



The Experiment

REBECCA STEAD

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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 10+

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CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Stead is the author of *When You Reach Me*, *Liar & Spy*, *First Light*, *Goodbye Stranger* and *The List of Things that Will Not Change*, and *Bob and The Lost Library* with Wendy Mass. Her books have been awarded the Newbery Medal, the *Boston Globe/Horn Book Award* for Fiction and the *Guardian Children's Fiction Prize*. Rebecca lives in New York.

SYNOPSIS

Nathan is just like any other sixth grader, except for one thing. At an early age, Nathan learned that he and his parents are aliens, sent to Earth from another planet as part of an experiment. They are explorers, tasked with understanding human behaviour and learning how to blend in. Nathan and his parents dutifully follow instructions from the mothership: regularly brushing their teeth with special pink toothpaste to maintain their human forms, and recording information in a logbook. No one knows their secret—not even Nathan's best friend, Victor. For eleven years, everything has gone according to plan. But then Nathan grows a tail.

Nathan's parents don't know what to do: this wasn't part of the experiment. How on Earth is Nathan going to blend in with a long stripey tail that seems to have a mind of its own? And that's not the only weird thing that's happening: other alien kids have started to disappear, including Nathan's friend, Izzy. When Nathan and his parents are called back to the mothership (known as the Wagon), Nathan can't help but worry about what might happen to him, and his tail.

However, when Nathan arrives at the Wagon (hidden inside a storage unit in Pennsylvania) he is met with enthusiastic applause. Nathan meets Hester, an oddly pink woman in charge of the experiment. Hester is very interested in Nathan's tail, and organises a series of tests. Nathan discovers that Izzy is also in the Wagon, along with the other missing kids. Izzy and her friends are tired and hungry, and are being forced to work in a part of the Wagon known as Section Six. Izzy believes they have been sent to the Wagon because, unlike Nathan, they didn't change. She thinks the whole experiment has been a lie, and that they're not actually aliens at all.

Hester sends Nathan and his parents back to New York. Nathan tells his mum and dad about Izzy's theory, but it is hard for them to hear, and they don't want to talk about it. Back home, Nathan's tail—named 'Tuck'—becomes more active. When Tuck uses Nathan's pencils to spell 'HLP', Nathan tells his parents they have to do something. He wants to go back to the Wagon, but his mum and dad



don't think it's a good idea. Nathan decides to go anyway, and, with Victor's help, he heads back to Pennsylvania.

Back in the Wagon, Nathan teams up with Izzy and the other kids from Section Six. Together they try to find out what the experiment is really about and what Hester's real plans are. But the Wagon is about to be pulled back into outer space, and time is running out. Can Nathan and his friends discover the truth before it's too late?

The Experiment is a gripping sci-fi adventure story for middle grade readers that addresses important themes of friendship, courage and figuring out who you are.

BEFORE READING

1. Look closely at the front cover. What do you notice? What clues does it give you about this story? What predictions can you make?
2. Do you think there is life elsewhere in the universe? Why / why not? If so, what do you think it might look like? Sound like? How do you think it might behave?
3. Look up some examples of the Calvin and Hobbes comics online or in the library. Who are the main characters in these comics? Can you find a connection between Calvin and Hobbes and the picture on the cover of *The Experiment*?
4. What do you know about New York City? Look up some photos and maps online. What words could you use to describe the city? In what ways is it different from where you live?

WHILE READING

1. How does Nathan's dad wake him up? Does someone wake you up in the morning? What do they say or do?
2. Why does Nathan's mum love it when Nathan is on his phone? How is this different from most parents?
3. How many of Nathan's 'nine friends' were at their last meeting? Where do you think his missing friends have gone?
4. What 'simple but important question' is Nathan's mum helping Hester answer? (p. 52)
5. Why is Nathan surprised when he meets Hester?
6. What does Nathan notice about the ripped corner of napkin Izzy drops on the floor of the Wagon? Where does this clue lead him?
7. What does Izzy mean when she says 'What if we're the failures...And you're the success?' (p. 101)
8. What does Nathan notice about Hester's skin?
9. What is the antidote that the title of Chapter 32 refers to?
10. What does Nathan notice about the pencils Tuck plays with in Chapter 34?
11. How does Tuck stop Toto from telling Nathan's mum that Nathan is leaving?

