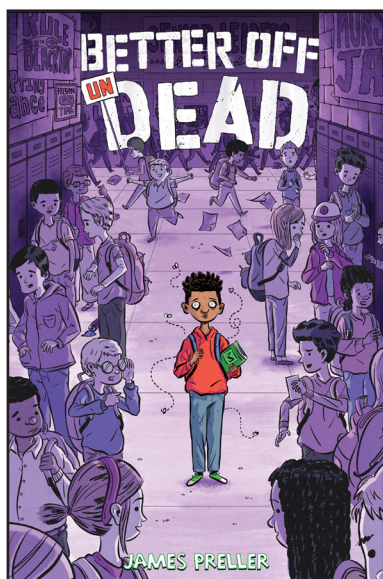


BETTER OFF DEAD

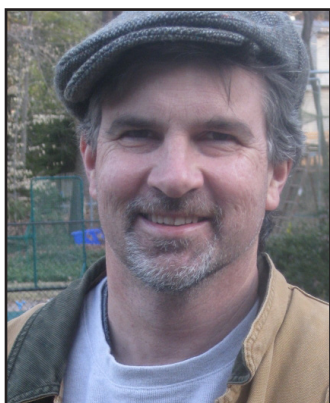
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ABOUT THE BOOK

Adrian Lazarus has met with a curious fate. He's returned from the dead (after a bad bike accident, no helmet), yet not a lot has changed. He's always been an outcast. But it's not just being a zombie that makes Adrian feel different. He notices the world has changed, too: bees are vanishing, forest fires are burning, super-flus are spreading. The holographic advertisements in the night sky assure people that all is well. Adrian and his friends—a beekeeping boy, a mysterious new girl, and a seventh-grade sleuth—aren't so sure. When they discover a birdlike drone has been spying on Adrian, the clues lead two powerful corporate moguls. What do they really want?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JAMES PRELLER is the author of numerous books, including the acclaimed novels *The Courage Test*, *The Fall*, *Bystander*, and *Six Innings*, as well as the Scary Tales and Jigsaw Jones series. He travels throughout the country visiting schools and book festivals. He lives in Delmar, New York, with his wife and their children. You can visit him online at jamespreller.com.

ABOUT THE GUIDE

Better Off Undead is the latest of James Preller's middle-grade fiction books. Although it contains elements of fantasy, it provides a realistic portrayal of middle school and the complex issues students of that age deal with: fitting in, dealing with bullies, finding one's true self, making sense of the world. The characters are relatable, appealing, and often humorous. It can be included in a James Preller author study, along with *The Courage Test*, *The Fall*, *Bystander*, and *Six Innings*.

This book can be used in many instructional contexts: as a read-aloud, in small groups or book clubs, or for independent reading. Students should take notes and respond to questions in their reading notebooks for the before, during, and after reading activities.

This guide is intended to support your classroom instruction. The standards listed throughout the guide reflect the standards for grade five, but the activities and questions can be applied to grades four through eight. Please adapt the activities and questions as needed to meet the needs of your students. You know your students better than anyone else!

BEFORE READING ACTIVITIES

Previewing the Text

Prior to reading, refer students to the quotes and dedication pages at the beginning of the book. Discuss the meaning of the quotes and the dedication with them. Ask how they think each one might connect to the story. Record their responses on chart paper.

After students finish reading the book, have a class discussion that revisits these questions. Encourage students to add to or amend their responses based on their reading of the text. They should cite specific and relevant details to support their thinking.

CCSS.RL.5.1 Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.RL.5.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.

CCSS.SL.5.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Determining the Importance of Names

Writers often choose character names that are derived from the Bible or Greek and Roman mythology. These names often have significance because of these references. Display these characters' names on the board or document camera:

- Adrian **Lazarus**
- **Gia** (derived from **Gaia**) **Demeter**
- **Zander** (derived from **Alexander**) Donnelly
- Dr. **Noah** Halpert

Divide students into groups and assign each group a character's name. They research its origin and meaning and write a brief synopsis of their findings that they share with the whole class.

Encourage students to take notes during their reading of the book about whether they think each name aptly fits the character. Provide an opportunity for students to share their ideas after reading the book, citing specific details from the text to support their statements.

CCSS.RL.5.1 Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.RL.5.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.

