

ANYTHING BUT OKAY
BY SARAH DARER LITTMAN
TEACHING GUIDE



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WHOLE BOOK QUESTIONS

- 1) In Chapter 1, the reader meets Stella, Farida, and Ken. How would you characterize each of them based on their interactions and discussions between each other in this chapter?
- 2) Examine Farida's words to Ken in Chapter One. What is she trying to express to him? Paraphrase her thoughts.
- 3) Why might Ken not understand what Farida is trying to express to him in Chapter One? What are the dangers in him not understanding?
- 4) In Chapter 1, Farida talks about how the film *Casablanca* was whitewashed. She states that she "can't turn off noticing when something's not the way it's supposed to be." What other films or books are whitewashed? What is the harm that is caused by whitewashing something?
- 5) How does Farida's conversation with Ken in Chapter One foreshadow future events in the book?
- 6) Each chapter is followed by communications between Rob and Jason, enabling the reader to experience Rob's point of view. Why do you think Sarah Darer Littman chose to show his point of view using texts and letters? What do the letters that Rob writes to Jason tell the reader about him? Why is it important to give Rob a voice in the story?
- 7) In Chapter 2, Rob's parents discuss his need for help. Rob's mom states that he's afraid to admit that he needs help, because he doesn't want his dad to "think he's weak. That he can't hack it the way [his dad] did." Do you believe that's true? Is asking for help a sign of weakness? Where in the story does the reader see characters who don't want to ask for help? Where does the reader see characters who do ask for help?
- 8) Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a mental health problem that some people develop after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event—in Rob's case, a specific combat incident. Warning about the risk of Rob seeking professional help, his dad says, "But can't you understand why he wouldn't want that on his record? Like it or not, there's still a stigma about going to see a shrink. It could come back to bite him later in life." Do you believe this is true? Is there a stigma in our society to seeing a psychologist? Why or why not?
- 9) In one of Jason's letters to Rob, he signs it, "Keep dodging them bullets, bro." What bullets do the characters dodge in this book? Identify and explain both the real and metaphorical bullets.

10) When Jason is texting Rob, he tells Rob that he doesn't know who the enemy is anymore, "Most of the time, I think it's me." What does he mean by this? Why would he view himself as the enemy?

11) How does Rob's PTSD affects other characters in the book? What are the repercussions to this?

12) When Rob's mom talks with Rob, she says, "You need help, Rob. I know you think you can tough this out alone, but you can't. There's no shame in asking for help." Do you believe people are shamed for asking for help? Are they conditioned to tough it out? Why or why not?

13) In Chapter 5, when Farida is talking with Stella about how other people treat her unfairly, she says, "But they're human. And the fact remains, all humans hurt in one way or another. That's what I try to remind myself." Examine how this relates to specific characters in the book. How are they hurting? Why?

14) In a couple of Rob's letters to Jason, he includes "Spockism," phrases said by Spock, the Vulcan character played by Leonard Nimoy in the original *Star Trek*. Here are two examples of Spockism:

"You find it easier to understand the death of one than the death of a million."

"In critical moments, men sometimes see exactly what they wish."

What do each of these mean? Explain how each relates to the book.

15) When Ashar Singh is interviewed by the police, he states, "I definitely felt like Wade Boles and his friend were threatening me, and that guy Walker came over and took my side. Not everyone will do that. Most people just walk on by, like they don't see what's happening, because it's not their problem." Do you believe this is true in our country? Do people act like they don't see injustices happening? Why or why not?

16) Sarah Darer Littman uses the transcripts of the police interviews with multiple characters in the book. Why do you think she chose to do this? Evaluate the effectiveness of this decision.

17) Stella seeks to find out what a patriot is by interviewing different people. Select some of the main characters in the book and explain how they would define a patriot.

