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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

Unwind

by

Neal Shusterman

(New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2007)

Author:

Award-winning author Neal Shusterman grew up in Brooklyn, New York, where he began writing at an early age. After spending his junior and senior years of high school at the American School of Mexico City, Neal went on to UC Irvine, where he made his mark on the UCI swim team, and wrote a successful humor column. Within a year of graduating, he had his first book deal, and was hired to write a movie script.



In the years since, Neal has made his mark as a successful novelist, screenwriter, and television writer. As a full-time writer, he claims to be his own hardest task-master, always at work creating new stories to tell. His books have received many awards from organizations such as the International Reading Association, and the American Library Association, as well as garnering a myriad of state and local awards across the country. Neal's talents range from film directing (two short films he directed won him the coveted CINE Golden Eagle Awards) to writing music and stage plays – including book and lyrical contributions to “American Twistory,” which is currently played in several major cities. He has even tried his hand at creating Games, having developed three successful “How to Host a Mystery” game for teens, as well as seven “How to Host a Murder” games.

As a screen and TV writer, Neal has written for the “Goosebumps” and “Animorphs” TV series, and wrote the Disney Channel Original Movie “Pixel Perfect”. Currently Neal is adapting his novel Everlost as a feature film for Universal Studios.

Wherever Neal goes, he quickly earns a reputation as a storyteller and dynamic speaker. Much of his fiction is traceable back to stories he tells to large audiences of children and teenagers -- such as his novel *The Eyes of Kid Midas*. As a speaker, Neal is in constant demand at schools and conferences. Degrees in both psychology and drama give Neal a unique approach to writing. Neal's novels always deal with topics that appeal to adults as well as teens, weaving true-to-life characters into sensitive and riveting issues, and binding it all together with a unique and entertaining sense of humor.

Neal Shusterman lives in Southern California with his four children, who are a constant source of inspiration! [From the author's web site]

Summary:

In the not-too-distant future, teens Connor, Risa, and Lev are on the run for their lives. Following the Second Civil War, between pro-choice and pro-life forces, the United States now allows parents to unwind their unwanted and difficult kids between the ages of thirteen and eighteen: Their bodies are surgically taken apart and all the organs and tissue are used in other people. According to the law, the kids aren't considered dead, they're "living in a divided state." But Connor, Risa, and Lev, and thousands of other teens slated for "unwinding", don't see it that way. They choose instead to "kick AWOL," or run away. *Unwind* follows these three across the country as they travel together, split up, and meet again when their destinies cross in a Harvest Camp where they are slated to be unwound. [From teachervision.com]

Questions:

1. How would you feel if you discovered you were going to be unwound? What would you do? If you didn't want to go along with it but couldn't run away like Connor and the others in the novel, what other options might you have?
2. How would you feel if you were in an accident, or had a rare disease, and you could be cured only if your damaged organs were replaced by parts taken from unwound teens? What would you choose to do? What if you were certain to die if you refused the parts? What if it wasn't you, but someone you loved (a parent, a sibling) who was in an accident? Would your answer be different?
3. You just found out the person sitting next to you is going to be unwound. Come up with ten good reasons why they should NOT be. Remember, their life may depend on it!
4. When do you think the story takes place? The book never reveals the year. How many years in the future might it be? What clues hint at how much time has passed? What companies or products are named? What societal norms can you point to that have changed or remained the same? What are the similarities between the world of *Unwind* and our own world? What are the differences?
5. Which of the three main characters, Connor, Risa, or Lev, do you most identify with? Why? What traits do you have in common? Which of their traits work for them, and which make their lives harder? Which of your own traits would you like to give up? Which would you want to keep?
6. In the course of the book, Connor and Risa get separated from Lev, who travels for a time with another character. Why do you think the author chose to split the narrative into two distinct threads? What do you think this achieves? How does this affect the evolution of the characters?

7. Compare the similarities and differences of Lev's journey with Cyrus to Joplin, Missouri, in *Unwind* to Huck's travel with Jim down the Mississippi River in the novel *Huckleberry Finn*.
8. While being transported to possible safety, some of the kids on the run wonder, "Would it be better to die or be unwound?" If given the choice, which would you choose? Why?
9. Another question the kids in the book discuss is, "If every part of you is still alive but inside someone else, are you alive or are you dead?" They also wonder if consciousness can exist even if it's spread out, and if the soul remains intact. What do you think?
10. Which adults in the story are depicted sympathetically? Which do you feel are not sympathetic? Do any shift from one to the other? How did the author describe these characters to make you feel one way or the other about them?
11. Risa is assigned to play in a band at a Harvest Camp, performing upbeat tunes while teens are marched to their unwinding. Risa is conflicted: She knows playing in the band will keep her alive longer, but it's at the expense of others, and her joy at having her fingers on a piano is matched by the horror of knowing what's going on around her. How would you feel in this situation? Would you accept the position? Are there any situations in history similar to this?
12. What positive consequences do you imagine would be realized by a society where unwinding exists? What are the negatives? Do you think the negatives outweigh the positives, or the other way around?
13. A euphemism is a mild word or phrase that's used to refer to something unpleasant or embarrassing. "Living in a divided state" is a euphemism officials in the novel use in place of "being unwound." Another euphemism in the novel is "harvest camps" in place of "unwinding facilities." Can you think of any commonly used euphemisms in real life? Why do you think people use euphemisms?
14. In the novel, unwinding becomes big business, as there's a lot of money to be made from ill people and accident victims requiring fresh organs, and the population looks the other way, not considering the source. Are there any present-day situations you can think of where ethics have been compromised because of money, or because it's simply easier not to think about it? Predict a situation in the future where greed or denial could defeat morals.
15. Imagine that you are approached to join the Clappers, the novel's futuristic terrorists. How would you respond? What would you tell them?
16. Connor's anger and lack of impulse control is often a problem for him, until he learns to control and channel his emotions. Do you ever feel like your impulses are stronger than your will? What strategies do you use to control your feelings? Do they work?

17. The bully, Roland, makes life hard for Connor and Risa from the time they meet him. What do you think of his ultimate payback? Did you think it was fair? Was it satisfying, or did it make you squirm or both? Why?

[From teachervision.com]