

Texting the Underworld

by Ellen Booraem

Essential Elements Guide

INTRODUCTION



Get ready for a fantastical journey to the Underworld!

Texting the Underworld is an “I can’t put this down!” read full of unexpected twists and turns as our protagonist, Conor, leads the reader on an exciting and unpredictable quest. As he attempts to prevent a death in his family, Conor takes us along on his reluctant expedition to the Underworld with its quirky and intriguing characters. All while being scared of, well . . . everything.

Will he succeed? Or will he do what he normally does . . . chicken out?

Among many other awards, Ellen Booraem's books have been chosen as Best Books of the Year by *Kirkus Reviews*. With years of experience as a writing coach to middle-schoolers, Booraem's prose flows with the language of this age group, making *Texting the Underworld* an authentic and fun read that will keep young people (and adults!) wanting to read more about this mythical and multi-layered quest.



The purpose of this guide is to present you, Amazing Teacher Extraordinaire, with opportunities to have meaningful discussions and experiences with your students about the novel and the themes it reveals, such as the importance of family, the meaning of life, and the difficulty of making hard, seemingly impossible choices. Conor is tested over and over and has to make some grueling decisions, as your young readers often must. It is a realistic portrayal of a twelve-year-old searching for his place in the world and in his family. *Texting the Underworld* truly is essential for all classroom libraries and so, so relevant for your students. It is un-put-downable with twists and turns and comic dialogue galore. Through it all, Booraem's imaginative and fantastical prose flows seamlessly whether she's describing a thrill-seeking, floating banshee or a quiet, poignant moment.

This educator guide is aligned with the Common Core Standards, and the activities, discussion questions and learning standards can be adapted to fit the needs and ages of your students. The interdisciplinary activities in this guide will create opportunities for your students to explore Conor and his

friends' sometimes perilous, spectacular journey more deeply – while making connections to Booraem's craft and to your students' own personal lives.

Enjoy the ride to the Underworld! Be prepared to gasp and laugh often! And, bring some candy with you. Trust us . . . it could save your life!

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. Think about a funny or silly story that your family or friend likes to tell about you from when you were smaller. Now, think about whether that story has revealed something about who you are today. For example, does a story about you constantly falling down show that you were destined to be clumsy? Foreshadowing in literature gives the reader hints of what is going on in the story and what might come next. Plus, it's just dang fun to use in your writing! How does Ellen Booraem use foreshadowing to give readers hints about the decisions that Conor will have to make in the future or what challenges he might soon face (i.e., the spiders, the fire alarms)?
2. What is a protagonist? Do you agree or disagree that Conor is not your typical protagonist? Why? How does Conor grow and develop as a character through the choices he is required to make throughout the story?
3. Someone chose to name you. Do you know who named you and why they chose that name for you? Or do you ever wonder why your favorite movie character is named that particular name? When authors name characters, they do it for very specific reasons.

Consider the names in *Texting the Underworld*: Conor (Pixie), Grump, Ashling, Javier, Glennie, etc. Research each name and then explain what that name might reveal about the character. Why might Ellen Booraem have chosen these specific names for her characters? Explain why you agree or disagree with Booraem's choice of names for her characters. Explain what names you would change if you could and why.

4. The plot has many twists and turns as the main conflict of the novel moves forward. Discuss which plot twist was the most surprising for you as a reader. How does Booraem create these sometimes magical twists and turns? What choices is she making in her writing to do this?
5. Booraem uses flashbacks throughout the novel to take the reader back in time and to help the reader better understand both Conor's and Declan's stories, as well as to explain Ashling's story. Find one of the flashbacks in the story and explain how it helps the reader better understand the character.
6. Have you ever had that prickly feeling of déjà vu? Or have you met someone for the very first time and felt that you already knew them? The ideas of death and rebirth keep popping up in the story. Conor, Ashling, and Grump are all characters who face death and are "reborn" in one way or another. Explain how each of them has a story to tell about why we are here on this planet and the importance of family and friends in our lives. Discuss why Booraem might have chosen to create different types of rebirth in her story and what that adds to your understanding as a reader.



Nergal, the Babylonian Lord of the Dead, appears in Texting the Underworld in a slightly different form.

