

The
Unlikely
Hero
OF ROOM 13B
TERESA TOTEN

WINNER of the Governor
General's Literary Award,
Children's Literature—Text



DOUBLEDAY
CANADA

A Teacher's Guide



DEAR EDUCATOR:

Teresa Toten sets some tough and topical issues against the backdrop of a traditional whodunit in this engaging new novel that readers will find hard to put down.

Teachers can use the text in a number of ways, including:

- Exploring conceptual and thematic connections such as heroism, courage, family, friendship, truth, faith, hope
- Conducting an in-depth study of character and narrative structure
- As a springboard for engaging students in meaningful and open conversations about mental illness

The activity guide that follows includes discussion questions, writing activities, and prompts to elicit a meaningful understanding of the text. Students will be encouraged to ask and answer questions to clarify and monitor their understanding, identify important ideas, and synthesize information for a broader understanding. The activities and learning prompts can be used for a Social Studies and/or Language Arts unit, or they can be used as stand alone enrichment in whole class and/or small group novel studies.



ABOUT THE BOOK

When Adam meets Robyn at a support group for kids coping with obsessive-compulsive disorder, he is drawn to her almost before he can take a breath. He's determined to protect and defend her—to play Batman to her Robyn—whatever the cost. But when you're fourteen and the everyday problems of dealing with divorced parents and step-siblings are supplemented by the challenges of OCD, it's hard to imagine yourself falling in love. How can you have a "normal" relationship when your life is so fraught with problems? And that's not even to mention the small matter of those threatening letters Adam's mother has started to receive...



PRE-READING DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

- Write a definition of “hero.” In small groups or partners, share and discuss your definitions. Use the following questions to guide your discussion:
 - What or who do you think of when you hear the word “hero?”
 - What are some of the characteristics you attribute to a heroic person?
 - Do you have any personal heroes?
- Write a short paragraph describing a personal hero that clearly explains why they are heroic in your eyes.
- In small groups, partners, or as a class, create a mind map of all the words you associate with the word “hero.”
- As a class, brainstorm a list of popular superheroes and the superpowers they are known for.
- The main character in the novel has OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder). Do you know anything about this disorder?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS and ACTIVITIES

Narrative Structure and Plot

- The novel begins with Adam immediately falling in love with Robyn. Why do you think the author chose to introduce Robyn so quickly into the story? How did Adam’s interest in her change his attitude about not only his therapy but also the urgency with which he wanted to improve his own mental health? What led Adam to take a leadership role in the group when he admitted to not paying much attention previously? Do you think he would have taken such a role otherwise? Why/why not?
- Chuck asked his patients to write a Top Ten list each week. Adam begins to complete this “homework” once he meets Robyn. What important roles do these lists play in the structure of the narrative? Locate three of Adam’s lists and consider how they are used to further the plot and affect the tone and pacing of the story.
- Why do you think the author chose to write the story in third-person narration rather than first-person? What challenges would writing this story in first-person potentially pose? In small groups, invite one student to take the “hot seat.” This student assumes the role of Adam or one of the other characters in the novel. The rest of the group asks the character questions that relate to or are borne from the novel and the person in the hot seat responds in character.

- How does the author use suspense as a means of engaging the reader? The mystery behind who was sending Carmella the threatening letters is solved by the end of the novel. Locate a minimum of three pieces of evidence in the novel that hints at the identity of the culprit.
- Conflict(s) and their resolution(s) are essential elements in most stories. Often the conflict exists between two or more people in the story, but this is not always the case. What do you see as being the primary conflict in the novel that needs to be resolved? Are you satisfied with its resolution? Why/why not?

Character

“Chuck had asked everyone to pick a *nom de guerre*, as he called it, for this and all future sessions. They would leave their doubt-ridden, shell-shocked and agonizing selves at the door and become instead all-powerful beings.”

