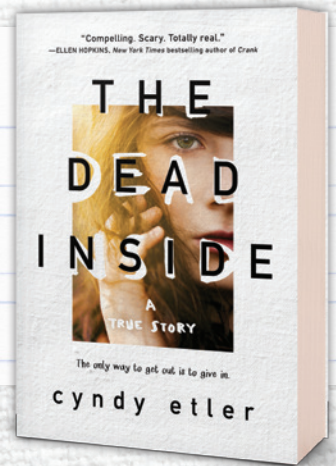


AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO THE DEAD INSIDE

written by cyndy etler



A Common Core State Standards Aligned Activity Guide for Grades 9 through 12

Note: The activities in this guide align with Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts for Grades 9, 10, 11, and 12, but standards for other grades may also apply.

Prepared by We Love Children's Books

About the Book

Cyndy Etler's gripping memoir gives readers a glimpse into the harrowing reality of her sixteen months in the notorious "tough love" program the ACLU called "a concentration camp for throwaway kids." All Cyndy wanted was to be loved and accepted. By age fourteen, she had escaped from her violent home, only to be reported as a runaway and sent to a "drug rehabilitation" facility that changed her world. To the public, Straight Inc. was a place of recovery. But behind closed doors, the program used bizarre and intimidating methods to "treat" its patients. In her raw and fearless memoir, Cyndy Etler recounts her sixteen months in the living nightmare that Straight Inc. considered "healing."

The Dead Inside combines insights into human nature with autobiography and an exposé of abuses that continue to haunt survivors of Straight Inc. and programs like it. Fascinating, enraging, and ultimately hopeful, this book tells a true story that even the most reluctant of readers will find difficult to put down.

About the Author



A modern-day Cinderella, Cyndy Etler was homeless at fourteen, summa cum laude at thirty. Currently a young adult author and teen life coach, Etler spent sixteen years teaching troubled teens in schools across America. Before she was paid for teaching, Etler did it for free, volunteering at public schools and facilities for runaway teens. Today, she speaks at fund-raisers, schools, and libraries, convincing teens that books work better than drugs. After years of hopscotching, Etler now lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, with her husband and dogs. Find her at www.CyndyEtler.com

Praise for *The Dead Inside*

"Raw and absorbing, Etler's voice captivates."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Etler weaves her story with conviction, self-deprecating humor, and hard facts... Readers will come to respect the fighter that Etler is and the advocate she became for other teens in similar situations."

—*Booklist*

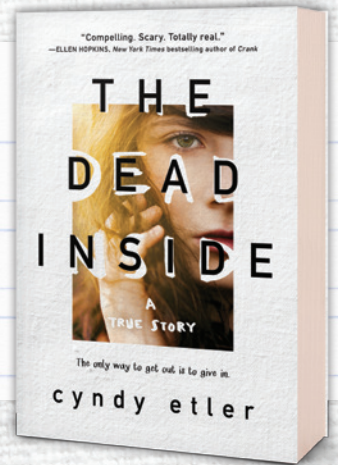
"[An] unnerving and heartrending memoir... readers may be stunned that a place like Straight could exist..."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"The message that teens can survive even the most horrific circumstances is heartening."

—*The Bulletin of the Center of Children's Books*

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Pre-Reading Discussion Questions

The Dead Inside is a memoir by Cyndy Etler. What is the difference between a memoir and an autobiography? What other memoirs have students read?

Discuss the phrase "Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction." Why is it that true stories often seem more unbelievable than the most imaginative fiction? Can a writer "get away" with more when writing fiction or when telling a true story? Why?

Vocabulary

As students read Cyndy Etler's memoir, have them compile a list of unfamiliar words and phrases, write down the meaning of the word or phrase from context, and then consult reference materials to identify the literal meaning, the part of speech, and the etymology of the word or phrase.

L 9–10.4, 9–10.6, 11–12.4, 11–12.6

Post-Reading Activities

Toward More Picturesque Speech

Cyndy uses original, unique metaphors to describe her feelings and situation. Break students into small groups and assign each a section of the book to review, searching for original figures of speech. Come together as a class to discuss their findings. How would this book be different if the author had not written this way? How do these metaphors help us understand Cyndy and her experiences? Does the reader feel more sympathy or less thanks to descriptions like these?

