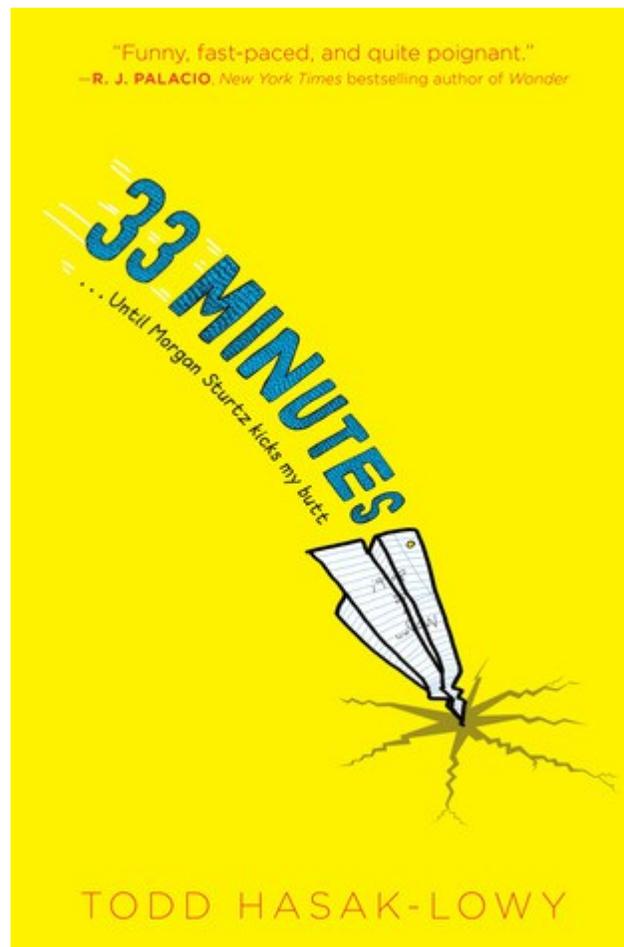


Literature Guide for Todd Hasak-Lowy's

33 Minutes... Until Morgan Sturtz Kicks My Butt

by Robin M. Huntley



Summary

A humorous and cleverly structured book for older readers, 33 Minutes... Until Morgan Sturtz Kicks My Butt offers a fresh take on a common middle school experience. Narrated by seventh grader Sam Lewis, the story is a full-length novel yet spans only a few hours of a day in the life of a somewhat average middle school student. Sam's narration weaves together real-time experiences, thoughts, and emotions, with memories, self-reflection, and background information in order to tell the story of a changing friendship.

The story begins at 11:41am in a middle school social studies classroom, where Sam waits anxiously for the time of day to arrive when Morgan will kick his butt. Though it is not until much later in the story that we learn about the roots of the animosity that exists between Sam and Morgan, but it is here in social studies class that readers begin to get a glimpse of the events leading up to the day proclaimed to be for butt-kicking.

As Sam anxiously experiences the next 33 minutes of his life, he guides readers through the ins and outs of a middle school lunch period and does a lot of reflecting upon past experiences with Morgan, his parents, and his math team – and the connections between the three. Through Sam's reflection, a secondary story begins to form alongside the real-time narrative. Each moment of anxiety that Sam experiences, and each interaction with a friend, peer, or authority figure that takes place before the time scheduled for butt-kicking inspires Sam to reflect upon himself and his relationship with Morgan – allowing readers to begin to understand the differences between the two characters and the choices that each one made that lead them to drift apart so drastically.

While some of the events that take place in the story are certainly hyperbolic representations of reality, Sam's sarcasm and wit are perfectly calibrated to please tween audiences. The fast-paced writing is paired with helpful (and often humorous) diagrams to further explain the social dynamics and general culture of the school that Sam attends. Middle-school-aged readers can easily identify with many of Sam's experiences, thoughts, and feelings, and will appreciate his honesty. 33 Minutes... Until

Morgan Sturtz Kicks My Butt offers tween readers a story about growing up that tells the difficult truth in a way that is over-the-top yet almost entirely believable.

