

THE TRUTH AS TOLD BY BY MASON BUTTLE

by Leslie Connor

Educators' Guide



Grades 3-7

About the Book

Mason Buttle's got troubles. In addition to being the biggest, sweatiest, most honest kid in his grade, his dyslexia makes reading and writing a struggle, and makes him a constant target of the school bullies. But that's not the half of it: Mason's best friend, Benny Kilmartin, turned up dead in the Buttles' family orchard. To make the situation even worse, the town's detective doesn't believe Mason's story about the day he lost his best friend. When Mason meets tiny Calvin Chumsky, his life begins to change for the better, and they create an underground haven for themselves away from the bullies who dog them after school. After Calvin goes missing, it's up to Mason to figure out what happened to him. But will anyone believe him?

★ "Poignant and suspenseful."

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* (starred review)

★ "Well-crafted, warm, and wonderful."

—*KIRKUS REVIEWS* (starred review)

★ "This beautifully written work will send readers' spirits soaring."

—*SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL* (starred review)

Discussion Questions

1. In chapter one, you learn that Mason has difficulty with spelling: "I can *see* the letters. But for me they go ugly. The fade or swell up. They slide away. If my eyes had pinchers on them. I'd grab at the letters and hold them still." Mason is describing dyslexia, a disorder that involves difficulty in learning to read or interpret words, letters, and other symbols. Dyslexia is not an indicator of intelligence, but because of his learning disability Mason does not consider himself to be smart. What does he mean when he reveals "I have been with my brain for twelve long years" (p. 2)? As you read the story, discuss scenes in which Mason's intelligence is evident. How does Mason slowly come to realize that he is a smart person?
2. Mason, Calvin, Annalissetta Yang, and other students like to visit the school social worker's office, known as the SWOOF. Discuss the character of Ms. Blinny. How does she make the SWOOF a safe haven for Mason and the other kids? How does she help Mason believe in himself? Discuss the significance of Ms. Blinny changing the message on Mason's T-shirt from STOOPIID to Thinks Outside the Box. How does this act help Mason salvage his integrity after being humiliated by Matt Drinker? Ms. Blinny says, "Your shirt makes a statement *and* asks a question. It is a curiosity!" (p. 10). What is a curiosity? Discuss examples throughout the text where curiosity appears. How is curiosity a theme of the story?

3. The story is told in the first person present tense. Why do you think the author chose to tell her story this way? How does Mason's way of speaking and forming sentences help you get to know how he thinks, and how he struggles with language?
4. From the first page you learn that Mason is bullied, mainly by Matt Drinker. Discuss how Mason reacts to being the target of Matt and Lance. Why do you think he often excuses their cruel behavior, such as his belief that Matt and Lance didn't really "mean anything" by writing STOOPID on his T-shirt? Why does Mason tend to think that "worse can happen" after he is bullied? Discuss chapter 28, "The Fight for the Tube." How is Mason an upstander for Calvin, as opposed to a bystander, like Corey?
5. Early on in the story Ms. Blinny introduces Mason to a voice-recognition writing program that she calls "the Dragon." She encourages Mason to "feed the Dragon" with his story, with his truth. How does the Dragon help Mason understand himself? Why does his first encounter with the Dragon produce a "wild feeling" inside? What do you think the "wild feeling" represents? How is the theme of truth presented throughout the story? Discuss examples of how Mason is truthful.
6. Although Mason struggles with reading and writing, he is a prolific thinker. Discuss examples of how Mason thinks about things deeply and in unexpected ways. How does Mason's ability to problem solve compensate for his difficulties at home and school?
7. The themes of grief and loss appear throughout the story. Discuss how Mason copes with the losses of his grandfather, mother, Benny, and, to some degree, the orchard. Reread and discuss the Dragon passage on pages 159-161 and discuss how grief is described and revealed. What does Mason mean by letting "the sad part worm all the way through me. Like getting it over with"(p. 160)?
8. In chapter 12, Matt demands that Calvin surrender his tablet. Mason describes how Matt scans the bus for Calvin like a "hawk for a field mouse." How is this description accurate? Why does Corey McSpirit often choose to be a bystander when he witnesses Matt and Lance bullying Mason and Calvin? Why do you think Mason often chooses not to defend himself? Discuss how Mason sticking up for Calvin on page 44 makes them allies and friends.
9. For Mason, colors represent aspects of his life and world. For example, green is the color he sees when he feels pressure. Discuss how colors and pictures are ways of thinking and communicating for Mason. Why does he feel such a strong connection to the aurochs?
10. Discuss Calvin Chumsky. What character traits do you admire about him? Why do you think Mason and Calvin connect as friends? How do they complement one another? Mason notices that Calvin "sees the best of this old crumbledown"(p. 51). What does it mean to see the best in something? How does Calvin help Mason see that he is an intelligent person? When the boys begin to renovate the root cellar, how are their abilities (not their disabilities) revealed? How does their friendship help Mason grow and begin to understand himself as a person?
11. Discuss Mason's treatment and love for Moonie Drinker. What does it reveal about his character? Why do you think that Moonie loves to be with Mason? How does Mason demonstrate personal responsibility in his relationship with Mrs. Drinker? How does Moonie's unconditional love for Mason help Mason cope with his grief? Discuss how it felt reading chapter 40, in which Matt abuses Moonie. Do you think that Mason and Calvin handled the situation wisely?
12. Mason has strengths and abilities that he doesn't notice, because he has convinced himself that his learning disability makes him stupid. Discuss Mason's experience as he draws the aurochs on the root cellar wall. How is he discovering that his creativity is an ability? On page 176 Mason questions Calvin about why it was so easy for "a kid like me to draw a pretty good aurochs. I mean all of a sudden like that." Discuss the meaning of Calvin's response. Why does Ms. Blinny give Mason a rock with the word "loyal" written on it? What is loyalty, and how does Mason display it?
13. How does Lieutenant Baird make Mason feel when he interrupts him? How is listening to someone a sign of respect? How is Baird the opposite of Ms. Blinny? How is Mason's confronting Baird by telling him that he is a "big *wrong* piece in your puzzle" (p. 254) a turning point for him? Why do you think that Baird so profusely apologizes to Mason once it is discovered that Matt and Lance tampered with the ladder?