- What do the descriptors “doubt-ridden, shell-shocked and agonizing selves” mean? Would this be an accurate way of describing the members of the group?
- What alter egos did the members of the group select for themselves? Why do you think that almost everybody selected a superhero?
- How did Adam and the other group members come to embody their superhero names? Select three of the members of the group and show how their names reflect themselves as people by locating evidence in the text.
- Think about Adam at the beginning of the novel and the goals he outlined for himself in Chapter One. How does Adam’s character evolve over the course of the novel? Make a list of some of the defining events and/or realizations in the novel that played a key role in his development. Explain why each of these events/realizations was significant.
- Revisit the mind map you created as a class before reading the novel. Choose five of the words on the map that you think might apply specifically to Adam. Locate evidence or events in the novel that support your choices.
- Adam is a true superhero in the eyes of his younger stepbrother, Sweetie. How does Adam use knowledge of his own compulsions to calm Sweetie? What kind of powers does Adam wield in the eyes of Sweetie? Think of Adam from each of the following characters’ perspectives: Carmella, Chuck, Wonder Woman, Robyn, Brenda, and Thor. In what ways might Adam seem heroic to them? Locate events or conversations in the text that supports your thinking.
- Why do you think the title of the novel is *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B*? Do you think Adam is an *unlikely* hero? Explain your thinking.

- What were some of the major compulsions that Adam suffered from? Think back to where you have been and what you have done so far today. If you suffered from the same compulsions as Adam, consider how your day may have differed or have been more difficult.
- If you had to choose a superhero as your alter ego, one that you feel truly represents you and what you believe in, who would you choose and why? What would your superpower be? Create a comic book or comic strip with you as the superhero protagonist.

Setting

- Do you think there is any significance to the group meeting on the fourteenth floor (which is actually the thirteenth floor), in Room 13B (when there is no 13A)? Chuck notes that, "...in some blessed existential way, we, uh, don't exist." How might this notion of 'not existing' positively impact the group's ability to share their thinking?
- The author does not identify the name of the city where the novel takes place. How does this affect the reader's ability to identify with the setting?

Heroism and Courage

- Bravery and courageousness are qualities that are often attributed to superheroes. Not all courageous and brave acts need to be grand gestures. The characters in the novel often demonstrate their courage and bravery through their day-to-day choices and behaviours. What are some examples of courage and bravery as demonstrated by Adam and the other characters in the novel? How was seeking help a courageous act?
- When Adam brings the group to his church, he has trouble entering the doorway, but the "...sheer breadth of their combined messed-upness gave him a wonky kind of courage." How did the other group members' troubles provide him with "wonky courage?"
- Think of a time when you have had to be courageous. Remember, even some of our day-to-day activities that to some may seem mundane, can require courage. Write a short story about an incident in your life where you have demonstrated courage. Write the story in third-person, with the hero (you!) as the main character. If you cannot think of anything personally, write about an act of courage performed by somebody you witnessed or heard about.

Friendship and Family

- Adam writes in the first list he creates that, “I believe that playing Warhammer games all these years with Stones (Ben Stone) has probably kept both our heads above water, but just barely.” How is Adam and Ben’s friendship mutually beneficial?
- Do you think if the members of Adam’s group had met outside of therapy, they would have become so close? Why or why not? How might their superhero personas have brought them closer together?
- How do the different members of Adam’s family both help and hinder his ability to control his OCD?

Truth

Everybody lies.

Well, hell, maybe everybody has damn good reasons to lie. Maybe we all just lie to hide the hurt or to fake being strong until we can be strong. That’s not so bad, is it?

Is it?

- Find three examples of when Adam didn’t tell the truth. What were his reasons each time? Do you think it was the right thing to do? Locate two instances when Adam revealed one of his secrets. How did he feel afterwards?
- How much of a role do you think honesty played in Robyn’s improvement? Was she able to get better because she was honest or was she able to be honest because she was getting better? Explain your thinking.
- Do you think it is true that everybody lies? Is there such a thing as a ‘good’ lie? As a class, debate whether lying can sometimes be justified versus whether honesty is *always* the best policy.

Faith

- Chuck is careful to warn the members of the group that religion is not a “panacea.” What does he mean?
- Robyn is quite keen to learn about, and become a part of, the Catholic faith. Why do you think this was so important to her? What role did it play in helping her feel better? Why were the other members of the group so keen to join Robyn and Adam at the church?

