of this chapter, we see the first postcard from Zeke's father. What are your thoughts after reading it?





#### 4. IT'S ALWAYS SOMETHING. AND SOMETHING.

**Vocabulary:** strategically, feasible

- Zeke's mother reminds him that he should not go around wasting stuff because they can't afford it. How many things can you think of that Zeke has wasted so far?

#### 5. KABAM AND KERPOW

**Vocabulary:** gaunt, lithe, tandem, atrocities, inequities, undeterred, humility

- Describe the reaction of Zeke's mother when Gordon Notts shows up to explain the competition.
- Though his mother's reaction is not that different from his own, how do you think Zeke feels as he listens to her express her shock and doubt at hearing he has been chosen as one of the top five Greatest Kids?
- Since she doesn't fully believe that this competition is real, or that Zeke is a serious candidate, why does Zeke's mother want to go forward with it?

#### 6. THE QUESTION MARK

**Vocabulary:** loiter, manifesto, exploit

- As Zeke and his mother explore the KABAM website to check out the competition, they form opinions about the other candidates. Describe their opinions.
- Zeke's mother says she thinks it is kind of obnoxious to rank kids. But these kids have agreed to be in this competition. Do *you* think it is obnoxious to have a competition like this, or is it a positive way to celebrate achievements?

- Zeke thinks about the World's Greatest Mom mug he made his mother a few years ago. She never uses it because she doesn't want the Sharpie he wrote with to wash off. Zeke wonders if she has forgotten about it. He observes that things get forgotten when they are tucked away...at least some things. What do you think is on his mind when he has that thought?



- Zeke knows his mother deserves a vacation because she works so hard in and out of the home. He does seem to truly care about how hard his mother works. If so, why does he do so many things to make her daily life more difficult?
- This chapter ends with a significant moment. Explain what we learn about what the cedar box holds.

#### 7. SEEING RED

**Vocabulary:** tenuous, staunch

- Zeke describes a lot of his past stunts. What makes the "hockey in the kitchen" stunt one of the worst? Do you think he went too far that time?
- We learn why Zeke's family is not allowed back at the local public pool. Do you think he should or should not be allowed back at the pool this season? Why?
- When the family goes to the movies, a stranger gives them a free popcorn coupon. Why is this gesture such a big deal?



## 8. KISSING CONCRETE

**Vocabulary:** debriefing, dysfunctional, trope, theoretically

- In this chapter, Zeke thinks back to how his mother used to squeeze his toe on her way out of the room at bedtime. He misses those toe wiggles but says he would never tell her that. Why do you think that is? What does this reveal to us about Zeke?
- Do you think Zeke actively puts up an emotional barrier between his mother and himself? If so, why might this be?
- Nate asks Zeke if their family is dysfunctional. What do you think about Zeke's response to Nate? Do you agree that everyone is a little dysfunctional?
- Are you noticing any growth or change in Zeke since being part of the competition?

## 9. PURE GRATITUDE

**Vocabulary:** ingenious, shrewd, desensitized, exemplify, adamantium, reconnaissance, espionage

- "In Nate's mind, Zeke could do no wrong."  
[PAGE 85] Why is this significant?
- Notts makes a big deal about Zeke being outside creating something, and not inside on the couch sucked into playing on a phone, even though Zeke's outdoor activity could be dangerous. Notts spins things to the positive, but do you trust his intentions?
- In Dad's postcard we read at the end of this chapter, he writes that sometimes we don't know what we have until we look at it just

right and realize it's been there the whole time. Take a moment to pause and think about something in your life that you truly appreciate.

- Do you have any other predictions about where Dad is at this point?

## 10. WINNERS AND LOSERS

**Vocabulary:** sabotaging

- Describe how Zeke and Jackie both change when the video camera is filming them.
- Are you surprised that Nate does not seem to notice the shift in his siblings? Why do you think that is?

## 11. NOTHING BUT CAN

**Vocabulary:** dilapidated, incomprehensible

- On page 120 Zeke thinks about how everybody is qualified to judge strangers online. What do you think he means by this, and how do you feel about this thought?
- Zeke takes the time to show Nate how to tie his shoes, just like Zeke's dad taught him. Why is this moment so significant?





## 12. A DISH BEST SERVED GRILLED

**Vocabulary:** pathogenic, fluke

- Jackie gets back at Zeke by making him think she used the old piece of cheese from her Elle magazine in his grilled cheese. Would Zeke deserve it if she did, or is she going too far?
- When Zeke and Jackie talk privately, she says she thinks it is some kind of fluke that Zeke is in the competition—there are so many more deserving kids out there, who actually have a chance to win. It hurts Zeke to hear this from his sister. Do you think Jackie is right, or not? Do you think her comments are appropriate, or not? State your opinion and explain your reasoning.
- Compare the postcard in this chapter to the first postcard on page 21. Do they give you different opinions about what Dad is like and why he might not still be living with Zeke and his family?