RI 9–10.4, 11–12.4
L 9–10.5, 11–12.5

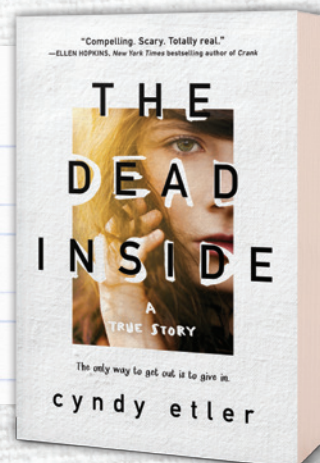
The Same but Different

Cyndy changes dramatically in the course of this story—and not necessarily because she wanted to. Have each student create a chart that draws on specific evidence from the text to list Cyndy's character traits before she enters Straight Inc. and what she is like when she gets out of the program. Come together as a class and discuss these findings. How is she the same when she gets out of Straight Inc.? How is she different? What things caused her to change? How do Cyndy and the people around her feel about these changes? Draw inferences from the text to make conclusions about what happened to her character during her time in Straight Inc. Do students think she will continue to change now that she is back home? What evidence from the text leads them to think that way?

RI 9–10.1, 9–10.2, 9–10.3, 11–12.1, 11–12.2, 11–12.3
W 9–10.4, 11–12.4
SL 9–10.1, 11–12.1

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What Music Means

When Cyndy and her boyfriend, Steve, speak on the phone, he sometimes plays music for her. Come together as a class and discuss this behavior. Do students think this is a good way to communicate? What songs would students play today to let someone know how they are feeling in a similar circumstance? Have students write an opinion piece discussing what music means to Cyndy. How does it make her feel about herself and her life? Do students think her reaction is similar to their own experiences with music? Be sure they cite specifics from the text and draw inferences based on what Cyndy says about her favorite music, songs, and bands. Have students review and revise as necessary before producing a final copy.

RI 9–10.1, 9–10.2, 11–12.1, 11–12.2

SL 9–10.1, 11–12.1

W 9–10.1, 9–10.4, 9–10.5, 11–12.1, 11–12.4, 11–12.5

The Beast Within

When Cyndy has her first group meeting at Straight Inc., she vividly describes the group as being a “beast.” Come together as a class and read this description aloud (Chapter 12). How does Cyndy’s description make the reader feel about Straight Inc. and its activities? How is this image or description developed in the text as the author describes the rap groups, spit therapy, and other group counseling at Straight Inc.? Does describing the group as a “beast” help the reader understand the disturbing aspects of the program? What effects does being part of such a group have on participants? Be sure students cite specifics from the text to support their assertions.

RI 9–10.1, 9–10.5, 9–10.6, 11–12.1, 11–12.5, 11–12.6

SL 9–10.1, 11–12.1

To Be or Not to Be

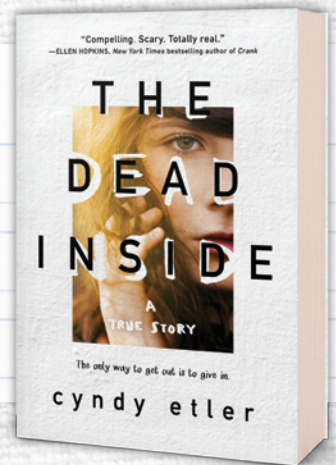
Come together as a class and discuss Cyndy’s experiences and how she changes at Straight Inc. Does she choose to go along with the group, or is it inevitable? Is this an example of “conformity,” or is it necessary for her survival? What events in the story show what can happen if the Straightlings do not cooperate with the process? What was the turning point when Cyndy decided to “play along”? What happened to her and her personality as a result? Were these changes permanent? How does the reader know? Be sure to cite specifics from the text.

RI 9–10.1, 9–10.2, 9–10.3, 11–12.1, 11–12.2, 11–12.3

SL 9–10.1, 11–12.1

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At the Heart of It

Cyndy's life is full of challenges, and she learns a great deal about herself, others, and the world. Come together as a class and identify the big life lessons she learns and the themes that run through this book. Have students write brief summaries about each theme. Drawing on specifics from the text, have them write a description of how each theme is developed sequentially through the text, including what actions and what characters are part of communicating it. Which themes reinforce each other? Which themes made the biggest impression on students? Which themes make an impression on Cyndy at the time she is going through her experiences? Which ones does she only see when looking back?

RI 9–10.1, 9–10.2, 9–10.3, 11–12.1, 11–12.2, 11–12.3
SL 9–10.1, 11–12.1

What if...?

Break students into small groups and have them create an outline of the story, describing the pivotal decisions Cyndy makes and how they lead to the next phases of her life. Given what students know about her personality and circumstances from the book, do students think she could have made different decisions that would have led to different experiences?

RI 9–10.1, 9–10.3, 11–12.1, 11–12.3
SL 9–10.1, 11–12.1

Teen Talk

Drawing on specific examples from the text, discuss the narrative voice. Do students think it is formal or casual? How does this narrative approach contrast with other books students have read? Does it make the story easier to read and the narrator easier to relate to, or harder? How do students think this narrative voice will sound to readers in twenty more years? Fifty years? Read a passage from Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and from S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. Do students think these authors are striving to achieve contemporary conversational style, like Cyndy Etler so effortlessly does? How successful are they? Can students think of any other books, movies, or TV shows where the narrator is speaking in a naturalistic voice of a "teenager"? How does this approach impact the reader's experience?

