

The Kids Under the Stairs

Ben Y

and the Ghost in the Machine

< K.A. Holt >

9781452183213 · \$17.99 HC · Grades 5-8
F&P Text Level Gradient: X · Lexile® Measure: NP

ABOUT THE BOOK

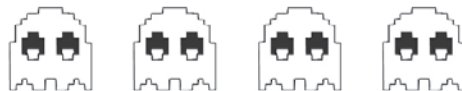
School and life have become much more difficult since Ben Y's older brother died, especially since the indefinable Ace seems determined to seek her out without clarifying what kind of relationship she wants. Ben Y tries to cope with her situation by going to a gaming chatroom and obsessively typing messages to her brother who is no longer there. When she starts getting messages from a ghost in the machine (apparently) she worries that her deepest secrets are now exposed. With a lovable cast of characters and raw, authentic emotion, this heartwarming, laugh-out-loud novel in verse tells an honest story about friendship, family, and personal identity that celebrates different types of intelligence and shows how every kid deserves to become their own "divergent" self.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.A. Holt is the author of *Rhyme Schemer*, *House Arrest*, *Knockout*, *Redwood and Ponytail*, and *BenBee and the Teacher Griefer*, along with several other books for young people. She lives in Austin, Texas, and is active within the vibrant Texas writing community.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This teacher guide contains discussion questions and activities aligned with the Common Core State Standards. See inside for reference to the Reading and Writing standards and grade-specific standards.



NOTES ON THE GENRE AND STRUCTURAL FEATURES

- Novels in verse are a hybrid form that combines the devices of a novel with the structures of poetry.
- Joy Alexander argues that “(t)he most prominent feature of the verse novel is voice,” and this is certainly the case with *Ben Y and The Ghost Machine*.¹
- In this novel, there is a single narrator.
- Other novels in verse that are excellent to recommend to your students are: *Bronx Masquerade*, *Inside Out and Back Again*, *The Crossover*, *Love that Dog*, *Garvey’s Choice*, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, and *Moo*.²
- This book also includes chat conversations, as well as a rough draft of a newspaper story, so the novel is not entirely in verse. Non-standard English is used in the chat conversations.
- Finally, this book is non-linear, with some of the chat conversations happening in the past. This is worth pointing out to and/or discussing with your students, and it may create confusion for lower readers, students with IEPs, and/or English Language Learners.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Cover Art

Facilitate a conversation in which students examine the cover art of *Ben Y and the Ghost in the Machine*. Utilize the following probing questions to explore what students can infer about the book based on the cover illustration and subtitle:

- What do you notice about the poster on the cover? What feeling do you get from it? Does it match with the idea of safe space?
- What do you notice about the subtitle? Does it connect to any of the art on the cover? What might you predict about “the kids under the stairs”?

Gallery Walk

Facilitate a gallery walk in which students are instructed to write and reflect upon their previous knowledge of, connections to, and questions about key words and phrases central to the novel. Suggested words and phrases to explore include: non-binary, divergent, safe space, bully, grief, friend.

Flash Research Projects

Have students research a famous historical non-binary, trans, or neurodivergent person, or a type of neurodivergence. Some suggestions for research topics follow below.

- important trans and non-binary people:³
 - Marsha P. Johnson
 - Kate Bornstein
 - Judith Butler
 - Alex MacFarlane
 - Mauree Turner
 - We’wha

¹Source: <https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v39n1/cadden.html>

²Source: <https://readingmiddlegrade.com/middle-grade-novels-in-verse/>

³Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_people_with_non-binary_gender_identities

- important neurodiverse people⁴:
 - Temple Grandin
 - Alan Turing
 - Mozart
 - Benjamin Banneker
 - Satoshi Tajiri
 - Emma Watson
- types of neurodiversity:
 - ADHD
 - ADD
 - Dyslexia
 - Dyscalculia
 - Autism

Have students circulate through several jigsaw groups so that they can share their “elevator pitch” on their research topic and learn from others. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7

DURING READING: TEXT-BASED QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- After reading the first “Before” and “Now” sections, have students generate a list of what they know, as a class, about the characters and world of this novel. Then have them generate a list of questions and predictions. As you read the novel with students, update the list to answer existing questions, confirm or correct predictions, and ask new questions. The author slowly reveals the world of the novel, so it’s important that students are continually reminded of what they have learned and what they may still be wondering about.
- As a class, trace the safe space motif throughout the novel. Discuss the safe spaces that are mentioned, who they are safe for, and the larger themes the author is able to reveal through use of this motif. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2
- Holt uses flashbacks throughout the novel to slowly reveal more about Ben Y and illuminate her current situation. Ask students to answer the following discussion questions:
 - What does each flashback contribute to the story? What do we learn about Ben Y and her past? How is this memory significant in her present-day life? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5
- After reading “Back at School,” instruct students to create a character portrait about one of the following secondary characters: Ms. J, Mr. Mann, Jordan, Ace, Ben B, Javier, Esme, or Mom. The character portrait should be in the form of a found poem. Have students incorporate a minimum of 10 lines or phrases from the text to create their found poem portraits. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6
- At the end of the novel, Ben Y is told that she hasn’t been a good friend to Jordan, and she also communicates to Ace that they haven’t been a good friend to her. As a class, use textual evidence from the novel to develop a definition and/or checklist for a good friend. Then lead the class in a discussion about whether or not everyone agrees with the author’s ideas about friendship. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1
- Throughout the novel, Mr. Mann is positioned as the antagonist. Lead the class in a discussion about how he differs from a classical antagonist and how Holt challenges the idea of a “bad guy.” Have students use textual evidence to prove that Mr. Mann is the antagonist and also to show how he doesn’t easily fit the definition of a bad guy. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL1

