

Teachers Resources

UNLOCKED

By Ryan G Van Cleave

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Reading Age: 12+

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***Unlocked* Teacher Resources**

About the book:

Andy's never had an easy time making friends, but being a freshman at a new high school is a fresh chance to become someone different. Someone popular. Someone cool. But how can he do that when his father is the JANITOR there?

Sure enough, Andy ends up an outcast. But at least he's able to befriend Blake, a once-popular boy whose father died in Iraq. To someone like Andy, a friendship with this quiet loner soon meant everything.

Then the rumours start. Everyone's talking about it. Everyone thinks it might be true. Does Blake have a gun hidden in his locker?

Andy's father has the master keys to the entire school. Is it more heroic to steal the keys and find out if the rumours are true, or should Andy have faith in his one and only friend? Andy's unsure what to do until the love of his life, Becky Ann, convinces him to open the locker.

What Andy finds inside changes everything.

About the author:

Ryan G. Van Cleave lives with his wife and two children in Sarasota, Florida, USA. Ryan is the author of many books for adults, including poetry collections, anthologies, textbooks, and a memoir. *Unlocked* is his first book for young readers. To learn more about Ryan and access free reader resources for *Unlocked*, please visit www.unlockedthebook.com

Pre-Reading:

Why do you think this particular cover image was chosen? What kind of mood does it create in your mind? What do you think this book will be about?

Which is more important: friendship or honesty? Love or belonging? Popularity or personal integrity?

Discussion Guide:

- How would you describe Andy's life after reading the first few poems in the book? Is he the type of person you'd be friends with? Why or why not?
- What type of person is Becky Ann? How sincere is she with her friends? With Andy? Is there specific evidence to support your impressions, or are you just going with a gut feeling?
- Andy encounters various types of bullying at school. How does he choose to handle it? How would you handle it if you were the victim of bullying or saw it happening to someone you knew?
- What does Andy want most of all? Is he able to get it? Why or why not? As a friend, what advice might you offer him about this?
- Andy plays video games, uses an iPod, and sends text messages. What assumptions do you make about him from these facts alone? Has anyone ever made an assumption about you because of what you did, said, or wore?
- Why doesn't Andy tell anyone about the gun? Is he scared of it? How does the secret of the gun change Blake and Andy's relationship?
- Why do you think Blake doesn't ever invite Andy over to his house? What do you think Andy would see if he did go there?
- Andy has an ongoing health issue. How do you imagine asthma affects him beyond breathing difficulties? Did you ever know anyone who has serious health issues? How did those issues affect their behavior, self-confidence, and friendships?
- Why does Andy finally tell? He had many opportunities to do so—what finally convinced him it was the right thing to do? (Or did he do it even if he thought it might not be the right thing to do?)
- What does it mean that Andy told his father versus the principal, a guidance counselor, the police, his mother, or someone else? Considering what you've seen about Andy's relationship with his father, does Andy telling him surprise you?

Projects:

Language Arts: Try your hand at a free verse poem (meaning poetry where you don't have to worry about counting syllables or rhyming unless you choose to). Write a poem that's inspired by "Me" or "Hate," or simply write a poem about any of the following:

- The strangest experience you had last summer
- Your first crush
- Peer pressure
- Your dream job

Art: Create your own picture of what you think Blake and Andy look like. Share your pictures with a friend who's read *Unlocked*. Can you tell which picture is which character? How close did you stay to the physical details of each character that were mentioned in the story?

Discuss your artistic process — why did you choose the color, setting, and medium that you did?

Math/Logical: With a partner (or on your own), create a timeline of the key events in *Unlocked*. See if you can make the entire timeline without looking back at the book. Later, check the book to see how you did. Did you flip-flop any scenes? If your changes were added in, how would the story be different?

Health: Blake was so sad over his father's death that he probably was suffering from depression. Research the statistics in your area for teen depression. Create a public awareness campaign for teen depression using a Powerpoint presentation, a website, a series of posters, a pamphlet, or a public speech to let the rest of the school (or your community) know about this important topic.

Current Events: Gun violence in American schools has become prevalent in recent years. Do you ever worry about gun violence in your own school, or in other Australian schools? Can you think of any other ways your school could be safer? Discuss these issues in small groups or as an entire class with your teacher.