12. Why does Nathan leave Victor behind when he goes back to the Wagon?
13. What is 'the life of a Scrubber'? (p. 183)
14. How does Nathan fall into the pool in Hester's office? Do you think Tuck did this on purpose? Why?
15. What are the Kast?
16. Why does Hester want the moss scrubbed off the ship every day? Why does she want to kill the moss 'once and for all'? (p. 229)
17. What does Tuck 'show' Nathan on page 254? How do Nathan's feelings change when he sees it?
18. What happens to Tuck? Is he completely gone?
19. What 'incredible opportunity' does Hester realise she had been given when she first found the Kast? (p. 263) Did she take that opportunity?
20. In what ways does the final chapter mirror the first?

AFTER READING CHARACTER

1. Most of the chapters in *The Experiment* are told from Nathan's perspective, but there are four chapters told from the perspectives of other characters. Who are they? Reread these four chapters. What do they tell you about these characters? What do they tell you about Nathan? What do you notice about the titles of the chapters told from alternative points of view? Why do you think the author chose to do this?
2. 'Victor was always Calvin (the mischievous boy), and Nathan was always Hobbes (the thoughtful tiger). Which made sense. Victor said Nathan was a lot like Hobbes because he was thoughtful and easygoing...And Victor was like Calvin because he was hyper and adventurous.' (p. 2) Do you agree with Victor's comparisons? Does Nathan? Do you think you are more like Calvin or Hobbes? Why?
3. Reread Chapter 59 'Hester in Space'. Why was Hester so unhappy? Do you think she deserves a happy ending? Does she get one?
4. What do you think Izzy means when she describes the D.P.s as 'kind of bitter'? (p. 27) List some of the other characters in this book. Can you describe them using different tastes? E.g. salty, sweet, sour, spicy.
5. Nathan is not in control of Tuck, his tail. Who is? Is Tuck, like Izzy asks on page 100, its own person? How would you describe Tuck's personality? Write a character profile for Tuck.

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. *The Experiment* is broken up into five parts. Why do you think the author chose to structure the novel this way? What is the 'Liftoff' that the title of each part refers to? What are the other parts of each title (e.g. 'Part One: Orders') and how do they reflect what is happening in the story?



2. What do you notice about the names of Nathan's 'alien' friends and the places they live? E.g. Isabel from Illinois. Can you create a list of names and Australian places that use alliteration?
3. 'His stomach was a washing machine of regret and relief'. (p. 154) What is the author using this metaphor to describe? Can you think of another metaphor to describe the same feeling?
4. 'I thought the Kast were...more like cats or something'. (p. 212) There are a number of clues in this novel that make the reader wonder if the Kast are cats. These are known as 'red herrings': clues that are intended to be misleading. Are there any other red herrings in this book? What about in other books or films? Try writing your own mystery story that includes a red herring.

THEMES

Identity

1. 'What Nathan felt in those moments was a secret thrill: half fear, half excitement. Plus maybe an unspoken wish to be seen as the person he really was? But Nathan's whole job was not to be seen as who he was'. (p. 7) Why does Nathan feel like he has to hide who he really is? Have you ever felt this way?
2. 'I know what we've been told for our whole lives... that doesn't make it a fact'. (p. 117) Nathan's parents are forced to question everything they thought they knew about who they are. How do they deal with this? In what ways do they come to terms with this information? How do their lives change at the end of the novel?
3. Victor feels sorry for Nathan's parents. He says, 'This experiment was their whole lives. Now it turns out that everything might be the opposite of how they thought it was. Isn't that like finding out your whole life was a waste?' (p. 125–6). Do you think Nathan's parents' lives have been wasted? Why / why not?
4. Nathan asks Victor's grandma if she thinks people are born with 'mean streaks'. (p. 133) What is Gram's answer? Why do you think some people might have 'mean streaks'?
5. Gram says she got over her mean streak by making 'choices'. (p. 134) 'You can't choose the way you feel. I made other choices.' What choices did she make? Have you ever made choices like this when you have been feeling upset or mean?
6. 'Because the Kast were definitely not the bad guys. They just wanted to go home. Nathan was looking at the bad guy'. (p. 214) Who is the 'bad guy' Nathan is looking at? Is Hester all bad? What do you think Hester really wants? Does she get it?