7. In *Texting the Underworld*, Conor and his friends meet several mythical creatures in the Underworld. These creatures turn out to be important to them and their futures. Do a little research on your favorite mythical creature from the book...how do the characters in Booraem's *Other Land* differ from those in other, earlier tales of the same mythological figures?

Common Core Standards aligned with the questions:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1

Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1.A

Come to discussions prepared, having read or researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text, or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3

Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g., how setting shapes the characters or plot).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.4

Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with pertinent

descriptions, facts, details, and examples; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

Oral Histories: What's Our Story?

Subjects: English Language Arts, Technology

Materials needed: a pen and a notebook or a recording device

Just as Conor's family doesn't always listen to Grump's tall tales about Ireland and the banshees, sometimes we don't truly hear or appreciate the stories of those closest to us. In this activity, students will interview a family member, a close family friend, or just someone they're plain interested in learning more about.

Do you have family members or friends who tell fantastical out-of-this-world stories that include other-worldly creatures? Maybe you have some great family stories or one story you are bursting at the seams to tell. Maybe one of those stories will be about you!

Sometimes we learn a lot about ourselves through someone else's story. What connections will we be able to make to our own lives after listening to other people's real or imagined tales!



Tell me about
the time you
saw a GHOST,
Grandpa!

→ Pick a person who knows your family stories or whose stories you'd

like to know more about and make a plan to interview that person. You can do this on the phone, on a video call, in person, or through email, texts or good old-fashioned mail.

→ Write down several questions you'd like to ask this person, hoping to encourage and motivate them to tell their story.

→ Think about:

- ◆ What do I really want to know about this person?

- ◆ What is something I've always wanted to ask about or I'm interested in learning more about?

- ◆ What story do I already know a bit about, but have always wanted to know more?

- ◆ Do I want to hear funny stories or more serious stories?

→ Prepare your questions ahead of time and take notes or record the responses of your family member, close family friend or other adult.

→ Write out the story in narrative or interview form OR record and then edit the recording to create a presentation for the class.

→ Present your family's story or other stories you've gathered or unearthed from an adult in your life.

→ While listening to your classmates' collected stories, be prepared to laugh and gasp the way you did while reading and experiencing the adventures of Conor and his friends. And . . . be ready to offer positive feedback and some thoughts: What did you enjoy about your peers' stories? What connections can you make between your own lives and the stories that you've collected? What did you learn that you didn't know before? What surprised you about your story and

those of your classmates? What might you want to learn even more about? Does hearing these stories affect the way you view Grump and his tales? Why or why not? What story from your life might you choose to pass down to the next generation or to a close friend?

Common Core Standards aligned with this activity:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.6

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and link to and cite sources as well as to interact and collaborate with others, including linking to and citing sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.7

Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions for further research and investigation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.5

Include multimedia components and visual displays in presentations to clarify claims and findings and emphasize salient points.

Quest Storyboards

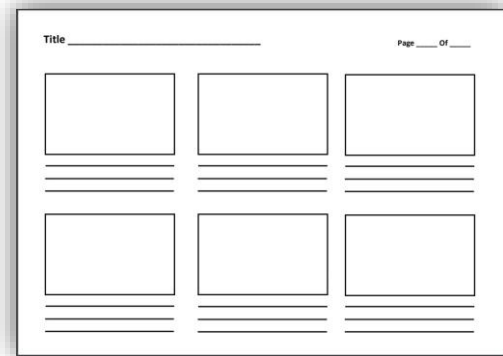
Subjects: ELA, Art

Materials Needed: Storyboard template, writing and drawing materials, access to digital art (optional)

Characters in literature often embark on a quest to save someone or to save the world. Conor is trying to prevent a death – a massive quest indeed! Sometimes, like Conor, the character on the quest is reluctant and unsure, and faces many internal battles to complete the quest. This activity will allow your students to highlight Conor’s expedition with his friends while

also examining the students' own personal quests and quests of their favorite characters in books and movies.

According to Professor Thomas C. Foster's book, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, a quest* in literature consists of five elements: 1) a quester, 2) a place to go, 3) a stated reason to go there (the actual mission, what will be accomplished), 4) challenges and struggles along the way, and 5) a real reason to go there (the lesson learned, why embark on this quest). Have students think about how Conor's journey throughout the novel is a quest. Students can also consider whether any other character in this novel is also on a quest.



