

## A Curriculum Guide to

### ***The Misfits***

By James Howe

#### **About the Book**

“Hilarious and poignant . . . An upbeat and reassuring novel that encourages preteens and teens to celebrate their individuality.”—*Publishers Weekly*

\*“Howe tells the truth about the pain and anger caused by jeers and name-calling in a fast, funny, tender story that will touch readers.”—*Booklist*, starred review

Bobby, Skeezie, Addie, and Joe are the “misfits.” Bobby is fat. Skeezie dresses like it’s 1957. Addie is tall, brainy, and outspoken. And Joe is gay. They’re used to being called names, but they know they’re better than the names they’re called.

They’ve always had each other when times got tough; however, surviving seventh grade looks like it’s not going to be easy. Starting with Addie’s refusal to say the Pledge of Allegiance and her insistence on creating a new political party to run for student council, the Gang of Five—as the four friends call themselves—is in for a dynamic beginning of school that’s full of surprises. They will learn about politics and popularity, love and loss, and what it means to be a misfit or a “fit.” After years of insults, the Gang of Five is determined to stop name-calling at their school. They are standing up and being seen—not as the one-word names that their classmates label them with, but as the full, complicated human beings they truly are.

#### **Discussion Questions**

The discussion questions below align with the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.7.1, 2, 3, 6, 10) (L.7.4, 6) (W.7.9, 10)

1. Why do you think the author chose the character of Bobby Goodspeed to tell the story of *The Misfits*? Back up your opinions with evidence from the book.
2. How is Bobby wise beyond his years? How does the author show that the character of Bobby is wise? Consider the vocabulary Bobby uses, his sense of humor, and his insights into himself and others.
3. *The Misfits* is a uniquely written novel. Part of the story is written in prose and part of it is in a play format. Make a Venn diagram that shows the similarities and differences between the two writing styles.
4. Celebrating one’s individuality is a strong theme throughout *The Misfits*. Choose one character, and using details from the book, explain how this character demonstrates her or

his individuality.

5. Explain how losing his mother has affected Bobby, and how the effects of this loss change throughout the novel as Bobby himself changes.

6. Mr. Kellerman and Mike, Bobby's dad, have also experienced the loss of someone they loved. And though Skeezie's father hasn't died, Skeezie has, in essence, lost his dad in this book. These losses have shaped each character's personality and have impacted each of them differently. Discuss how each character responds to his loss and then find a series of quotes from the book showing how one of these characters has been affected by this loss.

7. How do other characters perceive and feel towards Addie? Do they find her frustrating or refreshingly honest? Would you be friends with Addie if you had the opportunity?

8. Bobby, Skeezie, Addie, and Joe base the platform for their new political party on banishing name-calling. However, they are guilty of calling people names themselves. Cite examples throughout the book where they fall into this trap. Is name-calling a natural part of who we are, or is it learned? Give examples from the novel where name-calling is positive and/or fun.

9. Examine and discuss the following pairings: Bobby and Mr. Kellerman, Addie and Ms. Wyman, Joe and Colin. How does each relationship demonstrate how people who seem different may actually be alike?

10. The role of family is significant in the development of each character. Describe each character's connection with his or her family. How do the families help to define each character?

11. Bobby is surprised to discover that Pam was not popular when she was his age. How is this eye-opening, and ultimately, inspiring, for Bobby?

12. Bobby tells his friends that his dad says, "It's better to just get along [and] not make waves . . . [B]ringing attention can be a dangerous thing." Why does he say this to Bobby? What does this tell us about Mike?

13. Mr. Kellerman makes the comment that "we're all so ready to believe the worst about ourselves . . . we just accept them without even thinking about what they mean or even if they're true." Provide examples from the book that demonstrate where characters show this quote to be true. Write down a list of negative items that you believe about yourself. Look at the list and think about what each item means, and why you wrote it down.

