

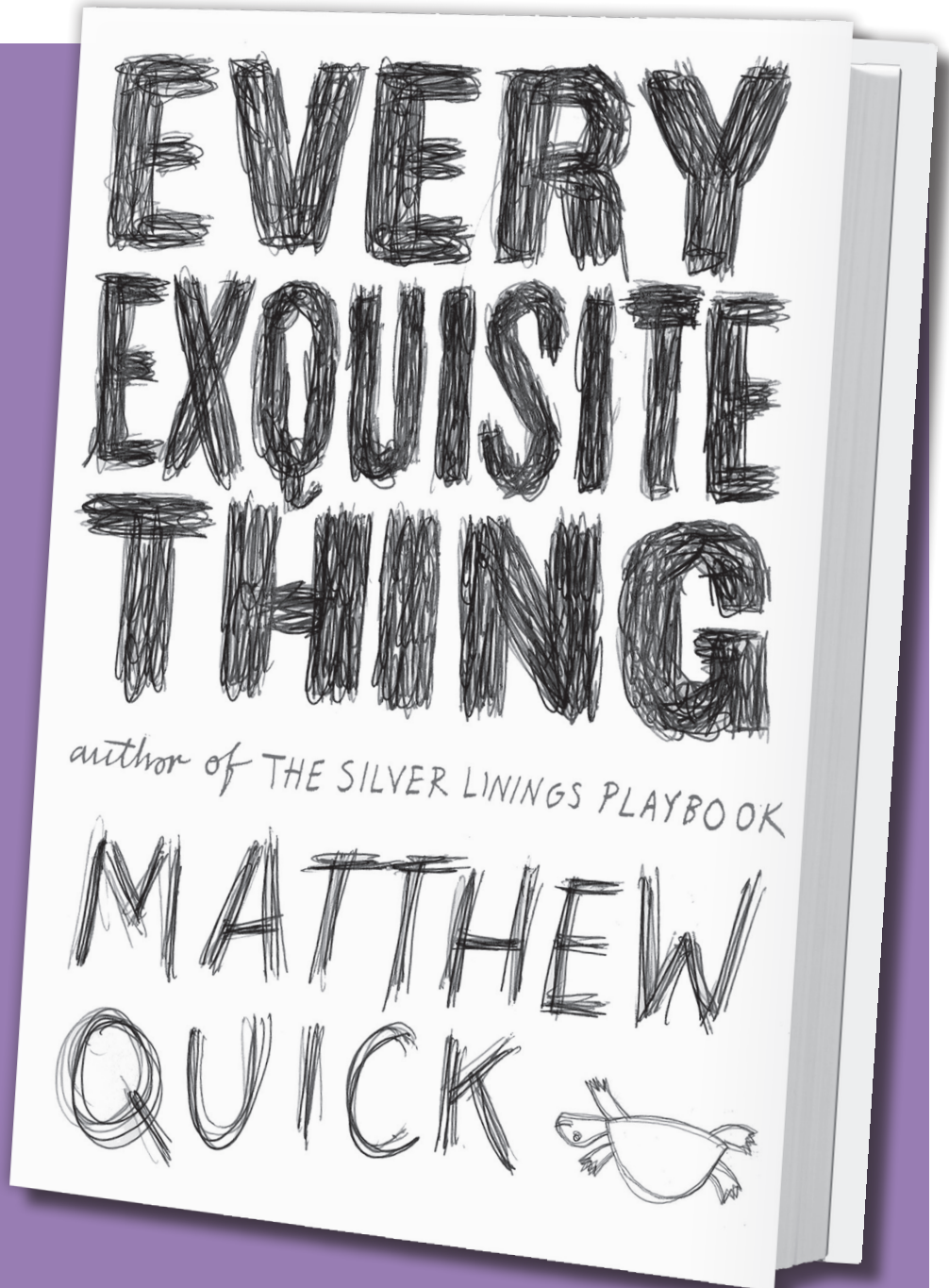
EVERY EXQUISITE THING

Curriculum connections

- ❖ Poetry
- ❖ Vocabulary
- ❖ Mental Health
- ❖ Identity

Ages 15 & up

by
Matthew Quick



CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

APPROACHES TO USING *EVERY EXQUISITE THING* IN THE CLASSROOM

Consider *Every Exquisite Thing* as the core selection for a literary unit involving the theme of coming of age. Exposure to literature that illustrates this theme offers numerous possibilities for helping your students connect their own lives to what is universal about growing up. Use the book to anchor a text set that includes poetry, essay, short fiction or coming of age film viewing. Or create curricular connections by gathering unifying texts around one of the book's many issues and themes such as mental health, aggression and violence, rebellion, youth culture, friendship, love, fear, conformity, family relationships, mentors, and identity.