Music: Create your own playlist for reading this book. Do any of your songs particularly match with the mood of any individual poem? How do you see them working together?

What happens next?:

Do you think Blake and Andy will ever see each other again? Will Andy's new popularity fade? Will Blake ever forgive Andy? Is he even angry with Andy in the first place?

In regular prose, write a one-page scene where Andy is reflecting back on the events of this story after he's graduated from college. What specifics does he still recall? What does he now know that he didn't know back then? Does he still feel the same about what happened?

Author Q&A:

Q: Where do your ideas come from?

A: The world's full of interesting things – the trick is to keep your eyes open and watch closely and creatively for them. But story ideas don't have to just come from what you see. I get story ideas from reading newspapers, watching television, talking to friends, going out to dinner, and surfing the Internet. You get pretty good at spotting them after awhile.

Q: Did you always want to be an author?

A: I used to want to run a pet shop but I knew I'd end up keeping every single animal and taking them home. I also briefly considered running a bookstore, except I had the same concerns about the books – I'd rather have kept them all!

I've always liked writing, though, so it's no surprise that I studied English at college. I started writing then too and I've stuck with it for the last two decades. I also run a lot of writing workshops, which is something I enjoy. Young writers, especially, are terrific to work with.

Q: When you work with young people who are interested in being writers, what are some of things you share?

A: I tell them about the "writer's eye" way of viewing the world. This is a term used by Stephen King that means you're able to see story potential in everything you encounter. It's an ability that improves with practice. Go ahead and try it now – just by looking at the room you're in, come up with five different story ideas.

Another thing I do is encourage young writers to read, read, read. The more you read, the better chances you'll have of writing something new and exciting versus something that's already been done before. It almost sounds counterintuitive, but after two decades in this business, I assure you that it's true.

Q: Did you ever witness gun violence in schools?

A: No, thank goodness. But I started really thinking about it when my college--Northern Illinois University--had a school shooting in 2008. The idea that bullets zinged through the air at Cole Hall, where I once sat, really haunted me. Twenty-four people were shot, and five of them died, including the shooter, Steven Philip Kazmerczak. I began wondering what would motivate someone to bring a gun to school and open fire. That's where the idea for *Unlocked* began.

Q: Do you worry that reading about gun violence in schools might encourage people to consider it?

A: I think *Unlocked* is pretty clear in showing the negative consequences of such an action. My intention is that it will help get schools thinking more about student safety, teachers thinking about watching students more closely for signs that they need help, and students thinking more about how bullying, stereotyping, and violence are never good options. Andy feels a little unsure of himself and what's happened by the end of the story, but I think most readers will applaud his courage and his sense of community responsibility.

Here's a quote that might help. The philosopher Edmund Burke once wrote: "All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."

Q: What are some of your literary influences?

A: I'm a college professor and a regular book reviewer for magazines, so I encounter a lot of great new books. I also have far too many bookshelves that are stuffed (sometimes three deep!) with old favorites. A few that I've read recently that really stuck with me are: J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series, *Charles M. Schulz: My Life with Charlie Brown*, *Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth About Violent Video Games*, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, and *David Archuleta: A Memoir of Soul, Song, and The Power of Perseverance*. While I've got favorite authors whose work profoundly affects me (F. Scott Fitzgerald, Tim O'Brien, Edgar Allen Poe, Lorrie Moore, etc.), every book I read influences me to some degree.

Q: Who are some of your favorite YA writers?

A: There are a lot of terrific YA writers, so this could easily get to be a very big list. Some of the books on my nightstand right now, though, include *The Season* (Sarah MacLean), *Holes* (Louis Sachar), *The Golden Compass* (Philip Pullman), *Rules* (Cynthia Lord), *Coraline* (Neil Gaiman), and *Criss Cross* (Lynne Rae Perkins).

I especially love YA books because readers are often still enjoying the act of reading. At the college level, I run across students all the time who have come to dislike reading. They're no longer open to enjoying the stories, hearing the messages, and appreciating what the author has to share--that's a sad situation. I think the best YA books have a chance of reaching and affecting millions. When I ask people what their favorites books are, more than half of the time it's a YA or children's book. That says a lot to me about the lasting power of a great YA book.