This fast-paced, humorous novel—perfect for readers in grades 3-7—is also unusually rich in teaching and learning opportunities. That's because in addition to an engaging narrative by a best-selling author, the book features a variety of text types and formats, abundant cultural references, inventive wordplay and language use, unique graphic elements, and curricular connections to Earth science, geography, and technology. What young readers may appreciate most, though, are resonant themes such as those related to bullying, teamwork and acceptance, and the value in being a social “outsider.”

Your Mission: Instant Engagement

Acronyms

Explain this concept by pointing to the title of the book itself and inviting students to share other acronyms they know. Then let the fun begin: revisit p. 64, where “NERDS” is described as an “unfortunate acronym,” and encourage students to come up with other sad/funny acronyms along this line. Provide prompts or have the students supply them, brainstorming for names of secret government agencies or obscure international nonprofits.

Wordplay

Practice vocabulary skills and alliteration by drawing attention to the “alternate” names (Glueboy, Metalmouth) that the Hyena gives characters on p. 168. Challenge students to create similar names for other characters in the book or simply for other well-known pop-culture figures.

Map It!

Sharpen geography skills by having students track the book’s global settings on a map as they read, either by printing copies for individual use or by sharing a classroom pull-down. Students can circle or use pushpins to identify locations such as Greenland and Iceland (throughout), the Bahamas and the North Pole (p. 11), Red Square and the other landmarks named on p. 28, Egypt/Cairo (pp. 128-129), Milwaukee (p. 138), and the Galápagos Islands (p. 229)—not to mention all the places that move in the latter part of story!

Going Ga-Ga with Graphics

The book often spotlights characters by providing pages that illustrate them in a variety of typical poses and situations. Have students use these comic book-like layouts as springboards for writing or speaking by asking them to provide appropriate accompanying text—either verbally or by adding word balloons, thought bubbles, or caption boxes. This added text should both clarify the scenes and connect them to the overall narrative (e.g, by supplying transitions). As an alternate exercise or a warm-up, reproduce and distribute the student activity on p. 4 of this guide that involves similar skills.
Discussion Questions: Connecting to the Text

In Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmerman’s groundbreaking book, *Mosaic of Thought*, reading comprehension is approached by helping students make three key connections . . .

Text-to-Text

1) Use NERDS to further genre study by helping readers identify the narrative’s standard elements of the espionage and thriller genres (villainous masterminds, high-tech gadgetry, assassins, exotic cars and locales) and having them cite other texts/media in which they appear. How does the author use such elements to exploit the genre even as he parodies it? You also may want to draw attention to the code names of the heroes as well as other “nicknames” in the story (p. 45); how are these similar to the names of superheroes and supervillains that students know? How do such names make stories more compelling?

2) On pp. 45–46, the Hyena makes distinctions between goons, minions, and other bad guys. How does her analysis hold up when applied to other books, or to movies? On p. 73, she reflects on different types of bosses, and on p. 227 she compares Jigsaw’s brand of evil to that of other villains. Again, what evidence from other texts can be used to refute or support her claims?

3) The alternating point-of-view for different chapters is typical of the thriller genre. Ask students to explain how such a structure heightens the overall tension for readers by switching between different characters and situations.

Text-to-World

1) One of the major themes of the book is how children can act like adults, and vice versa (pp. 162, 217). Although the author deals with this idea humorously, how might it be a serious concern in the real world? What are some examples of adults being childish or children experiencing adult-like pressure or responsibilities?

2) Discuss the key events that take place on pp. 236–238, when Jackson decides to leave the team. Why does he feel like a loser? More importantly, what defines a “loser” in the real world? Is a loser simply someone who is not liked, or doesn’t do a good job? Or is a loser someone who quits on his or her commitments?

3) How do the real bad guys in the world compare to Jigsaw or Simon? Do you think some of them were victims of bullies? Are most of them insane, or simply misguided in how they view things? Why do people stay loyal to them?

Text-to-Self

1) Jackson used to be a bully (pp.188–190) but then redeems himself. First, though, his fellow NERDS teammates find it hard to forget about his past (pp. 88–89). Promote self-evaluation by asking students some thought-provoking questions: Do you think you could ever forgive a bully? Under what circumstances? What would the bully need to do first?