As students read and identify themes and ideas of the novel, they can work alone or in small groups to build text sets that focus on exploring the themes and issues that are of particular interest to them. As they build their text sets, they should note why they included each resource and what specific connections it helped them to make. Make student-created text sets available to the entire class to help broaden knowledge and perspectives on a variety of topics.

BEFORE READING

Increase students' recognition of how they are influenced by social pressures to conform and their knowledge of conformity with this activity.

Don't mention anything to students about an activity or start a discussion about conformity. Begin your class normally, then create a situation where a few students leave the room for a few minutes. While they are out of the classroom, instruct the remaining students to stand at their seats while you continue with your lesson. When the students return, the class continues and your lesson proceeds with the standing students ignoring those that have returned. The likely result is that the returning students will go back to their seats, continue standing, blend in, and remain standing. After a few minutes, ask everyone to sit down.

What did standing students observe about the behavior of the students who returned to the classroom? Why does conformity exist? Talk about how conforming means following a group's behavior as a result of real or imagined unspoken group pressure. Ask students to share some reasons

why people conform. What motivates or influences people to conform? Have them give examples of what influences them or share instances of going along with the crowd. How do they feel about pressures to conform?

For further exploration on conformity, you might have students take a look at the classic study by Solomon Asch (simplypsychology.org/asch-conformity.html), check out some modern experiments in breaking social norms on YouTube, or use this lesson plan to have them to conduct their own experiment in breaking social norm of dress/appropriate attire (asanet.org/introtosociology/LessonPlans/Lesson%20PlanBreakingSocialNorm.htm).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why have Mr. Graves and Nanette been eating alone together in his classroom for months? Do you think their relationship is unusual? Why or why not? Why do you think Mr. Graves give Nanette his copy of *The Bubblegum Reaper* wrapped as a gift? Mr. Graves tells Nanette that *The Bubblegum Reaper* is "a rite of passage for weirdos like us" (p. 13), but what else might he have been trying to do in giving Nanette the book and introducing her to Booker?
2. Why did Booker title his novel *The Bubblegum Reaper*? From Nanette's description, does it sound like a book that you would want to read? Why or why not?
3. How does society typically depict the ideal family? Give examples from stories, television, and film. What is your definition of "good" parents? Does Nanette have "good" parents? How do her parents influence her? What expectations do Nanette's parents have for her? How do they communicate their expectations? Offer specific examples from the book.
4. Why do you think Nanette uses her soccer playing to keep her relationship with her father alive? Can you think of other ways she might have tried to connect with him? What are other things Nanette does just to please her parents? What are some things you've done just to please someone else or spend time with him or her?
5. What are Mr. Graves and Booker able to give Nanette that her parents can't? What is she seeking? How are these friendships a substitute for her family?

