

## **TEACHER'S GUIDE**

ALIGNED WITH COMMON CORE STANDARDS

### **Remember Dippy** by Shirley Reva Vernick

## **Introduction**

*Remember Dippy* tells the story of unexpected, even improbable friendships—friendships with people who are different. This fast-paced novel invites readers to view the world from a new perspective, one where “normal” and “different” are surprisingly similar.



In *Remember Dippy* 13-year-old Johnny's perfect summer plans fly out the window when he learns he must spend his vacation helping out with his autistic cousin, a 15-year-old boy named Remember. At first, Johnny's premonitions of disaster come to cringe worthy fruition as he gets into trouble with everyone, including the new girl, the neighborhood bully and his crush. But when the two boys save the local jock from drowning, salvage the pizzeria guy's romance, rescue an injured octogenarian, and share girl troubles, Johnny ends up having the summer of his life. He also discovers a new friend in his cousin, as well as an appreciation for what really matters in a person.

While *Remember Dippy* is a story about autism, it is also a larger story about friendship, loyalty, differences, resilience and tolerance. Most of the characters in the novel have some sort of difference—in ethnicity, body size, family situation, or other traits—giving readers multiple handles for accessing the themes of tolerance and difference.

## **Backgrounder on Autism**

(Information from the Centers for Disease Control and the Mayo Clinic)

Autism (officially autism spectrum disorders, or ASDs) is a group of developmental disabilities that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges. “Autistic disorder” is the most commonly known ASD; the other two types are “pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified” (PDD-NOS) and Asperger Syndrome. ASDs begin in early childhood and last throughout a person’s life.

ASDs affect different people in different ways and can range from very mild to severe. There is usually nothing about the outward appearance that sets individuals with an ASD

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apart from others, but they may communicate, interact, behave and learn in ways that are different from their peers. The thinking and learning abilities of people with ASDs can vary—from gifted to severely challenged.

The disorders appear in all racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups, but are almost five times more common among boys than among girls. In the U.S., about 1 in 88 children have been identified with an ASD.

More people than ever before are being diagnosed with an ASD. The U.S. Centers for Disease control believes this is due to a combination of factors: a broader definition of ASDs, better efforts in diagnosis, and possibly a true increase in the number of people with an ASD.

Currently there is no cure for ASDs. However, there are a range of educational/behavioral therapies and medications whose goal is to maximize the person's ability to function by reducing autism symptoms and supporting development and learning.

### Discussion questions/topics

1. People with autism often have trouble understanding figures of speech (idioms, sayings, abstract imagery). If you were talking with such a person, how could you communicate the following ideas without using the figures of speech:
  - a. The squeaky wheel gets the grease.
  - b. I'm between a rock and a hard place.
  - c. He made his own bed; now let him lie in it.
  - d. What goes around comes around.
2. Recognizing the emotions behind facial expressions doesn't come naturally to Mem. It's easy to understand why this would frustrate him. But why might it annoy the people around him?
3. Who do you think is better off: Johnny, who is "normal" but unhappy with some aspects of his life, or Mem, who is "different" but likes things just the way they are?
4. Do you think Dirk the Jerk is a jerk? Where do you think his behavior comes from?
5. Johnny is surprised when Mem's best friend turns out to be "grumpy old" Mr. Boots. Have you ever thought you've known someone's personality, only to find out you were wrong? What made you change your perception?

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6. Do you think it was worth the risk to send Linguini down Niko's pipes to look for the lost ring? If Linguini hadn't come back out, how do you think this would have affected Mem's relationship with Johnny?
7. Leesha decides not to go to the lake to help look for Linguini. Why do you think she refuses to go?
8. Johnny inadvertently stands up Jo a few times. Do you think she's justified in being angry, or do you think she should understand?
9. What are some of the things Johnny learns from Mem over the course of the summer? Do you think it surprises Johnny that his autistic cousin can teach him anything?
10. Which character do you think grows the most during the novel? In what ways does that person grow?
11. When the summer is over and Johnny moves back to his own house, what do you think will happen to his relationship with Mem? Do you think they'll continue to be friends?

