

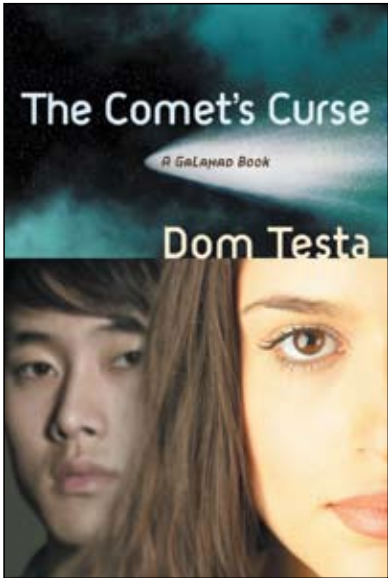
DEAR EDUCATOR,

A few years ago I decided that there were just too many things conspiring against kids. Cynical comments from adults often began with the words “kids these days...”, which basically implied that today’s young people were somehow flawed or incapable of doing well. I wondered: What if kids could pick up a book that unapologetically featured sharp, smart, good kids who took on an enormous challenge...and succeeded? The characters wouldn’t be labeled as nerds or social outcasts; if anything, they’d be pretty impressive role models, just as hip and cool as the traditional bad boys, but with (gasp!) brains and ambition.

I’ve spent several years working with kids, visiting schools to host creative writing assemblies and workshops, so maybe I’m a bit more optimistic about the potential we too often ignore. I created a foundation called The Big Brain Club that encourages young people to overcome the peer pressure to dumb down that they encounter on a daily basis. The first book in the Galahad series, *The Comet’s Curse*, is essentially my vision of an empowered younger generation.

By design, the characters in this book are not the stereotypes of “smart kids” that we see in everyday pop culture. Hey, they have the same issues, the same angst, the same hormones as the rebels who populate more edgy fiction, and young

readers will likely spot themselves in many of the scenes. But, just as with my real-life foundation, I’ve chosen to give these characters the benefit of the doubt when it comes to their intellectual abilities and goals. I’m happy to say that they don’t let me down.



that is honored in its pages, and I get a lot of satisfaction out of that. Kids simply love the story and the characters.

Hey, if a kid loves broccoli, I don’t feel the need to lecture him about the antioxidants. I just feed him more broccoli.

*All the best,*  
**Dom Testa**  
Author, the Galahad book series

The concept of *The Comet’s Curse* was initially pure action/adventure, with a healthy sprinkle of mystery as well. Yet as the first draft rounded into shape, I realized that the characters had clawed their way to the forefront of the story, almost demanding to outshine the action element. Without even planning it this way, my Big Brain Club had found its way into the story.

At its core this is still a fast-paced adventure tale, and there’s no agenda here, no pound-you-over-the-head message. Yet educators and parents have acknowledged the subtle nod to brainpower

responsibility. It also would allow for subplots that touch on respect, maturity, and tolerance. The characters would be growing and evolving in an isolated environment.

The setting also provides a vehicle for examining how relationships are born, how they are cultivated, and how they change. This includes both friendships and romantic/emotional relationships. The dynamics are magnified by the staggering pressure of the colonization mission itself, as well as the sense of loneliness and/or loss of family.

In my workshops and assemblies with schools, I’ve noticed an interesting response to the book series. Before reading them, young people are excited and fascinated by the prospect of teens going it alone without adults. Yet after reading the books, they have a completely different mindset; suddenly they are full of questions about the responsibility angle, the science behind the mission, and (most often) the complications behind the various social relationships. There are so many issues that they never had considered before reading the books.

Did the book involve special research, and/or travel?

Research on the Galahad books was quite fun. An avid space buff since childhood, it was great to explore the possibilities of extended space travel. I scoured dozens of web sites, including those sponsored by NASA and other space organizations. I also read books on space colonization and the effects of isolation.

There was no specific travel required for research purposes, but since I always seem to write better away from home, portions of the Galahad series have been written in: Denver, Tahoe, Monterrey/ Carmel, Santa Fe, New York, San Antonio, and (believe it or not) Peru. Trust me, hiking up to Machu Picchu will inspire you to do anything!