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6. What is the difference between manipulating people and influencing them? How does Booker influence and/or manipulate Nanette and Alex? Who or what else has influenced Nanette? Nanette is not influenced by crowd mentality when it comes to drinking or sex, but seems to think most people around her are. “Maybe Shannon would do whatever an older man told her to do.” (p. 71) Explain the irony in that statement.
7. In their quest to solve the “mystery” of *The Bubblegum Reaper*, Nanette, Alex, and Oliver uncover numerous similarities between the character Wrigley and the high school experiences of Booker, its author. Yet Booker stresses that he is not Wrigley and Wrigley is not him. What then does Booker mean by always saying, “There is no such thing as fiction” (p. 96)?
8. Compare and contrast Nanette and Alex’s reasons for rebellion. Find evidence in the text of differences and similarities in how they carry out their acts of rebellion. What other experiences do they have in common?
9. Booker encourages Nanette and Alex to read “Annus Mirabilis,” a sexually explicit poem by Philip Larkin. Is this appropriate? Or has Booker crossed a line? How do you know where the line is? Should this line exist? What about the line that Nanette crossed in kissing Mr. Graves? Do you think there should be exceptions—instances when it is acceptable to cross a line? Share an example.
10. Booker knows that *The Bubblegum Reaper*’s ‘come be with me, come be like me’ siren call invites trouble, yet over the years, he has continued to connect with readers—often with disastrous results. What are his motives in befriending Nanette and Alex? Why does he think things might be different this time? And what are his motives in putting Nanette and Alex together?
11. Both Alex and Nanette are completely obsessed with *The Bubblegum Reaper*. Do you believe that fictional characters can influence people’s behavior? Do you think writers are responsible for how their characters influence behavior, especially if the behavior is bad? Why or why not?
12. What effect does seeing Alex in jail have on Nanette? What do you think she has realized about him and about herself? Why do you think Nanette finally breaks down and tells her parents everything?
13. Why was Part I of the book told in past tense? What is the author trying to convey about Nanette by changing the narrative to present tense in Part II?
14. Do you agree with June that it was not Nanette’s (or June’s) responsibility to save Alex? Why or why not? What would you have done about Alex’s climbing if you knew and felt what Nanette did? Why do you think Nanette feels she must get Officer Damon’s opinion as to whether she’s responsible for Alex’s death? What does she want from Officer Damon and why does what he says resonate with Nanette?
15. Nanette had been unhappy pretending to be someone she wasn’t, yet in her “experiment” she deliberately pretends to be someone she’s not. Why does she choose “to be a joiner” instead of taking her own path? Is she repressing her rebel personality or rebelling against it? In having his character undertake this experiment, do you think the author is approving or criticizing his character’s behavior?
16. Discuss the novel as a coming-of-age story. How does Nanette’s character change during the course of the novel? How does this novel relate to or compare with other coming-of-age stories, such as *Catcher in the Rye*?
17. Alex says to Nanette, “. . . we wouldn’t even know each other if it weren’t for *The Bubblegum Reaper*.” In what ways does art such as novels, poetry and films bring people together? How does art also have the power to drive people apart?
18. The title of Matthew Quick’s novel is derived from a famous line in Oscar Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic.” What does the word “exquisite” mean? What happens to Nanette that could be described as exquisite? And what are the tragedies behind those exquisite things?



EXQUISITE ACTIVITIES

Identity Maps

Nanette and Alex talk about their parents as maps that they don't want to follow. But can you plan for the future without understanding the now? Have students create an Identity Map that shows their values, interests, and the roles they play to help them think about what they have and what they want to achieve in the future.

Ask students to draw a circle in the center of a piece of paper. Have them write their name in the circle. Here they should also write about those behaviors, interests, values, and skills that make them unique and best describe how they see themselves.

Have students draw a ring around the first circle. Inside that ring, they should list the roles they have chosen that resonate with them as an individual and any affiliations (political, religious, etc.) they have made.

Students should add one final outer ring with words that describe attributes they have, but were not ones they chose, such as age, physical characteristics, etc. In this ring students can also add words that family or friends might use to describe them.

In any or all circles, students should include those family members, mentors, friends, teachers, musicians, authors, actors, characters, heroes, etc., who affected their identity. Students should feel free to add illustrations or photos and use color to represent themselves as they choose. Hang all the maps on a wall and let students explore, discover, and discuss commonalities.

It's All an Allusion

Throughout the book, the author makes a significant number of literary allusions, and references a good many poets and novelists. Ask students for their thoughts on what are some of the most significant allusions. How do these references to authors and works of literature help deepen their understanding of the characters? The questions below can be used for small group discussion or offered to students as reflective writing or drawing prompts.

Picture Perfect

As mentioned above, the title *Every Exquisite Thing* is taken from Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic." In Wilde's novel, the handsome Dorian Gray is obsessed with his beautiful portrait. Over time, as Dorian leads a more and more depraved lifestyle, the portrait exhibits the corruption of Dorian's soul while he himself remains young and attractive. The now-hideous portrait haunts Dorian Gray—not because he is remorseful, but because he wants his picture to be beautiful again. The beauty of the portrait is restored only when Dorian tries to destroy it.

- How is this relevant to the idea of Booker as Wrigley in *The Bubblegum Reaper*? Imagine and create a dialog between Booker and Sandra where Booker explains his own attempts at rebuilding his life and moving forward since the publication of his book.
- Did *The Bubblegum Reaper* inspire Alex to be something he was not? Or do you think there were two Alexes—a real person and a persona? Write a poem from Nanette's point of view about who Alex seemed to be and who she thinks he really is.
- As Nanette conducts her "experiment," she changes her outward appearance. Express the toll Nanette's experiment takes on her true self by drawing a "Portrait of Nanette O'Hare."

