

Educators' Guide



AN OCCASIONALLY HAPPY FAMILY

CLIFF
BURKE

About the Book



There are zero reasons for Theo Ripley to look forward to his family vacation. Not only are he, sister Laura, and nature-obsessed Dad going to Big Bend, the least popular National Park, but once there, the family will be camping. It doesn't help that this will be the first vacation they're taking since Mom passed away. Once there, the family contends with 110 degree days, wild bears, an annoying amateur ornithologist and his teenage son.

Then, Theo's dad hits him with a whopper of a surprise: the whole trip is just a trick to introduce his secret new girlfriend. Theo tries to squash down the pain in his chest. But when it becomes clear that this is an auditioning-to-be-his-stepmom girlfriend, Theo must find a way to face his grief and talk to his dad before his family is forever changed.

About the Author

Cliff Burke grew up in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio. He worked as a house painter, a parking lot attendant, and a sign-twirling dancing banana before graduating from the College of William and Mary. For the past ten years, he has taught reading and writing in China, Hong Kong, and Texas. Currently, he teaches writing and humanities at a middle school in the San Francisco Bay Area. His first novel, *An Occasionally Happy Family*, was a 2022 Spirit of Texas Book and was selected for several state reading lists. His latest novel, *My Not-So-Great French Escape*, will be released in March 2023.



Before Reading...

"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

The book begins with this famous first line from the novel *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy. Students can discuss the meaning of this quotation and whether or not they agree with it. Then, they can discuss the meaning of the book's title, *An Occasionally Happy Family*, and what it means to be *occasionally* happy. Is this positive, negative, or somewhere in between?

Discussion Questions

Chapters 1 - 3

1. What have we learned so far about the main character, Theo? How would you describe his personality and his relationship to his sister and dad?
2. How does the first-person narration affect the way the story is told?
3. Make a prediction: what do you think is the "little surprise" the dad has planned?

Chapters 4 - 6

4. How does Theo react to seeing the picture of his mother? What insight does this give us into his character?
5. Does your family have any road trip or vacation rules similar to Dad's Family Road Trip Rules detailed on pages 24-5?
6. At the end of Chapter 6, we learn that if they could be superheroes, Theo would be "Only-Child Man" and Laura would be "One-Year-Older Woman." What would be your superhero name and accompanying power?

Chapters 7 - 10

7. How do Theo, Laura, and their dad each react to the death in their family? Why do you think they react differently?
8. How do you think the family's relative lack of camping experience will factor into the upcoming chapters?

9. These chapters provide more insight into Theo's current graphic novel, *Bob: The Boy With Perfect Memory*. If you were Theo, how would you continue the story - would Bob decide to become a 'normal' person or continue to live with perfect memory?

Chapters 11 - 15

10. Why do you think Theo's dad decides to join camps with Leonard and Leo?
11. Besides comic relief, what role do Leonard and Leo serve in the story?
12. As Chapter 15 ends, how happy are each of the main characters: Theo, Laura, and their dad?

Chapters 16 - 20

13. How does the author create tension in the bear scene in Chapter 17? How does this event help to bring the family back together?
14. Whose side do you take in the birder debate between Laura and Leonard - do you think Leonard was rightfully upset or do you think he overreacted?
15. Dad's "little surprise" is revealed in Chapter 20. How do Theo and Laura react, and what does this tell us about their personalities? How do you think Theo's dad feels at the end of the chapter?
16. How do you think Theo and Laura will respond to their dad's new girlfriend, Lucrecia?

Chapters 21 - 24

17. The Ripley family meets a French couple at the Boquillas Hot Springs and argue about the posted rules. Do you agree with the French couple that there should be no rules in nature?

18. What effect do the French couple have on the Ripley family? How does their inclusion in the story help to advance the plot?

19. If you were in the same situation as Theo and Laura, what would you want to know about your parent's new dating partner?

Chapters 25 - 28

20. What is your impression of Lucrecia? What kind of person is she? Do you agree with Theo and Laura's initial assessment?

21. Do you think that Radical Honesty, as described in Chapter 27, is a useful way to connect with people?

22. Everyone seems to have enjoyed the spa experience, but how do you think Theo and Laura are feeling about Lucrecia as Chapter 28 ends?

Chapters 29 - 31

23. Why do you think Theo is so bothered by his dad's changes in clothing and behavior?

24. What purpose do the excerpts from Theo's graphic novel serve in the larger story?

25. Tensions are mounting and no one seems particularly happy at the end of Chapter 31. What do you think will happen on the final day of the trip?

Chapters 32 - 34

26. Do you think that Lucrecia was right in trying to push through Theo's defenses while they kayaked together?

27. In Chapter 33, Theo finally unloaded his feelings on his dad. While he reacts 'stoically' in the moment, how do you think Theo's dad feels after the kayak trip?

28. How have the events of the road trip led Theo and Laura to confide their feelings to each other at the end of Chapter 34? Do you think this is just a one-time sharing of memories or do you think they will know start to share their memories and feelings with each other more regularly?

Chapters 35 - 38

29. Are you surprised that Theo's dad decided to take a break from his relationship with Lucrecia? Do you think this break is permanent or temporary?

30. What wish do you think Theo made on the shooting star?

31. Does Theo's dad seem truly changed by the end of the book or, as Theo mentions in the final chapter, do you believe that he will return to his usual patterns of behavior in a few weeks time?

32. Now that you have read the book, make a prediction about what will happen next. Where will the family be in one year? Will they be happy?

Extension Activities

Your Own Brief

In the book, Laura writes briefs about a variety of topics (e.g., cancer, Big Bend National Park). Create your own version of "Laura's Briefs" by researching a topic of your choice and writing up a formal report on it. In your report, highlight the most interesting things you have discovered, including key dates, figures, or people. Like Laura, you might start by using the links at the bottom of a Wikipedia page, but also read more widely.

Travel Itinerary

Select a location that you would like to visit and plan a one-week vacation there for you and your family. The location could be a national park, a nearby city, a global travel hotspot, but it must be a real destination. Remember to include how you will get there, what you plan to do each day, where you will stay, and what you will eat. Try to include prices for each of these.

Change the Point of View (POV)

The novel is written from the perspective of Theo. Take a scene from the novel, and re-write it from another character's point of view. You could rewrite the bear attack scene from the POV of Leo, the kayak confrontation scene from the POV of Lucrecia, or any scene from the dad's or Laura's perspective. Remember to use your chosen character's backstory in the scene you choose.

Bob: The Boy With Perfect Memory

Theo spends much of his time working on his graphic novel, *Bob: The Boy With Perfect Memory*, and gives detailed descriptions about the beginning, middle, and end of the story. Either use his descriptions to bring this graphic novel to life with your own illustrations OR use the premise (someone who lives with perfect memory) to create your own short graphic novel. Would your character have different best/worst memories, and decide to use their talents differently? Would they decide to keep their perfect memory or try to change it in some way?

Big Year of Birding

Leonard, an amateur ornithologist, is on his "Big Year," the term used to describe the year of a birder's life dedicated to finding and photographing as many different North American bird species as possible. Prepare for your own big year by researching which birds can be found in your home state. Make a list of the birds, and a brief description of their appearance and their natural habitat. For an added challenge, try to find and photograph at least one of your state's birds.

Imagining Mom

We don't learn much about Theo and Laura's mom in the book. Write a paragraph from Theo or Laura's perspective describing what she was like, what made her special, and how their family is different without her.

Discussion Notes

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Find more information about the book at www.cliffburke.com



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