RI 9–10.1, 9–10.2, 9–10.6, 9–10.7, 11–12.1, 11–12.2, 11–12.6, 11–12.7
SL 9–10.1, 11–12.1

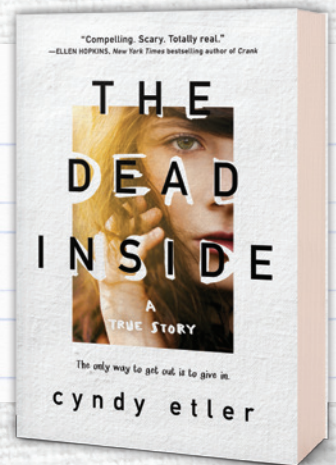
Ironically Enough

This book draws strongly on sarcasm and irony—events and descriptions that say one thing but mean another, or where the characters involved don't see the situation as clearly as the reader. Come together as a class to examine the scenes at Straight Inc. where the participants say "Love you!" to other kids. What do they really mean? Do the kids feel "loved" when they hear this? Next, focus on Cyndy's return to her high school. What does she think about her "druggie high school" when she returns to it? How does she feel about her friends there? How do students think they would feel were they in the same circumstances?

RI 9–10.4, 9–10.6, 11–12.4, 11–12.6 SL 9–10.1, 11–12.1
L 9–10.5, 11–12.5

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Random Acts of Kindness

Cyndy summarizes one of the central ideas of this text when she says, “The part of love that fixes? It comes from random grown-ups. Like AA strangers in rickety folding chairs or maybe a very cool English teacher, or maybe the staff at Janus House. Random grown-ups who take a kid’s broken heart and help her fit the pieces back together, and don’t want a single thing in return.” As a class, list the “random grown-ups” who helped Cyndy, in ways large and small. Even the smallest act of kindness can be significant. How do the actions of these grown-ups illustrate this theme?

RI 9–10.1, 9–10.2, 9–10.5, 11–12.1, 11–12.2

SL 9–10.1, 11–12.1

Research Project

Using internet and library resources, have students select a topic for a research paper from the suggestions below, or create their own research topic based on the book.

- The Stanford Prison Experiment conducted in 1971 is a famous psychological study that divided volunteers into two groups: one guards and one prisoners. How is this relevant to the behavior of participants in the Straight Inc. program as depicted in the book?
- Cyndy Etler references Stockholm syndrome in her epilogue. What aspects of the experiences in Straight Inc. reflect this psychological phenomenon?
- Research cults and their techniques for controlling their members. How is Straight Inc. like a cult? How is it different?

Come together as a class and have students lead the discussion on the subject they wrote their paper on, sharing what they learned in their research and what insights it gave them into Cyndy’s experiences at Straight Inc.

RI 9–10.1, 11–12.1 W 9–10.2, 9–10.7, 9–10.8, 11–12.2, 11–12.7, 11–12.8

SL 9–10.1, 11–12.1

Delving More Deeply

The afterword of *The Dead Inside* contains information about Straight Inc. and a link to a website dedicated to survivors of the program. Using this as a starting point, have students conduct a research project into the Straight Inc. program. While the program was active, it was praised by politicians and newspapers—but the tales from the survivors give a different view. Have students write a paper discussing these very different views of the program. Why do students feel that Straight Inc. continued to be praised despite its techniques? What changed to bring to light the abuses of Straight Inc.?

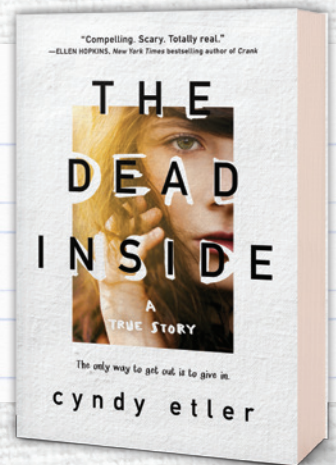
RI 9–10.1, 11–12.1 W 9–10.1, 9–10.7, 11–12.1, 11–12.7

Visit the *Common Core State Standards* website to read about the individual standards listed in this guide:

www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy

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Internet Resources

CyndyEtler.com

The author has also created discussion questions to use in a classroom setting. Her chapter-by-chapter exploration of the book is an excellent companion to the exercises in this guide.

www.cyndyetler.com/discussion-questions

Surviving Straight Inc.

Learn more about Straight Inc., including newspaper articles about the program and survivor stories.

www.survivingstraightinc.com