2) Another major theme concerns how Jackson disappoints his dad (pp. 61–62) before ultimately making him proud. How is this part of the book true to life . . . or not? Ask students to identify not only with Jackson, but with his father as well.

3) Read this question of Jackson’s from p. 17 aloud to students, and then ask how the story proceeds to answer it: “If everyone was an oddball, why had he been singled out as a nerd?” The book demonstrates that being special is good—one’s unique talents, skills, and abilities can benefit others even if it’s not initially obvious how. Ask students whether they believe such an attitude is realistic, or if this is more a case of optimistic fantasy.
Discussion Questions: Exploring Timeless Themes

1) Consider anchoring your discussion of the book's major themes by discussing the surprising, but thematically fitting, twist that’s provided at the climax (spoiler alert!). Ask students why, emotionally, it makes sense that Heathcliff is Simon by explaining the “cycle of violence”—a theme the book treats seriously despite surrounding it with humor.

2) In an argument with Jackson, Heathcliff states that “The world is not saved by touchdowns—it’s saved by ideas” (p. 158). Ask students if they agree or disagree? Or does it depend on the situation? Help students understand the validity of the statement, but also point out that, given later revelations, we know that Heathcliff has an ax to grind. In fact, in what ways is the statement not true—that grand ideas (e.g., Jigsaw’s) don’t save the world, but destroy it, thus making “touchdowns” (products of individual spirit and bravery) like Jackson’s at the book’s finale all the more important?

3) Challenge students to consider whether the Hyena is “likable” or “good” for most of the book—before she becomes Jackson’s friend and ally. Or can a character be likable without being morally good all the time? Have student’s explain how the Hyena’s “journey” in terms of character development is similar to Jackson’s.

4) Another compelling theme concerns the idea that people are more than what they appear to be (p. 93) and sometimes less than what they appear to be. Have students summarize Jackson’s phase of “swimming” through people’s secrets (p. 24) and identify specific characters that have major secrets they’re keeping (e.g., Heathcliff, the lunch lady, Chaz). Then help them see the connection between such secrets and the “everyone is an oddball” theme. In a world that values appearances so much, why are secrets so dangerous?

5) When we’re first introduced to the members of NERDS (pp. 68–71) we learn how each of their characteristically “nerdy” attributes is actually the basis for their unique contributions to the team. Discuss the theme of “weaknesses becoming strengths” with students, and prompt them to speculate on the author’s message in this regard.
**Bonus Feature: Deleted and Extended Scenes!**

Okay, so the scenes below aren’t really deleted—they are in the book after all—but now you get to extend them by adding dialogue that was omitted from the text you read. Just add word balloons, thought bubbles, or caption boxes as needed, and if you aren’t sure what these look like, just check out any comic or manga.

Oh, and make your additions outside the art since your words will be hard to read if they’re on top of the pictures. Just make sure the balloons’ tails or the thought bubbles’ chain of “little bubbles” lead back to the speaker or thinker. Go ahead—make these scenes funnier or more exciting than they already are!
Differentiated Instruction

Toward the end of the book (pp. 240–241), Jackson provides a simplified summary of the action to that point. You might want to have advanced students add detail to this passage, while below-level readers can paraphrase it and English-language learners can repeat the summary while referencing visuals in the book that illustrate its points. You can also use the following specific strategies to differentiate your instruction.

Below-level Readers

Activate prior knowledge—and build background knowledge as needed. The many cultural, historical, and technical references in NERDS make it a rich text, but can also make it a challenging one for some students. Activate prior knowledge by, for example, asking who Nathan Hale was, and why it might be appropriate that the school is named after him. And take time to review the meaning of recurring features such as the longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates that begin every chapter.

Assure students that some of the narrative is meant to be challenging and mysterious, with readers not sure what some of the characters are up to and why (e.g., Jigsaw’s equation, p. 36). Coach students to apply the comprehension strategies of making inferences and predictions, two approaches that are particularly well-suited to the text.

Make a point of clarifying the numerous shifts in text format and perspective (e.g., the large font, digital-style passages of direct address to the reader). Also consider reviewing parts of the book (such as the prologue and the epilogue) so that students can understand the structural meaning of these sections.

English-Language Learners

Help students appreciate the puns and wordplay that occur throughout the book (e.g., General Savage and “sumeri teeth,” both p. 7).