18) In Chapter 9, after interviewing her classmates, Stella concludes that "the answers have just given me more questions." She wonders, "Is that what happens when you start looking closely at the way things are—that you end up with more questions than answers?" Where do you see this happening in the book? Where do characters look closely at things and what

questions do they come up with? Are any of these questions answered by the end of the book?

19) In Chapter 11, Stella states, “I’ve been wrestling with the idea of truth and understanding how much of our perception of it can depend on who tells the story and how it’s told. I’m starting to realize how much of what I’ve taken for granted as true about life and my country is because of who got to tell the story.” What is the danger in doing this? Explain. Where do we see this idea come up in the book? Identify examples where “the story” is told by one side and explain how it affects a character(s).

20) Stella talks with Adam and tells him she is thinking of going into journalism instead of the armed forces. She worries that she’s letting down her family. Adam responds with the question, “Is there a law that says we have to do exactly what our parents do and think exactly the same way we think?” He then says, “I mean, we’re being encouraged to use critical-thinking skills, right? And doesn’t that mean that maybe, sometimes, we might come up with different answers.” Where does the reader see examples in the book where characters have different views than their parents? Explain how their views differ and any possible repercussions from this.

21) How does the character of Chris change throughout the course of the book? Analyze who he is at the beginning, middle, and end and the factors that contribute to this change.

22) How does Stella’s understandings and views about the world around her change throughout the book? Examine who she is and what she believes at the start of the book and how that changes by the end. What elements impacted these changes?

23) In Chapter 13, when talking with Stella about the election, Rob tells her, “Frank Meyers says democracy is messy but it’s better than all the other options . . . Doesn’t matter if it’s American-style democracy or a different kind. As long as people have a voice.” Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

24) While reflecting about losing the election, Stella concludes that at least working toward change is doing something. She states, “Action is better than inaction.” Who takes action in this book? In what ways? Who doesn’t take action in this book? How does this inaction affect the character and the story?

25) Track Rob’s growth as a character through his letters. Who was he at the start? What were his views and beliefs? How do these change?

26) Rob writes to Jason about the vet’s support group he’s in and how the counselor who leads that group, Mrs. Cook, told them that “we have to remember that it’s okay to ask for help and accept it when people offer it. That it’s not a weakness and there’s no reason to feel shame.” What characters in the book ask for help and how does it affect them? What

are ways in which the characters who didn't ask for help might have reached out to others for help?

27) In Chapter 16, Stella talks with Chris about his dad's election. Afterward, Stella wonders, "why Chris can tell me that he's relieved his dad lost, but not his own family?" What do you think makes Chris open up to Stella?

28) In one of his letters, Rob shares with Jason something that "this spiritual guy Ram Dass" said, "We're all just walking each other home." What does this mean? How are different characters doing this in the book?

29) Do you believe Stella made the right choice in the video she chose to share with her classmates? What would she have been sacrificing by showing the other video?

30) Examine Stella's friendship with Farida. Is it a strong one? How do they support each other? Where might there be differences in the friendship? How do each of them view their relationship?

31) Describe the relationship between Farida and Stella. How would you characterize it? How does their friendship change throughout the book? What are some complications in their friendship? What are some ways that they help each other?

32) The character of Farida offers the perspective of someone whose family immigrated to America but is still viewed as foreigners by many in the town. What does this perspective add to the narrative? What are Farida's struggles throughout the book and how do they affect her and her family?

33) Who are the secondary characters in the book? Explain how each of these secondary characters is important and what they contribute to the plot.

34) Trust is important in this book. What characters trust each other? What characters struggle with trust? How does it affect the plot?

35) A major theme of the book is the effects of stereotypes. What characters are stereotyped and why? How do these stereotypes affect each of them and the story? Additional Question: Can you think of any other stories, poems, movies, or songs that have this same theme? Describe them.

36) Identify another theme or central idea in the book. Where does the reader see examples of it? How does this theme develop throughout the book and how does it affect the outcome?

37) We read books for enjoyment, but sometimes we discover that books can teach us things. What has *Anything But Okay* taught you?

