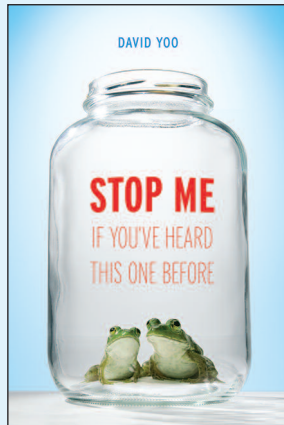


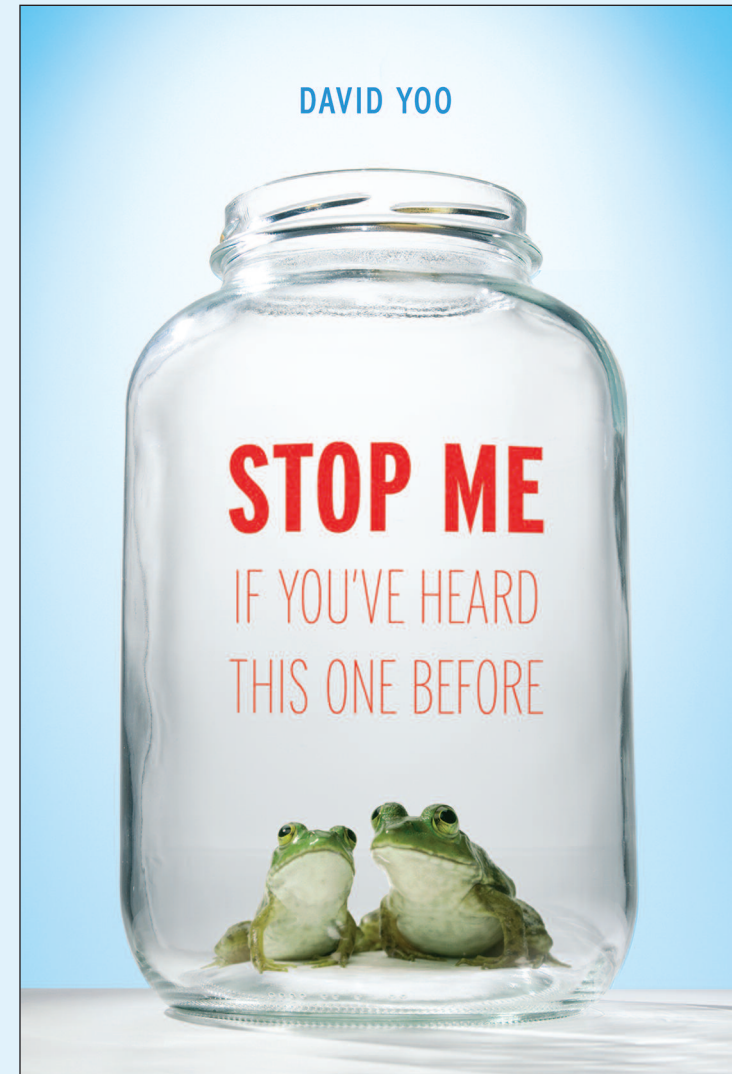
This guide was created by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, a reading specialist and children's author. Visit her Web site at www.tracievaughnzimmer.com to find hundreds of other guides to children's and young adult literature.



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DISCUSSION GUIDE
Disney • HYPERION BOOKS

ABOUT THE BOOK

If Albert Kim has learned one thing in his tragic adolescence, it's that God (probably a sadistic teenage alien) does not want him to succeed at Bern High. By the end of sophomore year, Al is so tired of humiliation that he's chosen to just forget girls and high school society in general, and enjoy the Zenlike detachment that comes from being an *intentional* loser.

Then he meets Mia Stone, and all the repressed hormones come flooding back. Mia, his coworker at the Bern Inn, is adorable, popular, and most intimidatingly, the ex-long-term girlfriend of Ivy-bound, muscle-bound king of BHS and world-class jerk, Ryan Stackhouse. But—chalk it up to the magic of Al's inner beauty—by the end of a summer vacuuming hotel rooms and goofing off together, he and Mia are officially “something.”

Albert barely has time to ponder this miracle before the bomb drops: Ryan has been diagnosed with cancer, and he needs Mia's support, i.e. constant companionship. True, he's lost weight and he's getting radiation, but that doesn't make him any less of a jerk. And to Albert, it could not be more apparent that Ryan is using his cancer to steal Mia back. With the whole town rallying behind Ryan like he's a fallen hero, and Mia emotionally confused and worried for Ryan, Al's bid for love is not a popular campaign. In fact, it's exactly like driving the wrong way on a five-lane highway.

In this desperately funny novel, David Yoo tells an authentic story of first love, and therein captures the agony, the mania, the kicking and screaming that define teenage existence.



PRE-READING

At the end of the prologue the narrator says, “I get to start this story where I want to start it because, like I said, this is *my* story, and what is a story, really, but a narrator's defense?” (p.4). Do you agree with him? Are most stories just a defense of the action of the main character? Do narrators ever portray themselves in a poor light?

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 How does Albert end up in a hotel room with Bern High School's “IT” girl? Is this event fantasy fulfillment, or an opportunity for a panic attack? Why?
- 2 What has Albert's social standing been at BHS? How has he coped with it? What would you do if something tragically humiliating happened on your first day of school? Is it possible to ever live down an incident like the broom dance?
- 3 Describe Mia's and Albert's jobs at the inn. What's the worst summer job you've ever had? Would you be willing to vacuum all summer for minimum wage?
- 4 Why is Albert a little (or maybe a LOT) socially stunted? Is he to blame for his lack of communication and social skills? Do you think they improve over the summer and school year? Why or why not?
- 5 What mistakes do Al and Mia make while they're working at the inn? How do Al and Mia's mistakes bring them closer together? What's the worst mistake you ever made while working?