In addition, NERDS contains countless examples of cultural references that can aid ELL’s in understanding common ideas, events, and things in contemporary society. And because Michael Buckley makes the inclusion of these items so much fun, consider having native speakers of English explain the meaning of such terms as: 401(k) (p. 45); the tooth fairy (p. 6); nunchakus, sai, kendo, etc. (pp. 43–44) and roundhouse kick (p. 283); Louisville Slugger (p. 94); NASCAR (p. 98); Craigslist (p. 180); piñata (p. 220); and Star Wars/Star Trek (p. 235)—not to mention the numerous James Bond allusions.

The text is also replete with idioms and slang, another area where ELL’s can benefit from explicit instruction. When possible, point out how the word or phrase in question is connected to its literal or historical meaning (e.g., raise eyebrows, p. xviii; clotheslined, p 102; I call shotgun p. 202). Slang terms that are harder to understand or remember may be best explained by native-speaking peers (e.g., dweebs, p.2; atomic wedgie, p. 3; showboat, gloryhog, p. 90; barfer, p. 133).

Advanced Students

Challenge students to identify and explain the effectiveness of the many stylistic devices that Buckley uses, such as hyperbole, which is present throughout.

Without asking them to conduct original research, call on volunteers to provide background information for the whole group on the text’s various references to history and technology. The account of espionage over the years (pp. 65–66), might be an excellent place to start.

Encourage critical thinking by asking students whether Jigsaw’s tectonic-plate-plus-tractor-beam scheme would ever work in the real world. And if so, what would be some unintended consequences, both positive and negative?
Extension and Cross-Curricular Projects

Creative Writing: Figurative Language

There are many ways that the text can provide inspiration and professional models for student writing, but an obvious one concerns figurative language. Review the author’s frequent use of metaphor and simile to create vivid and humorous descriptions by rereading passages with both simple examples of this literary device (e.g., “veins clogged with ice,” “heart black as coal,” p. 35) and much more complex, inventive instances (e.g., “a soupy zucchini in . . . the crisper drawer,” p. 204). Then have students create a secret agent, superhero/supervillain or other outsized character by drafting a list of bullet points consisting of nothing but phrases of figurative language.

Performing Arts: The Hyena’s Phone Calls

Practice expressive reading and increase reading fluency by using the hilarious phone call transcripts on 178–182 as the basis for dramatic read-alouds performed by small teams of students. Clarify the common elements the transcripts share with plays, radio dramas, screenplays, and other formats with which your students may be familiar.

Connections to Earth Science

Coordinate a cross-curricular project or “guest speaker” role with an Earth Science teacher, focusing on the topics of plate tectonics and Pangaea (p. 140). Encourage a close, critical reading of the text from a scientific mindset by having students (and/or the guest speaker/project) assess what the real-world consequences of, for example, Hawaii moving to California might be (p. 122). Additional passages to consider can be found on pp. 218–219, pp. 249–250, and p. 289.

Content Area Vocabulary: Create a Glossary

Since NERDS is particularly rich in content area vocabulary, have students collaborate on a glossary that can be used online or via a wall chart by those still reading the book. As students come across unknown or challenging words, they can define them through background knowledge, context clues, and/or dictionary/textbook resources. Word groups can relate to espionage/politics (depose, dictators, compounds, infiltrating), science-fiction/technology (tractor beam, nanobytes, solar panels), or science/academic vocabulary (preeminent, prototype, analysts, g-force, DNA).

Further Reading

Readers who respond to Michael Buckley’s wild imagination and playful use of language may also enjoy his series The Sisters Grimm (www.sistersgrimm.com). For those interested in following up fictional secret agents with their nonfiction counterparts, DK publishes Spy, a meticulously illustrated “Eyewitness” book by Richard Platt. Intrigued by NERD’s graphic elements and the activities based upon them? The Toon Treasury of Classic Children’s Comics is a great read, and comes with an extensive reading guide that’s available for free online.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Buckley is the author of The Sisters Grimm, a New York Times bestselling series and a Today Show Al Roker Book Club pick. He has also written and developed shows for Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, and Disney. He lives with his family in Brooklyn, New York. Visit teamnerds.com.

Teaching Guide conceived and written by Peter Gutiérrez.