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Perks of being a wallflower questions and answers

SUBJECTS — Literature/U.S.; SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING — Child Abuse; Courage; GBLTQ; Friendship; Romantic Relationships; Mental Illness; Suicide; MORAL-ETHICAL EMPHASIS — Caring. AGE: 14+; MPAA Rating — PG-13 for mature thematic material, drug and alcohol use, sexual content including references, and a fight – all involving teens; Drama: 2012; 103 minutes; Color. Available from Amazon.com. While this film contains several important life lessons for teens and is overall a positive experience, it also shows risky teen behavior, in particular, premarital sex, underage drinking, standing in the back of a pick-up truck going 40 – 60 mph, and taking marijuana and LSD. Teachers are advised to obtain parental and administrative permission before showing this movie. See TWM’s Movie Permission Slip. It is helpful to explain at least three things to a class that has watched this movie. First, when the actors in the film stood in the back of the pick-up truck, they were held in place with wires and many other off-screen precautions were taken to protect them. Second, marijuana, like many drugs, can have side effects, perhaps the most common is that frequent marijuana use can destroy motivation. Three, taking LSD sometimes causes people to do dangerous things and every once in a while they get hurt or they don’t come back from the trip with a sound mind. Have students read the book first. The novel is an excellent example of tone illuminating character and setting the groundwork for plot developments at the end of the story. The narrator’s flat emotionless tone does not come through as clearly in the movie. Watching the film after reading the book will provide a demonstration of how written stories are translated to film. In Middle School, Charlie’s best friend committed suicide. Shortly thereafter Charlie had a breakdown and spent time in a mental institution. As the movie begins, it is Charlie’s first day of high school. He is that “weird kid who spent time in a mental hospital” and has no friends. Charlie sits alone in the lunchroom every day. His luck changes when he is befriended by a group of misfit seniors: Patrick is gay; Samantha (“Sam”) was the freshman slut; and Mary Elizabeth is a goth. Through the school year Charlie learns many things about acceptance, friendship and romantic relations. Eventually he is able to confront a dark secret that has been troubling him far more than the suicide of his friend. The movie is based on the best selling novel of the same name and stays true to the themes of the book. The film does not follow the book exactly, but it has independent artistic significance. The author of the novel wrote and directed the movie. Selected Awards: None. Featured Actors: Logan Lerman as Charlie; Emma Watson as Sam; Ezra Miller as Patrick; Johnny Simmons as Brad; Mae Whitman as Mary Elizabeth; Nina Dobrev as Candace; Erin Wilhelmi as Alice; Adam Hagenbuch as Bob; Dylan McDermott as Father; Paul Rudd as Mr. Anderson; Kate Walsh as Mother; Nicholas Braun as Ponytail Derek Tom Savini as Mr. Callahan Leo Miles Farmerie as 7-Year-Old Charlie; Isabel Muschweck as 9-Year-Old Candace. Director: Stephen Chbosky. This coming of age story hits several social-emotional learning issues important to teens, including courage in social situations, friendship, and romantic relationships. The story is a landmark in young adult literature for its sympathetic portrayal of a gay teenager whose life does not have a tragic outcome. The movie is one of the best films available for increasing acceptance of GBLTQ teens. It does the same for teens who suffer from an emotional disorder, in this case, PTSD from childhood sexual abuse. Students will absorb the life-lessons presented in the film, will gain tolerance for GBLTQ people and will gain insight into the effects of childhood sexual abuse. The emotions generated by the film will lead to spirited discussions and a strong interest in completing assignments. Serious. See note at the beginning of the Guide. Also, there are no ethnic or racial minorities shown in this film. Watch and enjoy the film with your child. After the movie, if necessary, give the cautions described in the Warning at the beginning of this Guide. Later, after the passage of some time, when a situation arises in which one of the lessons of this story will be helpful to your child, use the story as a point of reference. Patrick: You see things and you understand – you’re a wallflower. Charlie: I didn’t think anyone noticed me, Patrick: We didn’t think there was anyone cool left to meet. Patrick: Welcome to the Island of the Misfit Toys. Charlie: Do you think that if people knew how crazy your are they would never talk to you. Sam: All the time. Mary Elizabeth: I hope it works out. Patrick: I don’t know. Alice: Craig would be a big step up from her last boyfriend. . . . Mary