Can you tell us a little more about The Comet’s Curse?

*The Comet’s Curse* is the first book in an award-winning series for young adults. In the not-too-distant future deadly particles in a comet’s tail have altered the Earth’s atmosphere. The only hope for saving mankind is to select the brightest young people from around the world, and launch them towards a new home, light-years away.

But trouble has also boarded Galahad, and it could easily spell disaster for the crew. Someone is determined to undermine the mission and destroy the ship. The five members of Galahad’s Council, along with the most sophisticated (and sarcastic) computer ever created, must battle fear,

jealousy, and time...before it’s too late.

Galahad explores the concepts of responsibility and maturity for young people, in an isolated—and challenging—setting. The lead character is a sixteen-year-old girl, which is one reason the action/adventure tale appeals to readers of both genders. The various relationships that evolve among the crew weave throughout the story, and create a layer of personal drama that young people relate to.

A subtle theme of loneliness rides below the surface of the book. In particular, Galahad examines the effects of this emotion on teens, and how each individual learns to cope.

At its core, however, *The Comet’s Curse* is a rollicking adventure story, complete with good guys, bad guys, danger, romance, a smart-aleck computer, and a new sport that has everyone talking: Airboarding.

What comments about the Galahad series do you hear the most?

I am told over and over again by teachers and librarians that the Galahad series should definitely be marketed to teachers and schools across the nation. Each teacher who has selected the Galahad books as a read-aloud for their class has raved about the reaction from their kids. As one sixth grade teacher said, “Simply get this book in the hands of teachers and you’ll have a massive hit.”

What is the Big Brain Club?

I am the founder of The Big Brain Club, which helps young people overcome the peer pressure to dumb down.

The web site (www.BigBrainClub.com) includes sections for students as well as teachers and parents. For the students there are writing tips and writing assignments, which help them gain experience and confidence in their writing. For the teachers and parents there are articles and essays devoted to the state of education and classroom issues.

The Big Brain Club site is also a forum that allows teachers and parents to submit their own comments, as well contribute original articles and essays. Feedback from the education community has been outstanding to this program, and it will likely be a huge vehicle for driving interest in the Galahad series.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The information, activities, and discussion questions which follow are intended to enhance your reading of *The Comet’s Curse*. Please feel free to adapt these materials to suit your needs and interests.

WRITING AND RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

I. Welcome to “Humanity’s Lifeboat”

**A.** You have just received a letter of invitation to join the Galahad project. If you accept, you must leave home tomorrow to begin two years of training in hopes of being one of the 251 young people chosen for the crew. With classmates or friends, role-play a conversation between yourself and family members in which you weigh the pros and cons of this opportunity.

**B.** Make a list of the 5-10 items you will bring to decorate your onboard living quarters and remind you of home. Be creative and choose wisely. Afterwards, share your list with friends or classmates and explain your choices.

**C.** You are looking at your former home planet as Galahad launches into space. Use colored pencils, oil pastels, chalk, or other art materials to draw a picture of what you see. Write ten words that describe your feelings.

**D.** Dr. Zimmer refers to Galahad as “humanity’s lifeboat.” Imagine you overheard your teacher use this phrase. Now, as you sit in your living quarters aboard Galahad, write a short essay describing what this phrase means to you.

II. A Knightly Ship

**A.** Go to the library or online to learn more about the Knights of the Round Table, the Holy Grail, and Sir Galahad. Based on your research, create an outline, list, or fact web of ways in which the spaceship is appropriately named. If desired, invite classmates or friends to make similar outlines suggesting other names, supported by facts about their history and meaning, and vote to choose your group’s favorite name for a humanity-saving ship.

**B.** Consider the suggestions made by Dr. Zimmer, Dr. Bauer, and Dr. Orzini about the design of the ship’s main computer. Then, divide into two groups to debate the following: The ship’s computer should/should not have a friendly personality to support the work of the teens on board. Use library or online research to support your positions.

**C.** Based on details from the text, recreate Galahad in one of the following ways: (1) Draw a diagram of part or all of the ship on graph paper; (2) Create a three-dimensional model using clay, pipe cleaners, or other craft materials; or (3) Use PowerPoint or another computer program to make a “Resident’s Guide to Galahad” with animations if possible.