Courage

1. 'Once you know there's a universe of stuff you didn't know you were supposed to worry about, you begin to wonder how big it is and how many bad things are in it'. (p. 16) Have you ever felt this

way? Can you remember a time that made you feel the universe was 'bigger' and 'badder' than you thought? What strategies did you use to cope?

2. Why do you think Victor starts laughing when he is hiding under Nathan's bed in Chapter 11?
3. 'Victor must have been so scared. But he had tried to follow Nathan anyway'. (p. 90) Have you ever felt scared to do something, but then done it anyway? What was the outcome? Is this what courage is?
4. 'No crying, he told himself. Crying would wake up his mom, and then she'd tell him, again, that everything was fine. Which only made him feel worse, because it was a lie.' (p. 85) Why do you think Nathan's mum would lie about things being fine? Is it ever okay to lie to try to make someone feel better?
5. What song does Annie start singing in Chapter 54? Do you know this song? What songs do you find comforting in difficult times?

Exploration

1. 'Nathan, everything we experience on Earth is important...We're here for a very important reason. Ask yourself: What is more noble than exploration?' (p. 32) Nathan's parents think of themselves as explorers. Have you ever been exploring? Where? Do you have to travel far away from where you live to be an explorer?
2. On page 143, Nathan talks about wanting the human character in the movie *E.T.* to get on the spaceship when he was invited. Victor, on the other hand, wanted the kid to go home with his mum. Nathan says, 'I was always curious about stuff like that.' Would you get on the spaceship, like Nathan, or stay home, like Victor? Why?
3. 'Sometimes an outsider's eyes see things that natives don't notice. Nathan's mom liked to say that being a "visitor" made her a better observer of life in New York City'. (p. 91) Imagine you are a visitor to your school or town. What things might you notice that you don't usually?
4. If you could explore any place in the world, where would you explore? Do some online exploration by researching a place of your choice. Look at maps and photos. Find out information about the population, wildlife, currency and culture.
5. Choose a particular part of your school or home to explore, like the sandpit or the laundry or a corner of your garden. What can you discover when you take the time to look closely at these places?

Love

1. 'Victor was Nathan's best friend forever, but Izzy understood both sides of Nathan's life'. (p. 50) Do you have friends in different ways?



2. Nathan and Victor had never spoken to each other until third grade. 'Victor's grandma liked to say that as soon as they did, their spirits recognised each other, grabbed each other up in a hug, and didn't let go. "Never let go," she often told them, her face serious. "You got lucky. True friends don't show up too often."' (p. 61) Write a letter to a 'true friend' to show them how much you appreciate them.
3. 'It was a normal, messy, perfect family. They [Victor's family] didn't have to think about being normal. They just were.' (p. 63) What does Nathan think makes a perfect family? What do you think? How can something be both 'messy' and 'perfect'?
4. What does Victor's grandma think 'everybody wants'? (p. 134) Do you agree? What happens if people don't get it?
5. 'Eyes closed, Nathan listened to his father scrambling eggs in a bowl. It was a sound he heard almost every morning. Just one tiny little part of a life that Nathan had taken for granted.' (p. 32) Think about 'one tiny little part' of your life that you love, but might take for granted. What's special about it? What would you miss about it if it didn't happen anymore?

RESPONDING

1. Nathan's tail, Tuck, looks just like Hobbes's tail, the character in the comic books Nathan has been reading. If you grew a tail, what sort of tail would it be? Design your own tail. What will it be inspired by? Why?
2. How do Tuck and Nathan communicate with each other? Design your own alien life form. Include information about how it communicates.
3. On page 26, Izzy and Nathan text back and forth about what they think D.P. might stand for. Come up with some other possible answers (other than 'Decommissioned Parents').
4. What is Nathan's secret dream? What is Nathan's mum's? What is Izzy's? Why are these dreams secret? Do you have a secret dream? (Or a not-so-secret dream?)
5. 'Did Nathan have a mean streak?' Nathan gets angry with Toto on page 65 and thinks about hurting him. Have you ever felt angry like this? Does everyone have 'a mean streak'? What strategies does Nathan use to manage his feelings of anger? What strategies do you use?
6. What does the word 'hypothesis' mean? (p. 148) What do you think Hester's hypothesis is? Come up with your own hypothesis to test out.
7. What is a 'mnemonic device'? How does Leo use one to remember the way back to Section Six? (p. 193) Come up with your own mnemonic device for something you need to remember.