38) *Anything But Okay* is written in first person POV. Select a scene in the book and re-write it in a different POV. How does this change the book? What POV do you like better? Explain your view.

39) The title of the book is *Anything But Okay*. Analyze and explain the meaning of this title. Why is it important in the story?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Sarah Darer Littman is the critically acclaimed author of Young Adult novels, In Case You Missed It, Backlash, (Winner of the Iowa Teen Book Award) Want to Go Private?; Life, After and Purge; and middle grade novels, Fairest of Them All, Charmed, I'm Sure and Confessions of a Closet Catholic, winner of the Sydney Taylor Book Award. As well as writing novels, Sarah teaches creative writing as an adjunct professor in the MFA program at Western Connecticut State University, at the Yale Summer Writers' Conference, and is an award-winning opinion columnist. She lives in Connecticut.

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ANYTHING BUT OKAY READER GUIDE – EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- 1) In Chapter 2, there is a debate in Stella’s AP Government class about restricting the flow of refugees into the United States. Do your own research on both sides of this debate and then present an argument with support of your own personal view.
- 2) In Chapter 15, when Adam talks about voting, he says, “A lot of people I spoke to aren’t paying attention. . . . They don’t even know what each of the candidates stands for.” If it is election time, select an election in your city, state, or country. Then, research each of the candidates and their platforms. Write a response about the candidate that you would vote for based on these findings and explain why.
- 3) The reader sees Rob’s point of view in the book through his letters to Jason. Select another character in the book and write a letter from them to someone else to show their point of view. Then, explain what it adds to the story. How does giving this character a voice help add to the story?
- 4) When Chris is angry about his campaign poster not being allowed to be hung up, Mr. Walsh references the court case, *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*. Research this case and write a summary explaining what the case entailed and what verdict was. Then, write a response about whether you agree with this ruling or not and why.
- 5) Throughout the book, there are mentions about the thankless return Vietnam vets got upon returning home. In Chapter 3, Stella’s teacher Mr. Walsh says, “. . . one of the main reasons I turned into such a political junkie was because of what happened to my dad. I wanted to understand the decisions that sent him to Vietnam and the climate that led to him facing protests when he got back home instead of being thanked for his duty.” Research and present information on the reaction soldiers got when returning home from the Vietnam War and why.
- 6) Read John Steinbeck’s piece, “Why Soldiers Won’t Talk,” which first appeared as a war dispatch in the New York Herald Tribune on November 5, 1943, and later appeared in his book, *Once There Was a War* under “Symptoms.” What does he say is the reason for soldiers not talking about combat when they return? How does this piece relate to the book?
- 7) Read Tim O’Brien’s book *The Things They Carried* or *Boots on the Ground* by Elizabeth Partridge, and write an essay making connections between it and this book.

8) Watch the movie *The Hurt Locker* and write an essay making connections between it and this book.

9) Stella seeks to find out what a patriot is by interviewing different people. Interview people in your life about what they believe a patriot is and present their responses in a creative way.

10) Write an essay that explains what your view of a patriot is. Create your own project using Stella's question of "What makes you a good member of your school?" Interview your classmates and then present your findings in a creative way.

11) Rob participates in an interview that is part of a special-interest piece about the problems vets have when they transition home from active duty. Research this topic yourself and present your findings.

12) In Chapter 11, Stella states, "I've been wrestling with the idea of truth and understanding how much of our perception of it can depend on who tells the story and how it's told. I'm starting to realize how much of what I've taken for granted as true about life and my country is because of who got to tell the story." What is the danger in doing this? Explain. Where does the reader see this idea come up in the book? Identify examples where "the story" is told by one side and explain how it affects a character(s). Select an event in the news and research it from different sides, outlets, and new sources. Present the multiple sides to this topic to show how contorted the news can be.

**This guide aligns with Common Core Standards ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10
1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 10.**

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