- 6 Describe how Mia and Al's relationship develops over the course of the novel. Do you think that almost any two teenagers might fall for each other if they worked together in such a private, intimate place? When does their friendship turn into something more?
- 7 Yoo's writing is full of keen (and hilarious) observations about life as a teenager (like the description of being in a locked hotel room with a gorgeous girl, for instance). Which is your favorite anecdote? How does it compare to your own experiences of high school?
- 8 How does Mia's liking him change Albert at school? Does it give him a false confidence and bravado? How do his classmates react to his summer transformation? Is it possible to change your social status in high school?
- 9 How do Mia's popular friends and her ex-boyfriend, "the House," react to her new love interest? Why do you think she doesn't want to define their relationship? Do you think she might be embarrassed about being associated with Albert?
- 10 What happens to Ryan that changes everything between Al and Mia? Do you think Ryan is manipulating Mia? Is she allowing it? How do some illnesses become public property to a community?
- 11 Describe the events at the Walk For Cancer event that Mia organized for Ryan's benefit. Was Albert completely in the wrong, or was he justified in finally speaking his mind to Ryan? How does he gain perspective on it later?
- 12 Despite all the drama with Mia, Albert manages to land himself some friends. How does this happen? How did he grow out of his sixth grade friends? Is it wrong to hang out with people significantly younger than you?

PROJECTS

LANGUAGE ARTS/READING

Write a reader's theater for one of the scenes (or one that could be in the book) between two or more characters. Try to make the dialogue reflect the way the character speaks. Act out the dialogue for your class or video and upload it.

MATH

Figure out how much an average teenager makes over the course of a summer. How long would it take you to earn enough money to buy the object of your desire (like a telescope)? How long to earn enough for a car?

HEALTH

Research Hodgkin's Disease or other types of cancer often diagnosed in young people. Create a pamphlet, poster, PowerPoint or Web site about what you learned.

SERVICE/LEARNING

Host a Walk for Cancer like Mia created in the novel. Divide the work into committees so no one member is stuck doing the majority of the work.

ART

Create a piece of sculpture that Albert, Mia, or Stackhouse might make. You can use a variety of media or a more traditional medium like clay. Explain your piece in a brief artist's statement.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID YOO's first novel, *Girls for Breakfast*, was a Summer 2005 Book Sense Pick, a NYPL Book For the Teen Age selection, and a Reading Rants Top Ten Books for Teens. David is a graduate of Skidmore College with an MA in creative writing from the University of Colorado, Boulder. He resides in Boston with his wife—and without his cat—where he teaches fiction workshops.



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

1 How do you tap into your inner teenager to create your hilarious books?

I think one trait a lot of YA writers probably share is that the stream of emotions, memories, and mysteries of growing up bubbles pretty close to the surface, still, well into adulthood. Which is to say that my teens years still mean something to me. While in many ways I'm not remotely the same person I was twenty years ago, I do still feel a closeness to him, and it's in the writing of my YA stories that I consult him, think about him, and question him, constantly.

My other, easier answer, as to how I tap into the teen voice is that, admittedly, I'm pitifully immature beyond my years, and mentally, if one were to run a battery of tests on me to decipher my emotional IQ, they'd find that I'm still barely in my early teens (despite my physical appearance to the contrary), and by my actions in adult life, show no signs of aging, whatsoever.

2 What advice do you have for surviving the cruel institution of high school?

Unfortunately, the sagest advice in my opinion is the very same lame advice that I distinctly recall turning a blind ear toward when I was a teenager, and here now as an adult I find myself wanting to tell teens the very same bits of true but utterly tone-deaf knowledge: that I know it's hard for them, that you're not alone in your pain and frustration, and that the key is to try not to

worry too hard about problematic friendships, unrequited love, loneliness, rage, bullying, etc, because eventually things do get better. You can't really say that, because it's pretty much a slap in the face of a teen to tell them that their present lives will hardly mean as much to them as they think it will when they reach adulthood; and they'd never believe for a second that the old adage is quite often true: that much of what they consider tragedy right now, they'll see as comedy down the road. You just can't give them such a pat and thereby utterly incomprehensible bit of advice because it's practically an insult. Fact is, today means EVERYTHING to them, it's their entire lives, their worldview, their past, present, and future all rolled into a confusing stew ball that feels, for many, incredibly difficult to navigate. But it is the truth, so I have to begrudgingly accept the fate of being a clueless adult when I say, with gusto, that high school is just one part of life, and if things are bad for you in high school, well, you have to trust that they can only get better, which they usually do.

3 What is the best piece of writing advice you ever got?

The piece of writing advice that I got that, far and away, has been the most instructive and useful for me as a writer is with regards to the producing of novel-length fiction. My former professor once told me to consider the rough draft of a novel a "big spill," and therefore, the sole objective when writing a rough draft is to just get that big spill down on paper. You must intentionally ignore structure, any sort of polishing, and refuse to consider any sort of editing or cleaning on a sentence-by-sentence basis during the rough draft stage, until it is done. The logic being you can worry about all that other stuff ad infinitum once you've written the raw, completed draft, but actually seeing a novel through from start to finish is impossible if you don't have a full draft to work with. There is an hourglass, or a limit, rather, to how long you can sit there dawdling or dealing with the minutiae of your story before your energy, your passion for this hugely ambitious project, starts to wane. Writing is indeed rewriting, so the sooner you get the first draft done the sooner you can get into the real writing. Plus, actually completing the rough draft of an entire novel forever dismisses the fear inside you that you're not actually capable of writing one; although I have to admit each time I sit down to write a new one it feels like the first time all over again . . . sigh.