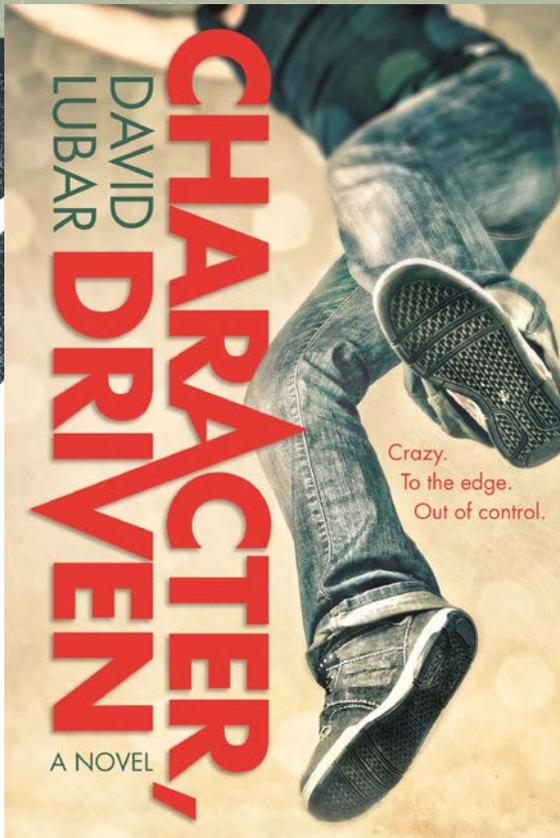


# TOR TEEN

## Teacher's Guide



- ★ "This exquisitely crafted coming-of-age novel gets down and dirty—and even rebellious—without sacrificing honesty, thoughtfulness, or respect."  
—*Booklist* starred review
- ★ "Filled with wordplay and moments of wry observation and revelation, this contemporary coming-of-age-novel follows the trials of a big-hearted teen who suffers some hard knocks... Cliff's humorous perspective on his predicaments doesn't lessen their sharp impact."  
—*Publishers Weekly* starred review
- ★ "Cliff's first-person and sometimes second-person narration, rendered in an affable, funny, and talkative tone, will suck readers into his life story immediately. ...Cliff breaks the fourth wall often, adding rich layers to this creative work of metafiction."  
—*School Library Journal* starred review

### About this guide

The questions and activities that follow are intended to enhance your reading of *Character, Driven*. The material is aligned with Common Core State Standards for Literacy in English and Language Arts ([www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)), however please feel free to adapt this content to suit the needs and interests of your students or reading group participants.

### About *Character, Driven*

*Character, Driven* is a powerful and hilarious coming-of-age novel for young adults by acclaimed author David Lubar.

With only one year left of high school, seventeen-year-old Cliff Sparks is desperate to "come of age"—a.k.a., find a girlfriend. But he's never had much luck with girls. So when he falls for Jillian, a new classmate, at first sight, all he can do is worship her from afar. At the same time, Cliff has to figure out what to do with the rest of his life, since he's pretty sure his unemployed father plans to kick him out of the house the minute he turns eighteen. Time is running out. Cliff is at the edge, on the verge, dangling—and holding on for dear life.

Photo credit: Joelle Lubar



**DAVID LUBAR** created a sensation with his debut novel, *Hidden Talents*, an ALA Best Book for Young Adults. He is also the author of *True Talents*, *Flip*, *Extremities*, the popular *Weenies* short story collections, and the *Nathan Abercrombie*, *Accidental Zombie* series, which has been optioned for TV. He lives in Nazareth, Pennsylvania.

- ★ "Readers will relish clever wordplay, fantasies, and a major secret."  
—*Kirkus Reviews* starred review

Ages 13-17 ★ Grades 8-12

Leveling information: Lexile level: HL760L



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# Pre-reading Activities

- *Character, Driven* is written in first-person point-of-view, meaning that the narrator is also a character in the story. Have students share titles of other novels featuring first-person narrators. Then create a brainstorm list of things a first-person narrator can and cannot understand or share with readers.
- Ask each student to write a one-page essay describing another novel they have read which is written from a first-person viewpoint. Have them include the title and genre of the novel; a very brief (2-4 sentence) plot summary; and an observation of something the reader discovers or understands particularly well because of the first-person viewpoint.

Supports Common Core State Standards:  
W.8.3, W.9-10.3, W.11-12.3;  
and SL.8.1, SL.9-10.1, SL.11-12.1

# Developing Reading & Discussion Skills

- In the opening chapter, readers realize that Cliff is aware that he is writing his words to the reader. What insights into novel-writing does Cliff reference? What do you think he is trying to tell readers when he notes that "...not every book tells a story" (p. 13)?
- Describe Cliff's family's financial situation. How does this effect his home life?
- Who is Jillian? What past experiences with girls make Cliff uncertain (or even afraid) to approach her?
- Describe the assumptions Cliff admits to making when starting to read a novel, and the concerns this raises for him about his own narrative (the book you are reading) in the chapter "INTER LEWD" (p. 63).
- Describe Cliff's relationships with Lucas and Nola. What happens to each of these characters as the story progresses? What type of language does Cliff use to explain these outcomes? Does he seem to feel a sense of responsibility, empathy, or another type of emotional connection to these characters? Explain your answers.
- Why does Cliff think Ms. Ryder is a good teacher? Do you think Cliff is an especially good judge of teaching ability? Why or why not? Which teachers have an important impact on Cliff? What do you think Cliff would list as the three most valuable attributes of a good teacher?
- Cliff enjoys art classes. Is he a good artist? Does it matter? What other talents seem to emerge as he considers creating new paintings? Why is discussing art

dangerous in the Sparks household?