It's All Greek to Me

Literature has explored the crisis of adolescence since the early Greeks. How would Nanette fit in a Greek tragedy? Read and examine the Greek tragedies referenced in the book—*Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*. Research the traditional structure of Greek tragedy and rewrite Nanette's story as a Greek tragedy. Work with other students to create masks and perform the new tragedy as Readers Theater.

Rocinante

Booker has a pet turtle named Don Quixote, after the central character of the great Spanish novel *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes. The character Don Quixote is a man who does not see the world in realistic terms but prefers to imagine that he is living a life of chivalry, bringing knightly justice to the world. What does Booker's choice of pets and the name for his turtle say about Booker himself? Create, describe, and draw pets and choose pet names from other fictional heroes for Nanette, Alex, and Oliver.

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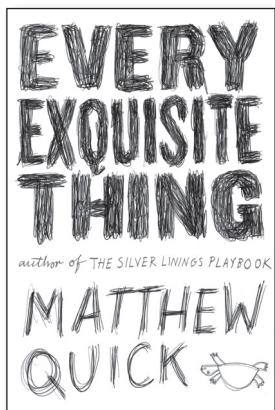
EXQUISITE WRITING PROMPTS

During their first meeting, Booker asks Nanette, “Are you a happy person?” (p. 18) Ask yourself the questions Booker asked Nanette at their first meeting and, thinking about all activities or sports you participate in, write about the one thing you really want to quit. Write it as a letter of resignation—even if the letter is addressed to you.

Alex says, “You can fight everyone who needs fighting or nothing changes! Nothing!” Free-write about a time when you, or one of your friends, have been hurt by bullying. How did you respond? How did you want to respond? Do you know peers or have friends who will stand up to the bully? Who are the adults in your life you can trust to help? How do you think schools should deal with bullying?

Though the phrasing varies, most college application essays essentially ask you to answer the question “Who are you?” Imagine that you are Nanette and that you have decided to answer this question absolutely truthfully, without trying to sell yourself. Then, try writing the same essay as yourself, without trying to focus only on your good points or trying to turn weaknesses into strengths. How do you compare with Nanette? Are you surprised by what you had to say about yourself? How?

about the book



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Also available as a audiobook and ebook

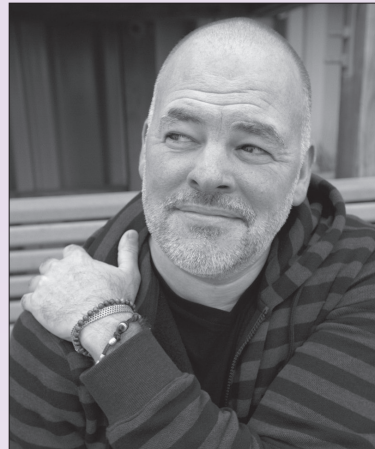
Nanette O’Hare is an unassuming teen who has played the role of dutiful daughter, hardworking student, and star athlete for as long as she can remember. But when a beloved teacher gives her his worn copy of *The Bubblegum Reaper*—a mysterious, out-of-print cult classic—the rebel within Nanette awakens.

As she befriends the reclusive author, falls in love with a young but troubled poet, and attempts to insert her true self into the world with wild abandon, Nanette learns the hard way that rebellion sometimes comes at a high price.

A celebration of the self and the formidable power of story, *Every Exquisite Thing* is Matthew Quick at his finest.

- ★ “Quick continues to excel at writing thought-provoking stories about nonconformity.”
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review
- ★ “This will find a dedicated audience among teen readers.”
—*School Library Journal*, starred review
- ★ “All of the elements of this novel work together to make this an outstanding coming-of-age story...This is a book that readers will want to read twice to take it all in.”
—*Voices of Youth Advocates*, starred review

about the author



Benj Lipchak

Matthew Quick (aka Q) is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Silver Linings Playbook*, *The Good Luck of Right Now*, and three young adult novels, *Sorta Like a Rock Star*, *Boy21*, and *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock*. His work has been translated into thirty languages, and has received a PEN/Hemingway Award Honorable Mention. The Weinstein Company and David O. Russell adapted *The Silver Linings Playbook* into an Academy Award winning film. Q lives in North Carolina. His website is matthewquickwriter.com



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Rachael Walker (belleofthebook.com) created this guide. She consults on a wide variety of educational programs and multimedia projects, with a special focus on children’s literacy, and develops educational materials and reading resources for children, parents, and teachers.