Critical Thinking Questions

These Critical Thinking Questions are intended to help readers process and reflect on what they have read. The questions focus little on the who, what, when, where, and why of the story, and are centered around the portions of the story that are left up to readers to make inferences about. Considering these Critical Thinking Questions can help readers to use the information that they have read as clues with which to analyze characters and events in order to formulate opinions and create connections. The questions are listed in an order that follows the chronology of the story, but many of the questions can be considered again and again throughout the book as further information is divulged. As readers learn more about Sam and his history with Morgan, their answers to some questions will evolve.

- Describe Sam's attitude towards school. Why do you think he feels this way?
- Why is Morgan so mad at Sam? Why do you think Morgan is willing to threaten violence towards Sam?
- Do you think that Sam could do anything to change his situation, or is his only option to anxiously await a butt-kicking?
- How do you know that Sam and Morgan have grown apart as friends?
- Do you think that Sam acknowledges the reasons for the change in his relationship with Morgan? Why or why not?
- What is Ms. Z's role within the school community? How is she different from the other adults in the story?

- Is Sam telling the truth? (About his friendship with Morgan, about his feelings about school, about his lack of friends, about his unpopularity, etc.)
- Was TAMADE really the best day ever, or did it serve as something else within Sam and Morgan's friendship?
- Who do you think spread the mean rumors about Morgan that Sam wasn't responsible for? What makes you think this?
- If there were a sequel to the story, do you think that Sam and Morgan would really have stopped being friends entirely? Explain.

Mini-Lesson

Throughout the story, Sam's drawings serve both as comic relief and as comprehension aids. During Sam's description of his lunch period, a diagram is included that details the numerous social groups at the middle school and the places where they sit during lunchtime. Though Sam's captions on the diagram at first seem more humorous than anything else, they actually serve as valuable information in understanding Sam's school experience.

Sociograms – diagrams that highlight or explain the social connections between people – are a tool often used by educators in order to understand classroom dynamics and to support the creation of a healthy classroom culture. While Sam's diagram may not seem to serve such a formal purpose, it serves as a sociogram within the context of the story.

This mini-lesson asks readers to focus not on academic skills, but on social and emotional awareness and understanding. Designed for middle school readers, the lesson is intended to support participants in bringing an awareness of social relationships and their emotional basis into their consciousness. The lesson could take place during a single meeting or over the course of two separate consecutive meetings.

Sociograms for Self-Awareness

1. Introduce readers to the concept of a sociogram by sharing an example with them.
Examples can be found easily online, but a sociogram that shows connections between the participants in the group will help readers to better understand the concept.
Sociograms can be as simple or complex as is necessary or desired, and might use different colored lines, patterns, or other symbols to denote a certain type of relationship, connection, or quality about a person or group of people. A sociogram for the participating group should be as complex as can be expected of readers.
2. Discuss with readers the connections shown on the group sociogram. Highlight the relationship between personality/interests and relationship/friendship connectors. These connections are the very reason for why sociograms can be powerful tools. Discuss the information that an outsider could gain by examining the sociogram.
3. Ask readers to create their own sociograms. Readers must include themselves in their sociograms, and as such must choose friends, peers, and/or family members as subjects for their consideration. Readers should use the same (or very similar) format that was used for the sample sociogram. Sufficient time should be given for students to complete their sociograms (this could even be given as a homework assignment).
4. When sociograms have been completed, ask readers to share their work – either with the entire group (if time allows) or with a small group (3-5 participants). Ask readers to focus on the ways in which they identified and showed connections and why.
5. Discuss with the group the similarities and differences that they see in each others' sociograms. Ask readers to consider both the people included in each sociogram and the types of connections highlighted.
6. Ask readers to reflect on their own sociograms. This could be done as a group

discussion or as a written reflection for privacy (and the potential for greater honesty).

Readers should discuss their own role within the sociogram, and should identify positive things that they can recognize about themselves and their role within whatever community of people they have included in their work. Additionally, the sociograms could be used as a toll for identifying room for growth or the desire for change within a group of people. (If being used in this way, it is best for reflection to be written as the reflection that readers do may be very personal.)

7. End the reflection by asking readers to think about what the creation of and reflection on a sociogram has helped them to learn about themselves. This can be done as a group discussion.