Sample storyboard template from imagineforest.com

in

A storyboard is a fun and creative way for students to tell the important parts of a story using art and dialogue. Students draw or create images in boxes or other shapes in the order of how they occurred. In this case, your students can use their collaborative, artistic skills to tell the story of Conor's quest in a different and unique way!

- Discuss as a class what a quest is as well as the elements of a quest.
- Discuss Conor's quest and other examples the students know from books, movies, comic books, their own lives, etc. Why are quests important in our own, real lives? Why are quests important in literature/stories? How does Booraem use her writing specifically to create the quest in *Texting the Underworld*? Based on what we know of how heroes are

supposed to behave on quests, how is Conor an unusual hero?
Why might Booraem have created him this way?

→ Show examples of/distribute/draw a storyboard template for students/groups to use. Storyboard templates/samples:

<https://www.imagineforest.com/blog/free-storyboard-template/>

<https://creately.com/blog/examples/storyboard-templates-creately/>

→ Students/groups will work collaboratively to choose 5 scenes that represent/show the 5 stages of Conor's quest (or those of another character from the book: Ashling, Grump, etc.).

→ Groups create digital or traditional artwork and dialogue to detail the main stages of the character's quest.

→ When complete, post students' storyboards for a quest-filled gallery walk where students can circulate and celebrate each other's work and success.

→ As a whole class, discuss what they love about each other's artistic choices, how specific elements of the art they created express the characters' journeys and how the characters dealt with the conflicts they faced. If walking in Conor's, Javier's, Glennie's, Ashling's, or Grump's shoes, would your students handle the conflicts similarly or differently? How and why?

Extend the Quest Even Further!

→ Students can write a sequel short story for *Texting the Underworld*. Emulating Booraem's mythical style, what new quest might your favorite character from the book face next? Will they return to the

Other World or will you imagine a whole new setting? Do we find out more about Javier's family and interests and struggles? How is Ashling adapting to life in this century? What mischief might courageous Glennie get mixed up in?

- Choose #2 ("a place to go") from the quest stages and return into the book to find/use Booraem's descriptive writing to build a diorama of the Other Land/Underworld using found material. What details and imagery does Booraem use and how does it make her reader see, feel, smell, taste and hear what she is describing? How can we use our engineering skills to build her words into a three dimensional structure?
- Students can use the quest elements to brainstorm a creative story where they construct a *new* character who goes on a totally *new* quest. The trick is...the character is you, the student! Get those juices flowing! As the character, do you live in Southie and know Conor, Glennie, Javier, and/or Ashling? Why are you on a quest? What are you struggling with? What decisions do you need to make? What new world will you journey to? The mall? A forest? Outer space? A new city? Or some new, totally invented, imaginary setting that your mind envisions? Be sure to use descriptive words (like Booraem's!) and your personal interests, hobbies, fears (ew . . . yuck . . . rodents!), and talents to make your story as engaging and image-filled as possible!

Additional Teacher Resources/Sources

[*https://ethos3.com/2019/12/telling-better-stories-the-narrative-quest/](https://ethos3.com/2019/12/telling-better-stories-the-narrative-quest/)

<https://wonderopolis.org/wonder/what-is-your-quest>

<https://bookunitteacher.com/wp/?p=6405>

Common Core Standards aligned with the interdisciplinary classroom activities:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.6

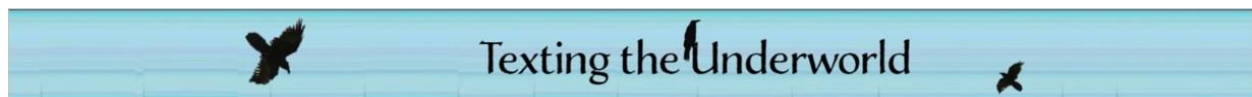
Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and link to and cite sources as well as to interact and collaborate with others, including linking to and citing sources.

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Include multimedia components and visual displays in presentations to clarify claims and findings and emphasize salient points.



This guide was written by Room 228 LLC with public school teacher Magda Adamczyk as lead teacher. We, like Conor, really, really, really don't enjoy death. But the journey of living life is oh so cool. To learn more, visit rm228.com.