14. Although the No-Name Party ultimately loses the student council election, Bobby puts the loss into perspective by saying "sometimes it is about winning something much bigger." How does the No-Name Party "win"?

15. The ending of *The Misfits* gives a glimpse into the Gang of Five's future. What is surprising about the ending of the story? Why is it surprising?
16. Define "misfit" as it relates to the novel. At the end of the story, are Addie, Bobby, Skeezie, and Joe really misfits? Explain your answer.
17. Does *The Misfits* present a realistic portrayal of life in middle school or junior high? In your experience, what aspects are realistic and which are not?
18. After reading the book, do you wish that any of the characters were your friends? Who and why?
19. What is the difference between seeing someone as "different from" you and "less than" you?
20. Define "courage." Which characters in the book show courage? Point out quotes and scenes in the book that demonstrate bravery.
21. Bobby decides to stop being a "get along type of guy" and stand up for himself and for others. Find characters in the book who, because of Bobby's courage, change and stand up for themselves.
22. Is the resolution of the story realistic or a fairy-tale ending? Support your answer with evidence.
23. Horton, Dr. Seuss's faithful elephant, says, "And it should be, it should be, it SHOULD be like that!" Is it better for fiction to reflect the way things are or point the way to how things should be? Justify your answer.

### **Research and Writing Activities**

These activities align with the following Common Core Standards:  
(RL.7.1, 2) (SL.7.1, 5) (RI.7.8, 10) (W. 7.1, 10)

1. *The Misfits* is a profound book because it doesn't stop at the simple idea of "no name-calling." Through the assortment of characters, the novel demonstrates how destructive any kind of label can be. We would usually consider being called "beautiful" a positive moniker, but Pam explains how this label crushed her. In groups, make posters for Mr. Kellerman, Pam, Kelsey, DuShawn, Kevin Hennesey, Ms. Wyman, and Colin. Draw all of the characters trapped in a box. Give each character a label, such as "beautiful," "popular," etc. On the other side, write at least seven other personality traits of each character. Be sure to only write traits that you can defend from quotes or scenes from the book.
2. Research the history of name-calling. Did you know that in the past, people were jailed or even killed for calling people names? Research historical situations where

these punishments were an outcome of name-calling. Find examples of where name-calling has had significant consequences in today's world. When has name-calling been used to oppress people? Make sure to include a bibliography. Using technology (Powerpoint, a video, audio clips, posters with images from reliable sources, etc.), give a presentation on your findings.

3. What is a political party and what is a platform? What do the Democratic and Republican parties stand for? What are their platforms? Find out more about the different political parties that exist in the United States (other than the Republican and Democratic parties). What party would you join?

4. Make a list of questions and interview your parents, grandparents, a teacher, or an older sibling about their experiences in middle school or junior high. How were their experiences the same and how were they different from the Gang of Five's?

5. Research the history of the Pledge of Allegiance and the controversies that have arisen over its use in schools and students' refusal to participate in its recital. Are any of these refusals similar to the reasons Addie states for not participating? After studying the Pledge, would you want to participate in its recital? Why or why not?

6. Research the experiences of gay students in the past and present. An excellent resource is [www.GLSEN.org](http://www.GLSEN.org), the website of GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network). How do Joe's experiences relate to your findings?

7. What is it like not fitting into the mainstream? Write a personal essay, with an introduction, body, and conclusion, about your own experiences of being a "misfit." Or write an essay about someone you know who is a "misfit." Explain what life is like for him or her.

8. Fold a piece of paper into four columns. In each column write one of these four statements: 1) Names I have heard 2) Names I have been called 3) Names I have called others 4) Names I have called myself. Take about 15 minutes to fill in all of the columns. Make sure to write something under each of the four headings. There are no right or wrong answers. The names can be kind, mean, funny, neutral—anything. Then put your writing implement down, take a breath, and look at all of the words. Turn the paper over and freewrite for 10 to 15 minutes about what you feel and think about when looking at your lists.

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