Elizabeth: . . . Who could forget Mr. Car Wash Loser? Patrick: I just hope she can stop playing dumb with these guys. I keep telling her, “Don’t make yourself small.” For more quotes from the book, see Perks of Being a Wallflower Quotes. Statements by the Author/Director in the Commentary to the Film (Some quotations may not be exact) Chbosky: Our wallflower is looking and he’s remembering everything and he’s carrying it with him. Chbosky: The generation gap is nothing more than a conversation we haven’t had yet. Chbosky: The thing I’ve learned about writing novels and also directing is that they are kind of the same job, ultimately. It’s about creating a world and creating a tone and a universe that all the characters get to play in. But in one, all you’re using is your imagination and some words on a piece of paper. And in the other one you are using as many as 350 people at any given time. And what’s beautiful about the process is that it’s always evolving and the people that you work with are always challenging you to make it better and they are adding their own sense of autobiography and their own passions. Mr. Chbosky commented that one of the differences between writing the novel and making the movie was how the information that Charlie’s best friend Michael had shot himself the year before could be revealed to the audience. In the book, he did it at the very beginning. In making the movie, he felt that it would cast a pall over the beginning of the film. He found a way to place this revelation in the scene at the party when Sam is making him a milk shake. Charlie tells her about Michael’s suicide without showing any emotion. Chbosky: There’s the script that you write, the film that you film, and then there’s the film you create in post production. Chbosky: Even the most lonely shy person you’ve ever met in your life . . . wants to have a great life and they want to be triumphant in their schools and how it does always work out but if you stick in there and you fight a little longer, it will work out Chbosky: This is the story of a writer finding his voice. Chbosky: One of the things about Perks that I wanted to do as a novelist and as a filmmaker [was to describe] all the highs and all the lows and all the secrets that young people have and they keep. When I think about that moment when Charlie’s sister gets hit and the instant forgiveness. And one of the things that was important to me as a story teller was to talk about how when problems exist in families and you don’t root them out and you don’t sift through them they repeat themselves. And if little kids like Charlie and Candace . . . saw their Aunt Helen go through abuse if it’s something that doesn’t become tragic it’s something that becomes normal. And how we do ourselves a great service and do our families a great service if we bring these things out into the light and talk about them and try to be the last person in our family to go through it. Chbosky: In a book you can take 75 pages to describe something that will be just a moment in the movie. Chbosky: We cannot change where we come from but we can change what we will become. 1. There are many life lessons in this story. Describe one. Suggested Response: The lessons of the story include: (1) standing on the fringes of life leads nowhere; if you want something, go for it; if you don’t you’ll never get it; if you try, you will often succeed; (2) acceptance by others and acceptance of others is important to everyone; as the author/director said in the commentary “When we accept each other, we save each other every day”; (3) people accept the love they think they deserve; (4) at the end of the day it’s your family and your friends who get you through life. (After one student has described a lesson from the story go to several other students in succession until all ideas have been exhausted. The discussion should at least cover the lessons described in the preceding sentences.) [The following two questions should be asked together] 2. Until the very end of the movie, Charlie thought his aunt Helen was one of his favorite persons in the world. Why would he feel something like that and why didn’t he remember what she had done to him? Suggested Response: Victims of childhood sexual abuse are torn by the following conflicting and powerful emotions: 1) an important adult has chosen the child for a special relationship and special favors, which means that the child is special and favored; this is more than flattering; all children would like to think of themselves as special and favored; 2) there is often pleasure felt in the act because the adult often manipulates erogenous zones of the child’s body; 3) the perpetrator will often try to convince the child that the child seduced the perpetrator or that somehow the child is responsible for the relationship; 4) the child knows at some level that his or her boundaries have been violated and that what is happening is wrong; 5) the child feels powerless; 