Extension Activities

Each of the following activity suggestions are designed to support readers in not only deepening their understanding of this particular story, but in strengthening their skills in reading comprehension and writing, as well. Loosely written so as to allow for adaptability, the activities have been designed with readers ages 10-13 in mind.

Timelines for Comprehension

Throughout the story, Sam fills in the back story of his relationship with Morgan while also describing the events happening around him. Piecing together the past and present in proper order can be very difficult while reading the story, but luckily, each of the chapters is marked with a time, allowing readers to track Sam's whereabouts at any given moment. Tracking the evolution of Sam and Morgan's friendship, however, proves much more difficult.

While readers work their way through the story, adults can help to offer comprehension support by facilitating the use of a timeline. Readers can stop to add events to the timeline while they read, or

at designated intervals throughout the book (at the end of each chapter, every ten pages, every time it feels necessary, etc.). Eventually, readers will find that the designated “beginning” of their timeline (which will most likely be the beginning of the story – 11:41am) becomes the middle, and that an extension must be added in order to accommodate for the many memories that Sam shares. As the timeline grows, readers will have to think critically in order to accurately place each new piece of information amongst the events of past and present, working to put each piece of information into context. Such close consideration of context will support readers in understanding the importance of each event, and its ties to both the past and present as well.

Examining Point-of-View

In the telling of any story, the point of view from which it is told is essential to the reader's understanding. In this story, we hear only Sam's version of the events leading up to the disintegration of his friendship with Morgan. Discuss with readers the meaning of the word bias, and the role that it can play in the telling of stories. Whether a narrator intends to exercise bias or not, when we tell stories about our selves (as Sam does), it is incredibly difficult – if not impossible – to tell them without our own thoughts, feelings, and concept of self affecting the way in which the story is formed. With this information in mind, try examining the events in the story from another character's perspective. How would the story be different if we were able to hear Morgan's perspective? How about Chris'? Or what about from the perspective of Sam's parents, who seem to know little about what's really going on in Sam's life and would be surprised to find that Morgan and Sam are no longer friends.

Considering the story from another perspective does not necessarily require re-writing the entire book. Rather, readers could craft a short story or chapter to place within the book that tells just a portion of the story from another perspective. Perhaps Morgan could tell his version of the food fight, or Ms. Z could share the post-fight art class from her own perspective.

Symbolism in Book Jackets

When readers have finished the book, consider the symbolism included in the book's cover art. The paper airplane – made of notebook paper and complete with a hand-written message peeking from its creases – comes straight from the story, but its crash-landing represents more than just the final fate of Sam's secret note. Theorize with readers about the possible meanings of the crash landing. Then, consider other ways in which an artist could use symbolism to represent these same ideas. What images came to mind while reading the book that might find a place on its cover? What objects are mentioned in the story that could better represent the events that take place? How could Sam's feelings be symbolized? Each reader can choose one of these alternative means of symbolism and use it to create their own original book jacket for the story, complete with a summary and reviews on the back.

Writing Memoirs

While 33 Minutes... is not truly a memoir (though it may be based on real-life experiences), the way in which it is written otherwise fits easily into the category of memoir writing. Todd Hasak-Lowy expertly blends Sam's present experiences with relevant, poignant details about the past and in-depth descriptions of Sam's thoughts and feelings. This style of writing is very difficult, as it requires not only careful planning, but an awareness of the connections between past events, thoughts, and emotions and present ones.

After reading 33 Minutes..., readers should be encouraged to try their own hand at memoir writing. Begin by brainstorming the stories that you have to tell. Good memoirs are moving, and focus on some kind of transformative experience, good or bad. Once readers have chosen a story, encourage them to plan their writing by making a list of the moments that will be included in the story. Then, add depth to the story by identifying places where details about the past can be added. Perhaps a mention of going swimming could include a flashback to memories of learning how to swim, or the process of eating and peanut butter and jelly sandwich could include a description of what the sandwich's flavor

evokes for the storyteller. Once readers have created a list of moments and can connect some of them to relevant memories, it's time to write! Encourage readers to focus on quality rather than quantity, and assure them that honest writing is much better than writing that is long but devoid of honesty.