CCSS.SL.5.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.L.5.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 5 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapters 1 through 13:

1. Read chapter 1, "Mirror, Mirror." In your notebook, write what you know so far about Adrian and about how things are changing in the world. What questions do you have? As you read the book, make note of any answers to your questions and add any new questions you may have.
2. How is Adrian similar to the other seventh graders? How is he different?
3. What are Zander's concerns about the environment? Who else shares his concerns?
4. What is Gia's explanation for Daryl's aggressive behavior? Do you agree? Explain your answer.

Chapters 14 through 26:

1. Why does Adrian wonder if he is part of something larger going on in the world?
2. How does Talal come into Adrian's life? What does Talal discover about who is spying on Adrian?
3. How does Gia change after being stung by bees? What do you think the queen bee means when she says, "It all connects"?
4. Why does Zander's cousin Clare have a problem with the Cinderella tale? How does she influence Adrian's thinking about his true self?

Chapters 27 through 39:

1. Why do Adrian and his friends decide to stop Daryl? Why do you think they have the courage to do this?
2. What do the Bork brothers want from Adrian? How does his escape from their mansion make him afraid of what he is becoming?
3. How does Adrian's encounter with the fox and the dead rabbit in the woods prove to be a turning point for how he feels about his life?
4. How do the friends triumph over Daryl and the Bork brothers?

CCSS.RL.5.1 Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.RL.5.2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.

CCSS.RL.5.3 Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).

CCSS.SL.5.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

AFTER READING ACTIVITIES

Developing Themes

James Preller explores many topics in *Better Off Undead*, including the ability of the individual to change the world, being different and fitting in, the outer and the inner self, acceptance and rejection, the connections among living things, friendship, and environmental issues. Generate other topics with students.

Explain to them that a theme is the author's main idea or underlying message about a topic and that a book may contain many themes. Students choose a topic and determine what they think Preller's underlying message is about it. They write an essay that states the theme and details how it is developed throughout the book, citing specific evidence from the text to support their ideas. Provide time for students to share their essays with the class. Encourage them to summarize each essay, ask questions, challenge assumptions, and state whether they agree or disagree with the writer.

CCSS.RL.5.1 Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.RL.5.2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.

CCSS.SL.5.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.SL.5.3 Summarize the points a speaker makes and explain how each claim is supported by reasons and evidence.

CCSS.W.5.1 Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.

CCSS.W.5.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.W.5.9a Apply grade 5 Reading standards to literature (e.g., "Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or a drama, drawing on specific details in the text [e.g., how characters interact]").

Writing Sequels

Explain to students that a sequel is a narrative that continues a story or further develops a theme in a story. Have them review their notebook entries for any unanswered questions or wonderings they have about the plot, characters, and themes in this book. Students write short narratives that tell what might happen next. Display these sequels in the classroom library for other students to read and comment upon.

CCSS.W.5.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

CCSS.W.5.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Comparing Characters

Students choose two characters in the story and write a brief piece that compares and contrasts these two characters, including specific details from the text that explains how they interact with each other. Provide time for students to share their writing with a partner or in a small group.

CCSS.RL.5.3 Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).

Making Literary Connections

There are many references to the movie *The Wizard of Oz* in *Better Off Undead*, including plot developments and characters. Provide time for the students to watch the movie. While they watch the movie, have them take notes about elements in the movie that are found in the book, including connections between the characters. After viewing the movie, have students meet in small groups to share their ideas, using their notes as reference.

CCSS.RL.5.5 Explain how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fits together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem.

CCSS. RL.5.9 Compare and contrast stories in the same genre (e.g., mysteries and adventure stories) on their approaches to similar themes and topics.

CCSS.SL.5.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Conducting Research

Make a list with students of the changes in the world that Adrian and his friends are concerned about, including global warming, diminishing species, genetically modified food, contaminated water, rising carbon levels, dying coral reefs, the use of pesticides, and the loss of privacy in the digital age.

Have students choose a topic of interest to them and conduct a research project about that topic, including the effects it has on people, animals, and the environment and steps that need to be taken to prevent further damage. They display their reports on posters and include pictures or illustrations. Provide time for them to present their projects to the whole class.

CCSS.RI.5.7 Draw on information from multiple print or digital sources, demonstrating the ability to locate an answer to a question quickly or to solve a problem efficiently.

CCSS.RI.5.9 Integrate information from several texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.

CCSS.SL.5.4 Report on a topic or text or present an opinion, sequencing ideas logically and using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace.

CCSS.W.5.7 Conduct short research projects that use several sources to build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic.

This guide was written by Barbara McLaughlin, M.Ed., M.A., Literacy Consultant and former Senior Program Director for Elementary ELA in the Boston Public Schools.