## Themes

**Differences:** The ways in which individuals may vary from each other are vast. One area of difference concerns cognition and behavior (thinking and acting). Cultures define the acceptable range of behavior, and people who fall outside of this range are often subject to discrimination, even if their behavior is harmless. These different individuals may be shunned, labeled, bullied, or otherwise oppressed.

**Friendship:** The term *friend* carries varying meanings, weights and expectations for different people, and these differences can cause conflict in relationships. *Friendship* commonly connotes mutual trust and support, but even terms like trust and support are open to interpretation. In *Remember Dippy*, the characters' personal growth is largely played out through their friendships.

**Coming of age:** Johnny, Mem, Leesha and Dirk are young adults dealing with formative issues: acceptance, loss, divorce, crushes, and the meaning of friendship. The characters' interrelationships influence their experiences with these issues—and vice versa.

## Literary Elements & Devices

**Characterization**—Which character do you most closely identify with? Why?

**Point of View**—The story is told from Johnny’s point of view. Do you think he’s the right person to be telling the story? What would the novel be like if Mem narrated it? If Leesha narrated?

**Setting**—*Remember Dippy* takes place in a small Vermont town. How do you think a differently-abled teen such as Mem would be treated by his peers where you live? What factors do you think affect the treatment of differently-abled people: the size of the city or town, the level of diversity in the population, local norms, etc.?

**Turning Points**—A turning point is a place where the emotions or action of the story change in an important and often surprising way. Early in the story, Johnny dreads spending the summer with Mem. Later, Johnny thinks of Mem more as one of the gang. What do you consider the turning point in their relationship?

**Symbolism**—Symbols are things that represent larger events, relationships, or ideas. What does Mr. Boots’ dog Millie symbolize? What do the video games symbolize?

**Foreshadowing**—Foreshadowing is an advance hint of future plot developments. In *Remember Dippy*, has the author provided any foreshadowing—for example, of Mr. Boots’ accident or of Leesha’s success in keep him out of the nursing home?

## Activities

### English-literature

1. Fictional characters may be consistently likable, consistently unlikable, or unpredictable. Pick one or more characters from *Remember Dippy* and examine where they fall on this spectrum.
2. Early in the novel, Johnny feels embarrassed about having Mem meet his friends. What does this tell you about Johnny—his personality, his self-confidence, his idea of friendship, etc.?

### Creative writing

1. The story ends before we learn whether Johnny and Dirk become friends, how Leesha and Mr. Boots get along, or how Mem deals with Johnny’s moving out at the end of the summer. Pick one of these topics and write an expository scene.
2. All the scenes in the book are told from Johnny’s first-person point of view. Choose one scene and rewrite it from another character’s point of view. For

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example, Mem’s POV when Linguini is in Niko’s pipes, Dirk’s POV at the strawberry shortcake festival, or Leesha’s POV when she’s giving haircuts to Mem and Johnny.

### **Resources for Further Information**

#### **Websites**

“Autism Acceptance Month: 10 Things I Wish Your Kids Knew About Autism,”  
<http://www.babble.com/mom/autism-acceptance-month-10-things-i-wish-your-kids-knew-about-autism/individuals-with-autism-are-individuals-2/>

“Autism Spectrum Disorders,”  
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/videos/whatisautism.html>

#### **Books**

*Six-Word Lessons on Growing Up Autistic: 100 Lessons to Understand How Autistic People See Life* by Trevor Pacelli

*And Love Was All He Said - Growing Up Autistic* by Michael J. O’Reilly

*Views from Our Shoes: Growing Up with a Brother or Sister with Special Needs* by Donald Joseph Meyer

#### **Films**

*The Boy Who Could Fly*: An autistic boy who dreams of flying touches everyone he meets, including a new family who has moved in after their father dies (fiction).

*The United States of Autism*: A documentary of one man's 11,000 mile, 40 day journey across the American landscape to visit 20 families and individuals affected by autism while searching for answers for his own son.

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