

Reading Group Guide for

One Kid's Trash

By Jamie Sumner

About the Book

When Hugo O'Connell's dad decides to leave his high-pressure job to work at a ski resort, Hugo is forced to move with his parents to a new town. For Hugo, that means leaving his friends behind and starting at a new middle school. Worse yet, Hugo is small. Like, really small. Girls think he's cute like a tiny puppy, and boys, well, they call him names like "leprechaun" and "shorts" and generally make his life miserable. As Hugo expects, things don't start off well for him at his new school. Popular basketball player Chance calls Hugo "Little Man" and rubs his head for luck. Hugo's math teacher hates him. Plus, Hugo's dad's new job isn't everything it's cracked up to be. But when Hugo's new classmates discover his secret talent for garbology or studying the things people throw away in order to learn more about them, things start to change. Suddenly, everyone wants to talk to Hugo. At first, Hugo loves the attention his garbology "superpower" brings him. For the first time in his life, he is popular. But when Hugo takes garbology too far, things fall apart fast. Can Hugo ever make it up to his friends and family?

Discussion Questions

1. *One Kid's Trash* begins with Hugo's family moving to a new town and Hugo starting at a new school. Hugo says, "Trying to fit into a new school is like studying for a test for a class you've never taken." What does he mean by this? Have you ever started at a new school? What was it like for you? How could you make new students in your class feel welcome?
2. Hugo's parents decide to move without consulting him. How does this make Hugo feel? Have your parents or guardians ever made a big family decision without consulting you? How did it make you feel? How did you discuss your feelings with them?
3. Hugo says, "I am not having my mother drive me to the first day of middle school. That's social suicide. A guy like me can't afford to take chances." What does Hugo mean when he says, "a guy like me"? What is different about Hugo? What chances would he be taking if he let his mom drive him?
4. When Hugo's family first decides to enable Hugo's dad to follow his dream, Hugo feels like "We were teaming up to find a bigger and better life." However, once they're actually in their new town, Hugo says his "world feels smaller than ever." How do Hugo and his parents deal with plans not going the way they'd hoped? Have you ever had something in your life turn out differently than you expected? What was it? What are your strategies for coping when things don't go as planned?
5. Hugo has always loved spending time with his cousin Vij, but it's complicated now that they live in the same town. In what ways does Vij help Hugo? In what ways does he make Hugo's life more challenging?
6. When Hugo is being bullied by Chance in the locker room, he says, "I imagine myself saying something, fighting back: *Better a leprechaun than a troll or At least I remembered deodorant*. It could be the beginning of a new era. . . I'd be funny and popular and living my best life. Finally one of the cool kids." Later, Hugo does fight back. Does it turn out how he expected? Do you think it's ever a good idea

to turn the tables on someone who is picking on you? What do you think is the best way to handle a bully?

7. How would you define bullying? Why do you think some kids bully other kids? Why do you think Chance bullies Hugo? What can you do if you see someone being bullied?

8. Do you think grown-ups do enough to stop bullying? Is there anything you wish they did more or less of? What about the other kids at your school? Why do you think so many people don't say anything when they see a kid being bullied? What advice would you have for someone in Hugo's situation?

9. What did you learn about garbology in this book? Had you heard of it before you read *One Kid's Trash*? What aspects would you like to learn more about?

10. When Vij first tries to get Hugo to do garbology readings for other kids, Hugo resists. Why doesn't he want to do this? Why does he eventually give in? Once Hugo starts sharing garbology with his classmates, how does it make him feel?

11. Vij calls Hugo's ability to "read" people's trash his "superpower." Do you have a secret superpower? If so, what is it? What superpower would you want to have if you could have any?

12. After his garbology readings get him invited to the popular kids' lunch table, Hugo says, "I'm getting exactly what I never thought was possible—a seat at the cool table. So why do I feel smaller than ever?" What does Hugo mean by feeling "smaller than ever"? Why do you think he's feeling like this?

13. Why do you think Hugo wants so badly to be popular? What does he discover once he gets there? What makes kids popular in your school? Why do you think kids care so much about popularity?

14. Hugo's mom says, "Your trash says a lot about you, Hugo—what you value, what you think is worth saving and what's not." Do you agree or disagree that someone's trash can say a lot about them? What would someone learn about you and your family if they were to go through your trash?

15. After breaking into Chance's locker to look at his garbage, Hugo says the information he learned "swirls in my brain like a tornado of badness, or possibly goodness, depending on how you want to look at it." What does he mean by this? Have you ever had a similar feeling? Explain your answers.

