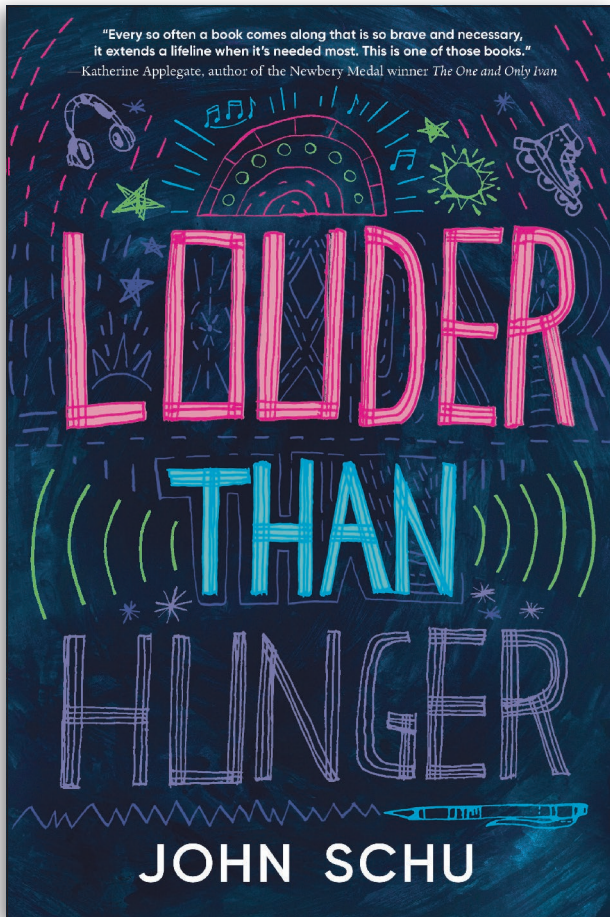


# LOUDER THAN HUNGER



ISBN: 978-1-5362-2909-7

Also available as an e-book

Jake's an outcast. He's so lonely that he just wants to disappear. He used to have friends, but now that he's in eighth grade, he just has the Voice in his head. The Voice tells him not to eat and not to trust anyone. The less he eats, the bigger Jake feels—but he knows it could kill him. Only with help at Whispering Pines, a residential treatment facility, does his life slowly start to get better. But will it be soon enough?

This guide explores emotional and literary aspects of this powerful, heartbreaking story destined to inspire empathy in readers.

“John Schu has given us a courageous tale confirming that the voices inside of us—the ones trying to silence our lives—are real, but conquerable. This is a story of triumph, and I hope that for readers, *Louder Than Hunger* is louder than heartbreak.”

—Jason Reynolds, former National Ambassador for Young People's Literature

“Pulling from struggles with his own eating disorder, Schu gives readers a searing, deeply intimate verse novel, depicting the emotional and physical devastation wrought by disordered eating with brutal, gut-punching honesty. . . . Disordered eating among boys is still an underdiscussed topic and this could bring some much-needed awareness.”

—The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

“Jake is a character who will stay in the hearts of readers for the rest of their lives. I can't wait for you to meet him.”

—Colby Sharp, teacher, author, and reader

“When we read an incredible story, our hearts can grow with every word. I do believe my heart grew three sizes.”

—Pernille Ripp, educator, author, and founder of the Global Read Aloud



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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Early in his narrative, Jake tries to figure out “who I am” (page 6). Why is he confused? What has changed in his life since elementary school? Why doesn't he have friends his age? What factors have driven him to listen to the Voice and to stop eating enough?
2. The Voice's first words in the story are about Jake's growling stomach: “The Voice tells it to S T O P” (page 7). Why does the Voice feel like a friend to Jake? Give examples of its main messages. How can you tell that Jake is changing in his relationship to the Voice? When does it feel like he's stronger than the Voice? Relate the Voice to Jake's experience with bullies and other hostile peers. Discuss how the text fonts vary in size and darkness to reflect the Voice's messages.
3. Why are Jake and the Voice obsessed with eating? About weighing himself, why does Jake say, “The lower the number on the scale goes, the bigger I feel” (page 16)? Connect your answers to Jake's statement “I tried to disappear” (page 367). In this context, discuss the book's title and the Emily Dickinson poem that begins, “I'm Nobody!” (page 8).
4. Discuss Jake's relationship with his grandmother, why it's important to him, and how it's changed since he started avoiding food. What is she like? What happens to her? How does her letter (pages 343–344) express her love for Jake? Explain what Kella means when she says, “Your grandma's always with you” (page 339).
5. Talk about what you learn from Jake's comment about visiting his grandmother: “Friday means three days away from Mom and her sadness. Three days away from Dad, who's never home anyway” (page 34). What's his relationship like with each parent? How does the incident with the waterbed illustrate some of the tensions? What shows that their relationships eventually improve?
6. Trust is a big issue for Jake. Why does the Voice tell him not to trust Ruth, Nurse Bruce, and Dr. Parker? Discuss Jake's description of entering group therapy: “Ruth calls it a circle of trust. I sit outside the circle. I don't trust them” (page 103); discuss his questions on Day 126, “How do you know when to trust? How do you know when to believe?” (page 353). Who does he come to trust, and what causes the change?
7. Why do the counselors at Whispering Pines think it's important for Jake to make friends his own age? How does Kella become a friend? What do they share? What do they learn from each other? Talk about her letter (page 358). In what way does her visit to Jake at Whispering Pines show how much he has changed?
8. In his therapy group, a girl named Evangeline urges Jake to share, but he doesn't. Evangeline looks disappointed, and Jake thinks, “I disappoint everyone” (page 194). Who else does he think he disappoints? Give examples of how he thinks he lets them down. How do you think he disappoints himself?
9. Discuss the author's note at the end of the book. Does knowing that he went through a similar experience influence how you see the story? How do you think personal knowledge of Jake's problems has had an impact on the author's writing? Discuss the novel's dedication: “For thirteen-year-old me, who needed a book like this one.”
10. Two weeks before Jake leaves Whispering Pines, he thanks Dr. Parker for helping him see that “anorexia nervosa isn't really about food” (page 491). What does he mean? Connect your answer to Jake's earlier comments, “I'm tired of anorexia nervosa defining me, controlling every thought and action” (pages 485–486) and “I gave in to my eating disorder. It controlled me when I thought I controlled it” (page 371).