6) often the perpetrators threaten the child or tell the child that terrible things will happen to a parent or to the perpetrator if “our little secret” is found out. Thus, children will not tell anyone about the abuse, they may even repress their memories of the abuse and all that is left in the conscious mind are feelings of closeness to the perpetrator, while full knowledge of what occurred is tearing the child apart in the subconscious. This is what was happening to Charlie. In addition, Charlie thought he was responsible for his Aunt’s death because she was on her way to get his birthday present when she had the accident. When he had his sexual encounter with Sam the day before she left for college, the similarity between what they did as a loving couple and what was done to him by his Aunt Helen brought the memories close to the surface. They were too painful to face directly and Charlie suffered a crisis. 3. Aunt Helen tells Charlie that, “It’s our little secret.” This is often said by abusers to their victims. Why would this instruction resonate with a child? Suggested Response: It communicates the idea that the child shares a special bond with the perpetrator; they share a secret that no one else knows about. In addition, many children are fearful of being hurt by the abuser or of getting the abuser, whom the child cares about, into trouble. Children also fear that no one would believe him or her. Or, it may be a mixture of all of these emotions. 4. There is one night shown in this story that changed Charlie’s life forever. Which night was it? Why did you pick this night as being the turning point? Suggested Response: There are many answers to this question. The justifications for the choice should refer to themes of the story. The author/director chose the night at the football game when Charlie went to sit near Patrick in the hopes of striking up a conversation. This night changed Charlie’s life because he took a risk and reached out to another person. 5. Stephen Chbosky, the author/director, said that he wanted to present a story in which none of the characters was a bad person. Was he successful? Is this really a story without a bad person? Explain the reasons for your answer. Suggested Response: He was successful in terms of the students. Brad is not a bad person, he’s just scared of his father and of being ridiculed as gay by the other students. He acted badly in the fight with Patrick, but regretted it. Remember when Brad thanked Charlie for stopping his friends from beating up Patrick? Mary Elizabeth isn’t bad, she’s just the wrong girl for Charlie. The girl who sits next to Charlie in English class is pretty mean, but she is tangential to the story. Brad’s friends, who beat up Patrick, are typical high school jocks. While their behaviour was not exemplary, they are also not important characters in the story. They are more a part of the background in which the major characters operate. The one character who could be said to be a bad person was Charlie’s Aunt Helen. This isn’t immediately apparent because we see her through the eyes of Charlie, who loved her, and because she, too, was injured by others. However, there is never an excuse for an adult to abuse a child, either sexually, physically or emotionally. That is a line that simply should not be crossed. Sexual child abuse is extremely damaging to a child, sometimes for the child’s entire life. There is a reason why child-abuse is classified as a major felony. In that way, Aunt Helen was a pretty bad person. 6. Why do really great people sometimes let themselves be treated badly? Suggested Response: The response of this story is that we accept the love we think we deserve. In other words, low self-esteem. 7. Flashback is a device that is usually used to fill in a backstory, that is, to tell the audience what has happened before the story told by the book or movie begins. Flashback is used in The Perks of Being a Wallflower for that purpose but also for an additional purpose which relates to the description of Charlie’s character. What was that? Suggested Response: At the beginning of the film, Charlie recalls the past in disconnected fragments – he can’t put the past together. He has no cohesive view of the past. The snippets of memory from the past, the flashbacks, come to Charlie as he remembers more and more about what happened with his Aunt Helen. The way the book and the movie is structured Charlie and the audience discover these memories together. 8. Why didn’t Charlie ever ask Sam out on a date? Suggested Response: He was going to and then Mary Elizabeth happened. After Mary Elizabeth, he was probably too scared. 9. Stephen Chbosky, the author of the book who also directed the film, has described one of the life-lessons of the film in the following way. What do you think about this statement: If you just reach out and you present yourself exactly as you are, the right people are going to say yes to you and the right people are going to befriend you and the right people are going to accept you and you can make great friends forever. Suggested Response: There is no one correct answer. Some students will agree and some will disagree. The purpose of the question is to get students thinking about the question. 