Hope

- Does the novel have a happy ending? Why/why not? Why do you think the author chose to end the novel in this manner?
- Were you left feeling hopeful for Adam, his family, and/or his friends at the end of the novel?
- The novel ends with yet another courageous act by our heroic protagonist. What courageous act did he undertake? Why was this courageous?
- Adam's nosy neighbour, Mrs. Polanski, tells Adam that letting go "...is the really hard part of growing up." In what way does Adam learn to let go?
- Do you think that Adam made the right decision to distance himself from Robyn? Why/why not? If you were to continue their story, what do you think would happen next? Write three more chapters of the novel, picking up where the story left off.

WRAP-UP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Revisit the quote from Rudyard Kipling at the beginning of the novel. How has your understanding of this quote changed after reading the novel? Why do you think the author chose this quote?
- What did you learn about Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder from the novel that you did not know before? Make a note of any questions you may have and visit the Canadian OCD Network's website (www.canadianocdnetwork.com) for further reading. Has your understanding of mental illness broadened at all after reading the novel? If so, how? If not, were any of your previous beliefs confirmed?
- In the interview with author Teresa Toten at the end of the book, she is asked if she was trying to get across any particular message to her readers. She replies in part that, "... *The Unlikely Hero* is about first love, making friends and struggling with yourself." Describe any strong feelings or emotions that you experienced while reading this novel. Was there anything in particular that you either remotely or strongly related to?

notes

This image shows a full page of a handwriting practice worksheet. It features approximately 20 horizontal dashed lines spaced evenly down the page, providing a guide for letter height and placement. The background is plain white, and there are no other markings or text present.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR TERESA TOTEN

Teresa Toten is the author of the acclaimed Blondes series, as well as *The Game*, *The Onlyhouse*, among other books. Before winning a Governor General Literary Award for *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B*, Teresa had twice before been short-listed for this prestigious prize. Born in Zagreb, Croatia, but left for Canada on that same day, she lives in Toronto.



PRAISE FOR

The Unlikely Hero OF ROOM 13B TERESA TOTEN

- Winner of the Governor General Literary Award for Children's Text
- Selected as one of Quill & Quire's 15 Best Books of the Year

"*The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B* by Teresa Toten is a **transformative**, high-energy novel that vibrates with the creativity of both the writer and main character. . . . A **powerful** story with brilliant language and unexpected moments of humour." —Governor General's Literary Awards jury

"Arguably one of the most likable teen characters since Ferris Bueller so famously took a day off. . . .

The Unlikely Hero is a tender, yet **hilarious** love story that will have you rooting for Adam as he grapples with OCD while also trying to save the world and win the hand of Robyn Plummer." —*National Reading Campaign*

"Toten masterfully portrays the turbulent emotions and deep-seated fears of someone suffering from mental illness. . . . Ultimately, the book draws the reader in with its **emotional intensity** and sophistication. *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B* is a **beautiful, heart-wrenching** story of life, loss, love, brokenness, and the purest form of bravery: giving in and asking for help." —*Quill & Quire*

"Toten spins an equally **compelling** — and occasionally humorous — story about the difficulties all adolescents face in getting to know themselves and how they fit in society, not to mention how to find kindred spirits and learn to trust." —*Montreal Gazette*

"A **compassionate**, funny, heartwarming story about a band of misfit teens — It's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* for the YA set." —Susin Nielsen, Governor General's Award-winning author of *The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen*

"Excellent novels like this are surefire ways to change the attitude of the young towards mental illness. This deft, **thoughtful** and hilariously funny novel will remain in the mind for a long, long time." —*CM Magazine*

LINKS

The Canadian Mental Health Association

http://www.cmha.ca/mental_health/obsessive-compulsive-disorder/#.UuR1W_Yo4y5

Kids Help Phone — OCD

<http://www.kidshelpphone.ca/Teens/InfoBooth/Emotional-Health/Anxiety/Obsessive-compulsive-disorder.aspx>

The Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario

<http://www.chéo.on.ca/en/mentalhealthtopicsandconditionsAZ>

The International OCD Foundation

<http://www.ocfoundation.org/whatisocd.aspx>

Teen Mental Health

www.teenmentalhealth.org

National Institute of Mental Health

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd/index.shtml>

The Canadian OCD Network

<http://canadianocdnetwork.com/>



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Connect with Teresa Toten at
www.teresatoten.com

 @TTotenAuthor

 /teresa.toten.9



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