## 13. SOME REASSEMBLY REQUIRED

**Vocabulary:** bevy

- On page 139 Zeke thinks to himself that some kids have to grow up faster than others. What do you think he means by this?
- What is bothering Zeke most about his current relationship with Jackie?
- How does Logan help Zeke begin to shift his perspective on the way Jackie treats him?
- On page 143 Zeke reflects on what Logan is saying to him, and thinks, “Sometimes you fool yourself into thinking things are one way when they’re actually something else entirely.” What do you think he means by this? Have you ever noticed yourself doing this?

## 14. DOWN THE POOP CHUTE

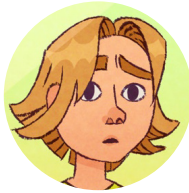
**Vocabulary:** incredulous, corroborating, garnering, periphery, emphatically, epiphany

- When Zeke gets to the park, he sees some kids from school. Using this scene and the scene on pages 16-18, what conclusions can you draw about Zeke’s relationships with his peers?
- We see Zeke hesitate before doing something on page 156. It might be the first time he has paused to think about his actions. What do you think might be creating this internal shift in Zeke?
- At the end of the chapter, Nate praises Zeke’s stunt, as he usually does. But then he says something else softly and privately to Zeke. Based on Zeke’s actions and thoughts so far, do you think what Nate said will have an impact on Zeke’s future behavior?

## 15. SUCK IT, TOAD

**Vocabulary:** aesthetically

- The first videos of the competition are posted, and voting can begin. Describe Zeke’s reaction to watching the other videos.
- Based on the videos of the first day, who would you cast your vote for, and why?
- Zeke’s first day of filming was certainly different from the other contestants. Imagine you are Gordon Notts, evaluating Zeke’s behavior. From that point of view, list all the positive aspects of Zeke’s day.



- The other contestants filled their days making positive impacts by spending time with various groups of people. Zeke spends his time with his siblings. Zeke's impact does not spread as far and wide as the other contestants. What do you think is the best way for people to share their time and make a positive impact?
- Why do you think Logan included the secret clip of Zeke showing Nate how to tie his shoes?

## 16. PUPPIES ARE THE WORST

**Vocabulary:** demoralizing, beneficent

- What do we learn about Dad in this chapter?
- In this chapter, Jackie opens up to Zeke about her frustrations. She tries so hard to be good. Yet here is Zeke, the boy who seems to do nothing but mess up, in a competition to be named The Greatest Kid in the World. Which character are you relating to more in this scene?
- On page 191 Zeke notices that he has not seen his mother genuinely smile or laugh out loud since his father was around. Does this support your prediction about where Dad is, or begin to shift your thoughts?



## 17. HERE KITTY, KITTY

**Vocabulary:** elude, maniacal, squall, abyss, distorted, benevolence

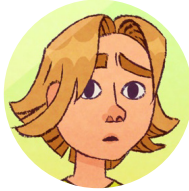
- Logan brings a basketball for Nate. What does this reveal is happening between Logan and the family?
- What does Logan say or do that suggests he has similarities to Zeke's dad?
- When Logan begins filming on this particular day, Zeke thinks about how it makes him feel *watched*, but not *seen*. How are those things both the same and different?
- Zeke wonders if fixing your own mistakes is proof of being great, or not. Defend what you think: to be great, does an act need to be big and grand, or can it be small, and designed to make a more modest repair?
- After rescuing Thin Mint, Zeke privately reflects on the fact that he has not done anything plainly nice for someone besides Nate in as long as he can remember. Then he wonders if he would have even done this latest act if it hadn't been for the camera. Share your thoughts about Zeke's reflection at this point in the story.

## 18. PUT IN ONE'S PLACE

**Vocabulary:** coda, jaunts

- On page 213 Zeke is riding in the car listening to somber news clips. Zeke wonders to himself: "Was it even possible to do enough good in the world to cancel all the bad?" What would you say to Zeke if you were discussing this together?
- While Zeke is pushing shopping carts back to their corrals, he thinks about the dirty dishes he left in the sink for his mother. Why is this a significant thought for him to have?





➤ On page 215 Zeke says that the problem with the world today is: “Everybody assumes someone else will come along and fix the problem, whatever it is.” What do you think about this statement?

➤ So far, this contest is changing not only the way Zeke acts, but also how he thinks. What internal shifts do you see happening that are positive?

➤ Why do you think Logan stops recording in the parking lot?