III. Past-Present-Future

**A.** Research an historic epidemic such as the Great Plague of London (1664-1666) or the Influenza Pandemic (1918). Collect facts about the disease, its effects on society, and how the health threat concluded. Make a two-columned chart on which you compare your research to Bhaktul, the disease of *The Comet’s Curse*.

**B.** Could events like those described in *The Comet’s Curse* come to pass? Why is it helpful to reflect upon such possibilities? Create an annotated list of science fiction works that make us consider the course of our nonfiction future. You may want to include the novels *Ender’s Game* by Orson Scott Card; *The Giver* by Lois Lowry; *Feed* by M. T. Anderson; *The Scorpion King* by Nancy Farmer; and film/television features such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Planet of the Apes*. If desired, add graphic novels, cartoons, paintings, and other creative works to your list.

**C.** Role-play the following scenario with friends or classmates: You are the host of a morning radio talk show whose engineer has managed to arrange a connection with Galahad’s communications system for five minutes. Choose the shipboard teen you would most like to interview, prepare your list of questions, set the timer and...go! If possible, make an audio or video recording of your interview.

**D.** Visit <http://eosps0.gsfc.nasa.gov/> to learn about EOS, NASA’s Earth Observing System. Then, write an essay answering the following question: What does EOS teach you about our planet, and how does this information affect your reading of *The Comet’s Curse*? Or, with a friend or classmate, role-play a conversation between a modern-day student and a student from Galahad in which you discuss human life and activities on Earth and in space.

“An exciting and dramatic space opera story.”  
—Midwest Book Review

Q&A WITH DOM TESTA

What inspired you to write The Comet’s Curse and the other Galahad books?

Galahad was born from the work I do with young people in the areas of education and literacy. After hosting writing workshops and assemblies for years, I wanted to write a book that would spotlight young people in a place of responsibility. The goal was to create a story where teens were

forced to rely on themselves and each other, without any adults around.

Rather than write yet another novel about a shipwreck and deserted island (please!), I chose to place my characters aboard a spacecraft, heading off to colonize a new world. This would truly isolate them, and create an atmosphere where they MUST learn cooperation and

# HUMAN KIND'S LAST HOPE IS IN THEIR HANDS

## WHEN THE TAIL OF THE COMET BHAKUTL

flicks through the Earth's atmosphere, deadly particles are left in its wake, and mankind is confronted with a virus that devastates the adult population. Desperate to save humanity, a renowned scientist proposes a bold plan: to create a ship that will carry a crew of 251 teenagers to a home in a distant solar system.

Two years later, the Galahad and its crew is launched. Their training has prepared the young crew for the challenges of space travel, but soon after departing Earth, the crew discovers that a saboteur is hiding on the Galahad. Sixteen-year-old Trianna Martell and her council must find a way to neutralize their enemy...for if their mission fails, it will be the end of the human race.

### Don't miss the next books in the Galahad series:

*The Web of Titan* (October 2009)

*The Cassini Code* (April 2010)

### Forthcoming:

Galahad #4, Galahad #5, Galahad #6

### Related websites:

[www.DomTesta.com](http://www.DomTesta.com)

[www.ClubGalahad.com](http://www.ClubGalahad.com)

The Galahad Blog,  
([www.GalahadBlog.typepad.com](http://www.GalahadBlog.typepad.com)), also  
accessible through the Club Galahad site.

The Big Brain Club  
([www.BigBrainClub.com](http://www.BigBrainClub.com)), a site devoted  
to my work with literacy and education.

**DOM TESTA** grew up a world-traveling Air Force "brat" with a passion for radio. He got his first radio job at the age of sixteen. In 1993, he joined Colorado's MIX 100 where he co-hosts the award-winning Dom & Jane Morning Show. A frequent speaker at schools and libraries, his passion for reading, writing, and education is profoundly evident in his Galahad books as well as his Big Brain Club, a website dedicated to encouraging young people to be proud of their intellectual accomplishments. He lives in Colorado.



