

Greetings from Planet Earth

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About the Book

It's 1977, and Theo is intrigued by a new assignment in his science class at school: to create a 'golden record' inspired by the record *Voyager 2* will carry into space as a greeting from Earth. But it is at home, during the family celebration of Theo's 12th birthday, that his world begins to change. An unspoken 'rule' never to talk about his father is challenged when Theo's grandmother JeeBee gives Theo a birthday present 'from his dad.' As Theo investigates what happened to his father in Vietnam, and explores the challenging questions his science teacher asks about what it means to be human, he uncovers truths that will alter his life forever.

Understanding the Book

Theme

1. Theo's class is given the assignment to share "what they think is most important about Earth." (p. 8) As your students read the novel, create a class list of the ideas Theo considers. Ask students what they think of his ultimate choice.
2. At the beginning of the book, Theo believes that everyone in his family must follow two rules: "Number One: If you *pretend* everything is fine, then everything *is* fine. And Number Two: Don't talk about Dad. Ever." (p. 20) Discuss how well these rules serve the family and if the rules have changed by the end of the book.
3. Theo, Janet, Mom, and JeeBee all keep secrets. Have students identify what secrets each character keeps, and why. Ask them to analyze how Theo's feelings about keeping secrets have changed by the end of the book.
4. Pose one of Mr. Meyer's questions to the class:

WHO ARE WE? (pages 27-28)

WHERE DO WE LIVE? (pages 47-49)

WHAT CAN WE DO? (pages 67-68)

WHAT MAKES US HUMAN? (pages 131-133)

Read aloud how the question is discussed in Theo's classroom and then continue the discussion with your own students.

5. Over the course of the novel, Theo breaks his bicycle, several of The Ladies, and almost all of his model airplanes. Relationships in the book are also broken: Theo isolates himself from his best friend, Kenny; a disagreement leaves Mom and JeeBee barely speaking to each other. Have students write a paragraph about what Theo learns from all that is broken. How does this affect his attitude toward Dad at the end of the book?

6. During a discussion in Theo's classroom (pages 131- 133), Theo asks if NASA will be including images of war on the Golden Record sent into space. Mr. Meyer responds, "Excellent question, Theo. What do you guys think? Should they send up a message of who we really are, or who we'd like to be?" Invite students to share and give reasons for their opinions.

7. Theo notes that the Apollo 11 moon plaque reads, "We came in peace for all mankind." (p. 163) Discuss how Theo's thoughts about the plaque reflect on the larger themes of the book.

Character

1. After reading the opening section (pages 1-21), discuss the ways in which Janet interacts with Theo. Then take a class vote: Is Janet a "good" sister or a "bad" sister? Why? As students read the rest of the book, note what Janet does with, to, and for Theo, organizing the information into a Venn diagram of "good" and "bad." At the end of the book, vote again. Have any students' opinions of Janet changed? As a follow-up, ask students to write a paragraph about whether or not they would want a sister like Janet, and why.

2. Both Theo and Mom collect things. Discuss what The Ladies illuminate about Mom and the model airplanes illuminate about Theo. Have students speculate what objects Janet might collect. Ask them to tell what they collect and what their collections say about them.

3. Discuss how Theo's feelings about Mom change when he discovers the secret stash of candy and books (p. 88) and what the secret stash reveals about Mom.

4. Theo gets to know his father largely through JeeBee's stories and the letters from Vietnam. At the end

of the book, when he finally sees his father face-to-face, Theo says, "I have a million questions to ask you." Have students write a continuation of this scene by imagining some questions Theo might ask and how his father might answer.

5. Mr. Meyer tells Theo, "You're someone who wants to understand things." (p. 155) Ask students if all the characters in the book "want to understand things." Discuss Mr. Meyer's assertion that "The road you're choosing is the harder one. But your life will be richer because of it."

Student Activities

1. Create a bulletin board, like the one in Theo's class, displaying photos and drawings of "what is most important about Earth." Invite students to share why they chose a particular picture.
2. Visit <http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/spacecraft/goldenrec.html>, NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory site, to explore the pictures, music, Earth sounds, and greetings featured on the actual Golden Record. If possible, listen to one of the pieces of music, such as Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode," or Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, First Movement. Ask the class to evaluate the Golden Record and if it would need to be changed if it were launched today. What would students want to include today and why?
3. Contact a veterans' hospital in your state to ask about sending a class 'get well soon' letter to a veteran. To locate hospitals, see the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Facilities Locator & Directory website <http://www1.va.gov/directory/guide/home.asp>.
4. Apollo 11 astronauts Collins, Armstrong, and Aldrin helped design the Apollo 11 mission patch depicting an eagle landing on the moon, holding an olive branch in its talons. Visit NASA's website, <http://nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/planetary/lunar/apollo11.html>, to see the mission patch and listen to Armstrong announce, as the lunar module *Eagle* touched down, "The *Eagle* has landed." Then ask students to name a new spacecraft and draw a patch representing its lunar landing.
5. Visit NASA's website, <http://moonbuggy.msfc.nasa.gov/index.html>, to learn more about The Great Moonbuggy Race and read the history of how real moonbuggies were built. Ask students to design their own version of a moonbuggy that can carry two astronauts "over a half-mile simulated lunar terrain course including 'craters,' rocks, 'lava' ridges, inclines and 'lunar' soil." Invite students to present their designs to the class.

- Subjects:

Death, Grief, Loss, Family Life, Literature, Reading Comprehension, Space Travel, Vietnam War, Understanding Self and Others

- Skills:

Reading Comprehension