## 19. ONE GOOD TURN

**Vocabulary:** martyr, terse, sate, vehemently

➤ Are you surprised by the thoughts Jackie reveals about going away to college?

➤ What do we learn about Logan in this chapter?

➤ Zeke reflects on loving to listen to stories read aloud to him, even though he is a strong reader. The experience of reading independently is different from listening to a story. Which do you prefer: reading alone or listening to someone read aloud to you?

➤ Why do you think Logan secretly fixes the air conditioner for the Stahl family?

## 20. K IS FOR KLEPTO

**Vocabulary:** insuperable, timpani, contrived

➤ Compare the video of Zeke reading with Logan to the video clips of him doing his other planned scenes. Why does Zeke feel like seeing the footage of him reading with Logan somehow lessens the magic of that moment?

➤ On page 249 Notts calls to let Zeke know that Kyo is disqualified. During this conversation, Notts says that the algorithm can't account for everything. What does Zeke think Notts is trying to say about him?

➤ What is your reaction to Kyo's disqualification?

## 21. BELIZE IT OR NOT

➤ Jackie is constantly taking care of herself and her younger siblings, so why does she react the way she does when Mom asks her to get milk the next time she is at the store? What is Jackie needing at that moment?

➤ How is Zeke's reaction to watching the videos of the other contestants different now?

➤ On page 257 Zeke wonders if people are only good when they know someone is watching them. How would you answer this question?

➤ Why do you think Jackie ripped all her posters down?





## 22. A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE ATTEMPTS

**Vocabulary:** retrospect, inevitable, incur, pantheon, adversity, orthodontia, facsimile

- Why does Zeke think viewers will be so impressed with his odd feats?
- Zeke quickly thought up new stunts for the day. What does his style of planning and executing those plans say about him?
- What cues is Zeke missing from Logan today?
- Do you notice Logan and Zeke's relationship shifting again? If so, how?
- Logan apologizes for using the footage of Zeke reading with Logan. He explains that he thought it would help show another side of Zeke. What is Logan getting at here? Do you think Logan was in the right, or did he break trust?

## 23. BETTER FROM A DISTANCE

**Vocabulary:** reverent

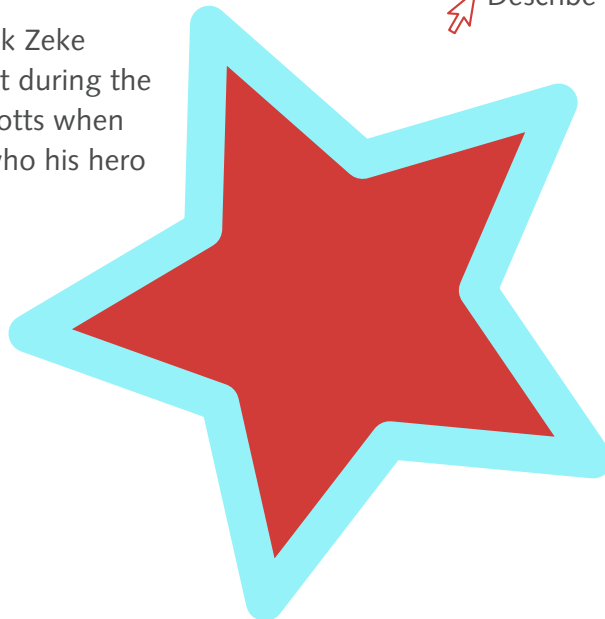
- Zeke has seemed in many ways to be self-centered through this story. Find evidence on page 287 that shows Zeke beginning to think beyond himself.
- Why do you think Zeke stiffens in his seat during the interview with Notts when Notts asks him who his hero is? [PAGE 290]

- Here are Zeke's criteria for choosing a hero: "You pick the one who's there for you. Who shows up. Every day. For real." [PAGE 291] Based on those qualities, who is a hero to you?
- Why do you think Notts asks Zeke why he didn't choose his dad as his hero?
- This is the chapter in which we learn why Zeke's dad is not in the story. Zeke's built-up emotion spills out at this point. He says his father was not a hero. After hearing the story do you agree with Zeke, or not?

## 24. PROMISES TO KEEP

**Vocabulary:** enshrouding, hoarding

- Do you think Zeke expected his mother's reaction to watching the video in which he said she was his hero? What do you make of it?
- On page 320 Zeke thinks about how his mother still spritzes his father's cologne when she thinks no one is looking. A tangible item can help us hold on to someone. Think about someone you love. What item would you hold onto bring you comfort when you were missing them most?
- Describe the sad irony in Dad's final message.