"Dom Testa has invented a highly original world packed with surprise, insight, and heart. Read it with your whole family, and enjoy the ride."

—Michael Booth,  
*The Denver Post*

### THE COMET'S CURSE YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Tor Teen Hardcover  
978-0-7653-2107-7  
\$16.95 • \$18.95 Can.  
5 ½" x 8 ¼" • 240 pages

AGES  
12+

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. After reading only the prologue to *The Comet's Curse*, who did you think was going to be the story's narrator? Were you surprised to discover the identity of the narrator? Did you trust this narrator? Do the other main characters of the story trust this narrator? Explain.

2. What is Bhaktul's disease? How does the presence of the disease affect life and society on Earth?

3. Why doesn't Trianna want to look back at Earth as Galahad launches? What insights into her character does this choice give readers? Where did Trianna grow up? What qualities make her a good Council leader?

4. Why does Wallace Zimmer develop the Galahad project? Who are Zimmer's supporters? Who is his most strenuous detractor? If you were a member of the scientific community of this period, do you think you would be for or against Zimmer's work and why?

5. What is the relationship between Roy Orzini and Roc? In what way does the relationship resemble that of parent and child? How are parent-child relationships a key motif in the novel? How are these relationships important to children? How are they important to parents? What different outcomes result from challenging parent-child relationships in the story?

6. What does Peter Mayer see in the Storage Section of the ship that dramatically changes the mood onboard? What are the Council Members' initial reactions to Peter's outburst? What other strange events follow Peter's outburst?

7. What are Bon, Gap, Channy, and Lita's responsibilities aboard Galahad? What qualities resulted in their being chosen for these jobs? Do you think the selection process described in Chapter 16 was a good one? Had you been selected for Galahad, to which of these roles do you think you would be best suited and why?

8. What is in the Storage Sections? Do you think the plan to keep these sections unopened until the passengers reach Eos is a good one? Do you think everyone on the crew will be able to resist the temptation of these sealed compartments?

9. What are Roc's thoughts about Galahad's mysterious extra passenger? How does he describe the relationships forming between the Council members? How do Roc's insights affect your reading of the novel? If you were aboard Galahad, how might you consult, confide in, or play with your computerized companion?

10. Near the end of the novel, how do Dr. Zimmer and Dr. Scofield begin to repair their relationship? How does this lead Dr. Zimmer to concerns about Dr. Bauer? What conclusions are Trianna and her crew beginning to draw at the same time?

11. What are the other Council members' reactions to Trianna's revelation of the mysterious e-mail message? When Trianna heads to the Storage Section to confront Galahad's intruder, is she completely alone? Explain.

12. How does Trianna stall Dr. Bauer in the Storage Section? Who comes to her aid? How does the group work together to defeat their former teacher? How do Bon and Trianna work together and what effect does this have on their relationship? How does this affect Trianna's relationship with Gap?

13. What is the status of Galahad and its crew members as the novel draws to a close? Do you think their mission can continue successfully now that they are aware of Roc's weaknesses? In what way is the crew stronger with this knowledge?

14. Do you think *The Comet's Curse* is foremost a story of conflicting ideologies, of the struggle to preserve humanity, or of the power of individual relationships? Explain your answer.

15. Do you think that Galahad will make it to Eos? Why or why not? In your opinion, what are the greatest threats or obstacles to Galahad's success?

"Sci-fi fans will enjoy Testa's spare Asimovian plot, but even those leery of the genre will appreciate how each chapter alternates to the past to further flesh out our protagonists. Stealing the show is the Galahad's mischievous central computer, Roc, who speaks directly to the readers as he acts as the Greek chorus." —*Booklist*

"...It grabs readers' attention with the very first page and never lets go. Both a mystery and an adventure, combining a solid cast of characters with humor, pathos, growing pains and just a hint of romance."

—*Kirkus Reviews*



[tor-forge.com](http://tor-forge.com)

# TOR TEEN TEACHER'S GUIDE

## The Comet's Curse

A GALAHAD BOOK

Dom Testa

GRAND PRIZE WINNER:  
Writer's Digest Book Award

(chosen from more than 1500 entries worldwide)