14. When Mason realizes that Matt and Lance are responsible for Benny's death, he first can't believe it, then he says, "Nobody meant to kill Benny Kilmartin!" (p. 297). Why does Mason still not blame Matt after all the cruelty he has shown toward Calvin, Moonie, and himself? What does that tell you about Mason's character?

15. On page 308, Uncle Drum tells Mason, "People are just looking for one kindness." Discuss kindness as a theme in the story. Cite examples from the text. How did kindness prevail? The final sentence in the text is: "Knowing what you love is smart." Discuss what Mason means by this statement.

Extension Activities

If the Shirt Fits. When Ms. Blinny sees Mason's T-shirt with the word STOOPID written on it, she covers the derogatory word with duct tape and uses a Sharpie to draw a picture of a box and the words: "Thinks Outside the . . ." Have students brainstorm mottoes about thinking. Examples might include: "Think Positively" or "Think with an Open Mind." Have students bring in a plain T-shirt. Provide fabric paints (or duct tape and Sharpies) to create a personalized "Think Shirt."

Feed the Dragon. When Mason is first introduced to the voice-recognition program that helps him write, he is amazed. For the first time in his life he is writing without the struggle caused by dyslexia. Ms. Blinny tells him, "It's the story of *you*. You can use it to dump all the stuff that's on your mind." Have students begin a "Story of You" project as they read the text. (For students with language-based learning disabilities, work with the school special education teacher to acquire VR software).

Raspberry-Pink Joy. Color is important to Mason. He often sees and feels in color: Pink is joy and laughter. Green is pressure and confusion. Lead a discussion about color symbolism and what colors represent to students. Begin a poetry exercise by writing the colors of the rainbow on the board: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. Have students brainstorm what they envision when they think of each color. For example, red is a handful of heart-shaped cinnamon candies. Or blue is the lake at sunrise. Create a class rainbow that incorporates students' color metaphors.

Pet Rocks. In chapter 43 Ms. Blinny creates keepsakes for the students that remind them of their positive character traits. Toward the end of the story, she gives Mason a glittery rock with the word "loyal." Discuss the meaning of a character trait. Lead a brainstorm to help kids generate a list of positive character traits. Work with students to create rock keepsakes to give to another student in class.

Truth Be Told. On page 314 Andy Kilmartin says, "I forgot *who you are*, Mason." After reading the text, challenge each student to write a short essay entitled: "Who Is Mason Buttle?" Encourage students to describe Mason as a person, his strengths and weaknesses, and how he changed over the course of the story. Students should include examples from the text to support their ideas.



About the Author

LESLIE CONNOR is the author of several award-winning books for children, including *Waiting for Normal*, winner of the ALA Schneider Family Book Award, *Crunch*, *All Rise for the Honorable Perry T. Cook*, and a teen novel, *The Things You Kiss Goodbye*. She lives with her family in Connecticut.