## 25. ALL EXPENSES PAID

**Vocabulary:** relish, regaled, facades, stoically, stint, instantaneous

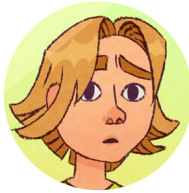
- How does Zeke begin to heal his family in this chapter? What is his grand gesture?
- Why do you think it was easier for Mom to hide away the cedar box of postcards?
- On page 343 Zeke realizes the truth: that he simply couldn't lose. What does he mean by this?
- At the end of this chapter, Logan hands Zeke a flash drive. Zeke knows Notts won't be happy. What do you think is on that flash drive, and why do you think Zeke wants it?
- "Some things don't have to stop even when you think you've reached the end." [PAGE 346] What is the significance of this line at this point in the story?

## 26. AND THE WINNER IS

**Vocabulary:** trounced

- Think back to the first Monopoly game played between Zeke, Nate, and Jackie. Mom just trounced all three kids in Monopoly. Even though all three kids lost, why do you think this game might have been more enjoyable?
- Now you know what was on the flash drive. What is your reaction to Zeke's final video?
- Did you assume that Zeke was putting on his special family day as one final hope at being named The Greatest Kid in the World? Knowing that he did not include it in the video, does that change your impressions of his actions?
- On pages 354-55 Zeke's mom is giving him some directions and reminders for the day. What big shift is occurring here?
- Why do you think Zeke is now ready to put the cedar box in the living room, with the lid open?
- Who writes the final postcard in the book, and who is it written to? What stands out to you in this message?



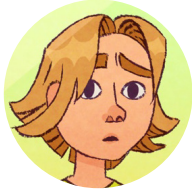


## AFTER READING: FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- How or why do you think Zeke receives the letter inviting him to be a contestant in the Greatest Kid in the World competition?
- What was your initial thought about where Zeke's dad is? How does the author slowly shift our thinking about Zeke's dad?
- Zeke is nominated for The Greatest Kid in the World competition. How does the contest take on new meaning if the emphasis goes from The Greatest Kid in the World to The Greatest Kid in the World? Might Zeke have a better shot at winning the second one? Explain.
- Zeke grows a lot in this story. He becomes more reflective and starts to change some of his scheming ways. Zeke shifts his thinking about what is most important in life. The contest got him started on this path, but in the end, it's Zeke himself that makes the changes. Do you think Zeke should feel proud of his growth? Do you think he would have changed without the contest? Why or why not?
- It feels like Zeke's nomination to be named The Greatest Kid in the World is a long shot. But it has a major impact on him, nonetheless. Describe the ways the family begins to heal and come together in this story.
- Zeke might not have been a clear candidate for The Greatest Kid in the World competition, but through the process, he becomes a greater kid. What are some of the most significant signs of growth you notice in Zeke?
- In the author's Acknowledgements he shares a quotation from Teddy Roosevelt: "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are." How can you live by those words? Do you agree that they could be the starting point for being great?







## SCHOOL & LIBRARY EXTENSIONS:

### ★ YOU'RE GREAT, TOO!

Celebrate your own greatness. Design a poster, or create a video, promoting yourself as The Greatest Kid in the World. What would you highlight about yourself?

### POSTCARDS FROM DAD

Everyone loves getting mail! Find a local postcard and write a message to someone. It doesn't have to be someone far away!

### TIME TO SCHEME

Author John David Anderson came up with a lot of funny pranks and stunts for Zeke to pull off. Write about your own pranks or stunts or dream up one you wish you could pull off!

### CRUNCH SOME NUMBERS

Throughout the book there are descriptions of many things in and around Zeke's home that are damaged or broken. Keep a running list as you read. Then price out the cost of each item. Zeke has the opportunity to win \$10,000 in The Greatest Kid in the World competition. How much of that prize money would be needed to fix or replace all broken items?

### DAD JOKES

Dad ends his postcards with "Dad Jokes" when he writes to his family. Compile a list of cheesy jokes you like and share them with others! For added flair, illustrate the jokes in comic style panels.

### THE POWER OF BOOKS

*Winnie-the-Pooh* has a significant place in this story. Books are powerful, and this particular book has special meaning to Zeke and to Logan. Think of a book that you love. Write a recommendation encouraging young readers to read that book.



[www.walden.com/books](http://www.walden.com/books)

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

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

This Discussion Guide was written by Nicole Levesque, an elementary school teacher in Maine. Nicole earned her BS in Elementary Education from the University of Maine at Farmington and her MS Ed. in Literacy Education from the University of Southern Maine. She served on the Maine Student Book Award Committee for 10 years and has spent 5 years serving as a Cybils Award Round One Judge in the fiction picture book and board book category. She is the author of the blog **Bluestocking Thinking**.