16. Why does Hugo decide to use his garbology knowledge to create a crossword puzzle about Chance for the newsletter? Were you surprised that he did this? Do you think it was a good decision? Does he feel the way he thought he would after?

17. Immediately after publishing the crossword puzzle, Hugo regrets it. Have you ever made a decision that you immediately regretted? Did it hurt someone? What did you do to make it up to that person?

18. Why do you think Hugo's mom worries so much about him? Why does Hugo feel the need to protect her by making sure she never finds out about Chance picking on him? Do you ever feel like this with your parents or other family members?

19. After hurting his mom's feelings, Hugo notes, "Sorry is much harder to say than to think." Why do you think it can be so hard to say we're sorry? Who does Hugo have to apologize to in the book? How

does he find the strength to do it?

20. At the end of the book, Hugo has an idea to decorate his new school for the holidays with people's donated garbage. Why does he do this? How does it make him feel?

Extension Activities

1. In *One Kid's Trash*, Hugo calls himself a garbologist. He says that garbology "is the study of people's trash to learn more about them." Did you know that garbology is a real branch of sociology, which is the study of groups and societies? Use the internet to research garbology. Then write a short essay that explains what it is and why it's important. Consider the following questions:

What exactly is garbology?

Who came up with the word, and why?

How is garbology used in the real world?

Create a poster to go along with your report. Consider including examples of discarded items and what they can tell you about a person or society. As a bonus activity, you can try to "read" someone's garbage the way Hugo does in the book. Be sure to ask their permission and check with your parents or guardians first!

2. At the end of *One Kid's Trash*, Hugo and his friends use donated garbage to decorate their school for the holidays. They make wreaths, menorahs, garlands, and more out of items that would otherwise be thrown away. This kind of repurposing of things that would otherwise be thrown away is called "upcycling." Look for things you can upcycle in your own life, such as paper, old clothes, or scrap metal. Use these items to make something new. For example, you can turn an old T-shirt into a pillow, use discarded newspaper to create a chain of origami cranes, or turn discarded tin cans into painted flowerpots. Or maybe you have another great idea for turning trash into treasure!

3. Hugo and his friends create a newsletter called the Paw Print. It includes stories and pictures about interesting and important things happening at their school. Create a newsletter about your own school, household, or community. What will you call your newsletter? What interesting things are happening in your community that you could include? Who would you interview? If you'd like, you can print out your newsletter and distribute it to friends and family.

4. Hugo is bullied at both of his schools. However, he also does something to Chance that most people would call bullying. Research bullying and then create a poster or video to teach your classmates what you've learned and what kids like you can do to prevent this behavior. Try to answer the following questions:

What is bullying?

How do you recognize bullying behavior?

What should you do if you are being bullied, or if you see someone else being bullied?

What if you are the bully? What can you do to change your behavior and address the people you've hurt?

You may find these websites useful to get started: <https://pacerkidsagainstbullying.org/> and <https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/kids>.

5. Throughout *One Kid's Trash*, Hugo is bullied for his small size. He struggles with how to deal with this bullying and ends up making a decision he regrets. Write a letter to Hugo offering him advice about good ways to deal with bullying. How could Hugo respond when Chance or another kid picks on him? What resources are available to kids who are being bullied? What do you think Hugo needs to hear to help him feel better after being picked on? How could you be a good friend to Hugo?

6. Hugo's mom is a psychologist and often asks Hugo to do something called "Check In," where he lists how he's feeling emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually. This is what is called a mindfulness exercise. Mindfulness exercises can help us calm our minds and our bodies when we're feeling anxious or upset. They include structured check-ins like Hugo does with his mom, but also breathing exercises and other activities. Research different kinds of mindfulness activities. Then create a set of mindfulness cards. On each card, write the name of the activity on the front and then a description of what to do on the back. Save these cards to use when you are feeling anxious or upset. Pull one randomly from the pile or choose the one you feel will help you most in that moment. Do the activity and see if it helps!

7. In *One Kid's Trash*, Hugo uses a crossword puzzle to get revenge, which ends up really hurting Chance. One way to combat bullying is to practice being kind to others. Create a crossword puzzle about one of your friends, classmates, or family members. The clues and answers should be all the things that are really great about that person.

Chris Clark is a writer and reading teacher who lives with her family in coastal Maine.

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