⁴Source: <https://scribe.uccs.edu/5-inspiring-famous-and-historical-neurodivergent-figures/>

- Ask students to “translate” one section of the book into prose. Have them read the original text aloud, and then their translation. Then ask them to discuss what difference, or impact, the verse structure has on the reading experience. **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5**
- Read the excerpt on pages 117–119, starting with “Beige is a color, sure. / It blandly blends, / and it blends blandly” and ending with “maybe / just maybe / the safety / of being the same is better than / the danger of being you.” As a class, discuss how the author uses figurative language, particularly personification and alliteration, to describe the beige blob at Ben Y’s school and its impact. **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4**
- Ben Y and her friends are characterized as being abnormal or divergent. Ask students to describe how Mann’s perspective on Ben Y’s unconventionality differs from Ms. J’s opinion. Then ask students to discuss how they treat people who are different from them. **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2**
- In 2014, the Centers for Disease Control and the Department of Education released the first federal definition of bullying. The definition includes three core elements:
 - unwanted aggressive behavior
 - observed or perceived power imbalance
 - repetition or high likelihood of repetition of bullying behaviors
- This definition helps determine whether an incident is bullying or another type of aggressive behavior, such as one-time physical fights, online arguments, or incidents between adults.
- Some bullying actions can fall into criminal categories, such as harassment, hazing, or assault⁵. Based on this definition, ask students to identify any bullies in the novel. Have them use evidence from the novel as well as the CDC’s definition to support their argument. **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1**
- The adults in this novel defy simplification. Have students choose an adult character from the novel—Ms. J, Mr. Mann, or Ben Y’s mom—and describe them by identifying scenes from the novel in which they are sympathetic as well as scenes from the novel in which they are unkind or unsympathetic. Lead the class in a discussion about the theme the author is exploring by revealing multiple aspects of her characters. **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2**
- At the end of the novel, Ben Y’s mom agrees to let her move into Bernicio’s room. Ask students to answer the following discussion questions:
 - What is the symbolism of this decision? How does this symbolic move connect to the final scene between Ben Y and Esme? **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5**

AFTER READING: CROSS-CURRICULAR, CREATIVE, AND RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

- Lead the class in the following exercise:
 - Your principal is concerned about bullying at your school and wants to create more safe spaces for all students. Have students consider the flaws of Mr. Mann’s attempts to create a safe space with a zero-tolerance policy for bullying, and then work in a group to develop a true anti-bullying campaign at your school. Then have students work together to write a letter to your principal advocating that they adopt the proposal. Encourage the class to consider which kids at your school might feel least safe, and what would make them feel safer. Have students research anti-bullying campaigns and use them to inform their proposal. **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9**
- Ann Sexton’s poem “Consorting with Angels” explores the idea of gender and the gender binary. As a class, discuss how both Sexton and Ben Y question the concept of the gender assigned to them at birth. **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9**

⁵Source: https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/facts#_Definition_of_Bullying

- In a novel about being an outsider, Ace is the ultimate outsider—an outsider of the group of outsiders. Lead the class in a discussion about how the novel would be different if told from Ace’s perspective. Have students pick a pivotal moment from the novel—like when Ben Y distributes the unauthorized *The Hart Times* or when Ms. J rips down the Planet Safe Space wall—and rewrite the scene from Ace’s perspective rather than Ben Y’s.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.3
- Mr. Mann and Ben Y both want to prevent bullying, but they have different ideas about what makes a space safe. Mr. Mann wants uniformity, while Ben Y wants to celebrate and allow for difference. Many schools base their dress codes off of ideas similar to Mr. Mann’s way of thinking. This logic purports that if students wear uniforms or have a similar dress code, they won’t be bullied for what they wear. Have students write a persuasive essay taking a side on the debate about uniforms and dress codes. Do they create more safety for students by limiting opportunities for bullying? Ask students to use their personal experience and interviews with other students and adults at your school to support their opinion.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9
- Holt leaves her readers with a cliffhanger; we never find out how Mr. Mann responds to Ben Y’s Admin Spotlight of him. Ask students to write another section of the novel that reveals his reaction and shows whether he doubles down on his commitment to uniformity or changes his policies to make space for difference. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.3

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION NOTES

- Ben Y’s experience is impacted by her various identities, which are slowly revealed over the course of the novel. As readers, we are able to infer that she is non-binary, Latinx, and neurodivergent (specifically, she has dyslexia).
- It’s important to read ahead in the novel so that you know when various parts of Ben Y’s identity will be revealed to students. For instance, we can conclude that Ben Y is Latinx because her mom calls her *mija*, her last name is Ybarra, and her siblings also have traditionally Latinx names.
- If you yourself are not familiar and/or comfortable with current respectful language used to discuss non-binary/trans people, neurodivergent people, and/or Latinx people, seek out resources and practice your language before engaging in discussion with your students.⁶
- Recognize that gender and ability are often invisible identities, and you most likely do have students in your classroom who are non-binary, genderqueer, trans, and/or neurodivergent, and you may not know it. You very likely have students who are questioning their gender and who may have undiagnosed learning differences. It’s important to consider how you will protect and celebrate those students as you read this book, even if you may not know who they are.

ABOUT THE GUIDE CREATOR

This guide was created by Jessica Majerus, an teacher at a public charter school in Oakland, California. She has had the honor and privilege of being an educator for 17 years and is a lifelong bibliophile who is grateful for books, which were her escape from a challenging childhood and have opened up worlds and possibilities beyond what she ever could have imagined.

⁶Source: <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/publications/best-practices-for-serving-lgbtq-students/section-ii-classroom-culture>