

# Discussion Guide



## An Educator's Guide to *Nothing Special* by Geoff Herbach

A Common Core Standards-aligned activity guide for grades 9 and 10

Prepared by We Love Children's Books

## Nothing Special by Geoff Herbach Discussion Guide



*Nothing Special* is the follow-up to *Stupid Fast*. It's the following year and Felton Reinstein is as big, strong, and fast as everyone thought he'd be—which makes him one of the best-known high school athletes in the state. Unfortunately, he's still a little kid on the inside and often can't see beyond his own problems.

While dealing with the pressures and trials of his own rise to popularity, he loses sight of his friends and family. He's a jerk to his pal Gus, and he ignores his little brother Andrew—who struggles mightily without Felton's help. And now, instead of going to orchestra camp, Andrew has disappeared. Ride along with Felton as he searches for his brother and finds himself with the help of their estranged grandfather and family he never knew before.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Geoff Herbach is the author of the award-winning *Stupid Fast* YA series featuring Felton Reinstein. His books have received a variety of awards and accolades, including the 2011 Cybils Award for best YA fiction; Junior Library Guild selections; and being listed in the year's best by the American Library Association, the American Booksellers Association, and many state library associations. Herbach is also the author of the literary novel *The Miracle Letters of T. Rimberg*. He has produced radio comedy shows and toured rock clubs telling weird stories. Geoff teaches creative writing at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Geoff, his wife Stephanie, and their children live in a log cabin on the side of a bluff.



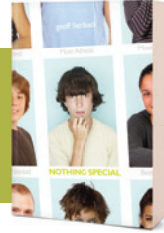
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To learn more about Geoff and his books,  
visit [www.geoffherbach.com](http://www.geoffherbach.com)  
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### PRAISE

"Felton's voice is fresh and believable as a teen on the edge of manhood...Kudos to Herbach for this deep, moving, LOL funny, and completely original story."  
—*School Library Journal*

"Sports abound in this story—track, football, tennis, and Frisbee. The writing is particularly fresh in these descriptions, which depict all the internal rhythms, workings, and mantras of an athlete in a critical moment." —*Star Tribune*

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### PRE-READING QUESTION

This book focuses on the problems that come along with being a student who excels at sports. As a class, discuss the pressures that a highly recruited star athlete might face. Are these challenges unique? What things might be easier for such a student? What might be more difficult?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

#### Vocabulary

As students read the novel, have them identify sentences with words or phrases that are unfamiliar, or used in an interesting way. Instruct students to keep a list of these words and phrases. Have them write down what they believe the meaning of the word or phrase is from context. Then have them consult reference materials to identify the literal meaning, the part of speech, and the etymology of the word or phrase. *L 9-10.4, 9-10.5, 9-10.6*

#### In a Manner of Speaking

The author uses idioms, slang, and figures of speech in this book. Some are used in a specific way by Felton or his friends (e.g., “squirrel nut,” “gorilla”) and some are standard figurative language (Andrew sings “like a canary”). Have students keep a list of these phrases as they read the book. Have them break into pairs and share their findings. Come together as a class and discuss these phrases. What is the literal meaning of the phrase? What is it meant to convey about the action of the story or the characters? Why did the author use this particular idiom, metaphor, or figure of speech in this passage? What effect does the author achieve by using these figures of speech in the book? How do these phrases and idioms impact the sense of time and place in the book? What do they tell the reader about the nature of the text? *RL 9-10.4 SL 9-10.1 L 9-10.4, 9-10.5, 9-10.6*

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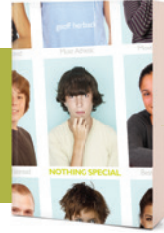
Discuss the title of the book. Why is the book called *Nothing Special*? What do students think it means? While it could reflect a negative way a character or characters feel about themselves, it also has other implications in the story. In what ways do the characters feel it might be nice to be “nothing special”? Have students reread the last chapter of the book, paying particular attention to the passage where Felton says that he is “nothing special.” Discuss this last chapter, especially the final conversation between Felton, Tovi, Andrew, and Stan, and Felton’s personal revelations following that passage, in light of the title. *RL 9-10.1, 9-10.2 SL 9-10.1*

#### Be a Good Sport

*Nothing Special* presents an uncommon focus: a look at the troubles that come along with being a statewide star athlete. Felton’s outstanding abilities at football and track create a unique set