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### I Know the Feeling . . .

Have students keep a journal as they read *Louder Than Hunger*, making connections between Jake's experiences and emotions and their own lives. Ask them to consider questions such as: Have I had similar experiences, and when? Have I had the same or similar emotions? Do I have friends who have felt this way? Students can also create writing prompts for the class based on the current reading. The journals could be kept private, shared with the teacher, or shared with fellow students, depending on the class dynamics.

### "Music Is Healing"

The musician Prince is often quoted as saying, "Music is healing. Music holds things together." Of the artists on Kella's mixtape, Jake says, "Their voices help me imagine a better life, a brighter life, a healthier life" (page 475). Have students make a list or a playlist of songs that stir their emotions. For each song, they should write a sentence or two about how it affects them. If it's comfortable for the students, have them meet in small groups to share their lists and emotional responses in a nonjudgmental way, playing songs if possible.

### *Incandescent, Serendipitous, Wanderlust*

Jake's favorite word is *wanderlust*. Ask the class to review the other favorite words from the circle of trust on Day 278. Create a bulletin board in the classroom or online for students to post their favorite words. Each word should include the part of speech, the definition, its use in a sentence, what it evokes for them, and why it's a favorite. After posting words, students should exchange thoughts about them in a class discussion.

### I AM Poems

Ruth gives patients a template (page 123) to write an "I Am" poem, but Jake thinks, "I'm scared to share who I am" (page 125). Ask each student to write two versions of the poem from Jake's point of view. The first version should be what he might have written that day in class if he hadn't been scared. The second should be from the end of the novel and reflect how he has changed.

### Mindset Matters

Jake goes from believing he's helpless to resist the Voice to shouting back at it. He develops what psychologists call a "growth mindset" in which he sets goals, experiences setbacks, tries again, and achieves some success. As a class, watch the following video about basketball legend Michael Jordan, Supreme Court justice Sonia Sotomayor, and the writer J.K. Rowling, who all persisted despite setbacks: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HEg-ftMEFA>. Hold a class discussion about approaching problems the way these three did, and how Jake learns some of the same approaches.

## ABOUT JOHN SCHU



Photo by Saverio Truglia

**JOHN SCHU** is the author of the acclaimed picture books *This Is a School*, illustrated by Veronica Miller Jamison, and *This Is a Story*, illustrated by Caldecott Honoree Lauren Castillo. He also wrote the adult nonfiction book *The Gift of Story: Exploring the Affective Side of the Reading Life* and was named a *Library Journal* Mover and Shaker for his dynamic interactions with students and his passionate adoption of new technologies as a means of connecting authors, illustrators, books, and readers.

Children's librarian for Bookelicious, part-time lecturer at Rutgers University, and former Ambassador of School Libraries for Scholastic Book Fairs, Mr. Schu (as he is affectionately known) continues to travel the world to share his love of books.

He lives in Naperville, Illinois. You can find him at [www.JohnSchu.com](http://www.JohnSchu.com) and on social media @MrSchuReads.

“Writing *Louder Than Hunger* was a journey. A journey of self-discovery. A journey of bravery and vulnerability. A journey that hurt and healed my heart. Jake, the main character, is based on me in middle school. I spent more than two years in and out of multiple inpatient and outpatient treatment programs and facilities for anorexia nervosa, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety, and depression.

*Louder Than Hunger* is about finding one's place in the world. It's about accepting it's OK to take up space and be who you are. I hope readers who are going through things similar to Jake's experiences see how he survives. I hope it helps them ask for help. I hope it helps build empathy and understanding in readers of all ages. I hope it helps heal hearts.”

— JOHN SCHU

### Common Core Connections

This guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.



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These questions were prepared by Kathleen Odean, a school librarian who gives professional development workshops about new children's and YA books. She chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and served on earlier Caldecott and Newbery Award committees.