- Do you think there is a relationship between the wordplay Cliff employs throughout the story and the visual arts compositions he and Jillian paint? Why or why not? How might these creative outlets relate to the emotional journeys of the characters?
- By the end of the story, Cliff has realized that he has a quality circle of friends. Name at least three of these characters and explain how each of them give Cliff strength to face the challenges to come in the final chapters.
- As well as struggling with his painful home life, Cliff is trying to sort out what he will do after high school—what he wants to learn and who he wants to become. How do his plans and dreams evolve over the course of the story? Has Cliff's journey provided you with any insight into your own thoughts about life after high school? Explain your answer.
- Write a paragraph arguing that *Character, Driven* is an exploration of the relationship between how the stories we tell enable us to endure, manage, and possibly even change the trajectory of our real lives.
- Early in the novel, Cliff struggles with the issue of describing himself to the reader because, "...the truth is, nobody sees himself clearly in a mirror or photo." (p. 31). Then, in the final chapter, he admits to buying a car, but that "[T]o describe it, to even hint at the color of the body...would be to reveal too much of my soul...Instead, I'll let you craft your own wheels." (p. 289). What is the relationship between these two statements? What might Cliff (or David Lubar) be encouraging readers to do with respect to their own lives?
- Do you think the narrator's name is really "Cliff Sparks"? Why or why not?
- Could the theme of *Character, Driven* be reflected in the cliché "you can't judge a book by its cover"? How might this common expression be applied to Butch, Nicky, Jimby, Jillian, and ultimately, Cliff himself?

Supports Common Core State Standards:  
RL.8.1-4, 9-10.1-5, 11-12.1-6;  
and SL.8.1, 3, 4; SL.9-10.1, 3, 4; SL.11-12.1, 3, 4.

# Developing Research & Writing Skills

## UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

Beyond being written from a first-person viewpoint, by the end of the novel, readers come to realize that Cliff has been an



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unreliable narrator. Go to the library or online to research the literary term “unreliable narrator.” With friends or classmates, create a reading list of famous novels featuring unreliable narrators. Divide into two groups to debate the following topic: One cannot be a reliable narrator of one’s own life.

### **TIMELINE**

*Character, Driven* is written as a series of flashbacks and even-further flashbacks. Make a list of the novel’s chapter titles. Beside each title, note the time in which the chapter takes place (e.g., “present,” “last April,” “sometime last year”). Note any patterns you detect in terms of the relationship between content, timeframe, and the non-linear style of the story.

### **EPIC WORDPLAY**

From chapter titles to the body of the text, the novel is filled with wordplay, such as puns and double entendres. As Cliff, write an essay explaining how and/or why you came up with your chapter titles.

### **THE GIFT OF BOOKS**

Throughout the novel, Mr. Piccaro quietly gives Cliff books to read. Using a library website or other online resources, create an annotated list of the titles Mr. Piccaro shares. Then, write a one-page essay about the relationships, if any, you observe between the titles and Cliff’s own journey.

### **FIRST PERSON, DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES**

Cliff second-guesses the ways that he didn’t get to know Lucas or Nola better. Perhaps Cliff’s friends feel similarly about him. From the viewpoint of Butch, Nicky, or Jimby, write a journal-style essay discussing your friendship with Cliff; any concerns or suspicions you may have about his home situation; and the way your own home or family life influences the way you handle your potential knowledge about Cliff.

### **SOCIAL ISSUES**

*Character, Driven* tells the story of Cliff’s journey from mere survival to escape from an abusive situation. Sadly, child abuse is not fiction, and teens suffering abuse may not see a way out. But conversation and awareness can help. Learn more about this serious issue ([teens.webmd.com](http://teens.webmd.com) and [kidshealth.org/teen](http://kidshealth.org/teen) are good starting points for research), including warning signs, appropriate ways to offer your support, and resources for victims. Compile your research into a multi-media presentation to share with friends or classmates.

### **CHARACTERS ONSCREEN**

Individually or in small groups, imagine you are creating a film or television adaptation of *Character, Driven*. Write a promotional paragraph and the script or storyboard for the first fifteen minutes of your film. If desired, create a video trailer for your movie.

### **ARTS CAN...**

From Jimby’s story, to Jillian’s paintings, to a performance of *Romeo & Juliet*, *Character, Driven* is a story in which the creative arts perform many valuable functions. Individually, or with friends or classmates, create a poster, mural, or image/word collage depicting the many levels at which art entertains, informs, and does more in the novel—and in life.

### **INTRODUCING YOU**

If you were going to write about the last two months of your life any way you wanted, what tale would you spin? In first-person, with the reader in mind, write a chapter title and the first five pages of your story.

Supports Common Core State Standards:

RL.8.1-4, 9-10.1-5, 11-12.1-6;

SL.8.1, 4; SL.9-10.1, 4; SL.11-12.1, 4;

and W.8.1-4, W.8.6, W.9-10.1-4, W.9-10.6, W.11-12.1-4, W.11-12.6