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of problems for him. Discuss as a class how the author uses Felton’s games and track meets to advance the plot and explicate his character. What do we learn about Felton from the sports sequences that we would not otherwise know? Draw students’ attention to the stresses that Felton experiences due to his outstanding abilities. Given what is at stake (a college scholarship and the path of his future life, etc.), do his reactions seem realistic? Have students discuss Felton’s family, friends, and classmates and their perceptions of Felton. Do the other people in Felton’s life know how he really feels? Be sure to cite specifics from the text. *RL 9-10.1, 9-10.2, 9-10.3 SL 9-10.1*

#### Andrew and Gus

Andrew and Gus are two of the most important, and most well-defined, characters in Felton’s life. One thing that makes them vivid as characters is their conflicting emotions toward Felton, and the conflicting motivations they have for behaving as they do. Break students into pairs. Have one student in the pair summarize and explain Andrew’s feelings toward Felton, and his motivations for his actions in the book. How does he change and grow through the text? How does his growth advance the plot? Have the other student do the same for Gus. Have them present their findings to each other. Working together, have them identify similarities and differences between the characters. How are their relationships with Felton the same? How are they different? What theme or themes can readers draw from how these two characters act, react, grow, and change through the story? Come together as a class to share their insights. *RL 9-10.1, 9-10.2, 9-10.3 SL 9-10.1*

#### Theme Song

Have each student write down three main themes of this book. Collect them and collate the responses. Come together as a class to discuss these different themes. Identify how each emerges in the book and how it develops over the course of the story. Have students cite specific evidence from the text to support their analysis. Which themes were mentioned most frequently? Which were mentioned most rarely? *RL 9-10.1, 9-10.2 SL 9-10.1*

#### Another Point of View

Nothing Special is an epistolary novel. It is told as a series of entries, written by the main character and addressed to his girlfriend Aleah, which narrate recent events and their aftermath. As a class, discuss the pros and cons of writing in this narrative style of first person versus other points of view—third person, shifting viewpoints, a first-person memoir, etc. Have students rewrite a passage or event from the book using a different point of view. Students may use the point of view of a different character or the third person. Working as a class, compare the rewritten passages with the original text. How does the altered point of view change the way the story is told and read? *RL 9-10.1, 9-10.3 W 9-10.3, 9-10.4, 9-10.5, 9-10.10 SL 9-10.1 L 9-10.1, 9-10.2*

#### Structure

Nothing Special tells two stories simultaneously. Felton relates to Aleah what has been happening in his life while she was in Germany and taking a “break” from their relationship. In addition, Felton is telling the story of the disastrous journey to Florida that he is currently taking. As the book progresses, the two narratives intersect as current events remind Felton of past ones and

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vice versa. Discuss as a class why the author structures the text this way. Does it make the story more confusing to follow? Does it stimulate reader interest? On the whole, is it successful? Why or why not? Are there certain parts of the story that work better in this format? *RL 9-10.1, 9-10.5*  
*SL 9-10.1*

### **Dramatic Tension**

Nothing Special is told in flashback, as Felton recounts his recent adventures and reflects on what he has learned. Discuss as a class the techniques the author uses to convey to the reader the passage of time and the progress of the plot. After the discussion, have students select a section from the book for closer analysis in the form of an essay. Citing specific passages from the text, have students show how the author builds tension, creates mystery, and elicits surprise from the reader. Have students break into pairs and exchange papers. Based on input from their partner, have students revise and edit their work. *RL 9-10.1, 9-10.5 W 9-10.1, 9-10.4, 9-10.5, 9-10.6, 9-10.10 SL 9-10.1 L 9-10.1, 9-10.2*

### **What Is Wrong with Me**

Nothing Special deals with the problems of high school students, their friends, their parents, and their families. Some of these problems are minor; some are more severe. Working as a class, identify and list the problems—mental, emotional, and physical—that appear in the book. Have each student select one and write a short research paper on it. Then have the student analyze the character's behavior in the book in light of this research. Is the condition described accurately by the text? How do the circumstances of the story contribute to the problem the student researched? Examples include suicide, depression, narcissistic personality disorder, bullying, alcohol abuse, and self-esteem issues. *RL 9-10.1, 9-10.2, 9-10.3 W 9-10.1, 9-10.2, 9-10.4, 9-10.5, 9-10.6, 9-10.7, 9-10.8, 9-10.10 SL 9-10.1 L 9-10.1, 9-10.2*