10. Sam said that she thought that one day, “I’d see a person across the room and I’d know everything was ok.” What type of thinking does this demonstrate? Suggested Response: There is no one correct response. One strong response is that this thought is an example of magical thinking. Another is that the thought is an example of romanticism. The basic concept is that it’s not realistic. Good relationships are made by loving partners who do whatever work is necessary to make the relationship strong. 11. How would you describe Charlie’s family and its affect on Charlie? Suggested Response: Adjectives that could be used are close, loving, caremmed, supportive, helpful, and life-saving. Some students might describe the family as blind or unable to observe because they didn’t notice what Helen was doing to Charlie. This is unfortunately true of many situations in which children are abused. 12. Describe some of the evidence of Charlie suffering from some type of mental illness. Suggested Response: There are many, but here are a few: seeing disturbing images in his mind; uncontrollable rage when someone is going to hurt a friend (this rage was so strong that he beat up three seniors); obsessiveness, as when he is calling everyone after the break-up with Mary Elizabeth; blackouts; crying, suicidal thoughts. Also, the audience sees Charlie taking medication. 13. What does Charlie mean when he says that he feels infinite? Suggested Response: He is accepted by his friends and this connection makes everything right with the world. 14. What is the moment in this story when Charlie gets a chance to become a hero? Why did you select this occasion? Suggested Response: There are many answers to this question. The justifications for the choice should refer to themes of the story. The author/director chose the night at the football game when Charlie went to sit near Patrick in the hopes of striking up a conversation. 15. Had Charlie gone to the football game and not changed his seat to be near Patrick, what would have happened? Suggested Response: There is no one correct answer. Good responses will include: there would have been no story; he never would have met Patrick or Sam; he would have stayed friendless for a while longer. Mr. Chbosky put it this way, “He could have stayed in his seat for the next three hours and hate the fact that he would never get up.” 16. Why was Charlie contemplating suicide? Suggested Response: There is no one correct answer. The best answers will refer to the themes of the story. One good answer is that the repressed memories of what his Aunt Helen had done to him were coming to the surface and they were so painful that he could not bear them. In addition, all his friends were leaving school and going off to college; he was facing the next two or three years alone and while this was not enough for suicide, it was a contributing factor. 17. Who or what are the antagonists in this story? Suggested Response: There are several. For Charlie, they include Charlie’s isolation; the adolescent culture which allows kids to be shunned, insulted and bullied; the effects of the injury that Charlie suffered at the hands of Aunt Helen. For Patrick, the antagonist is the prejudice against gays. For Sam, the antagonist is her lack of self-esteem. 18. Who or what are the protagonists of this story and what are they seeking? Suggested Response: Charlie is the chief protagonist, but there are at least two others. Charlie is seeking acceptance and friendship, love, and to recover from the injuries caused to him by Aunt Helen and by Michael’s suicide. Patrick is seeking to recover from the loss of his relationship with Brad, specifically, and generally, he confronts prejudice against gays. Sam is seeking love and to redeem herself after her first disastrous years in high school. 19. In the fight between Candace and her boyfriend, what did she do to provoke him? Is this question of any importance in determining the blame for this incident? Suggested Response: She insulted him and then she hit him on the chest ineffectually, doing absolutely no harm. She kept at him after he asked her to stop. That is no excuse for Pony Tail Derek’s action in hitting Candace. Boys should never hit girls; men should never hit women. For that matter, women shouldn’t hit men but due to the fact that the average male is much stronger than the average female, it’s orders of magnitude worse for a man or a boy to hit a woman or a girl. 20. John Malkovich, a well-known actor who was a producer of this movie, said that in a movie, “when you have heard you don’t need sentiment.” What did he mean by that? Give an example from the film. Suggested Response: The basic concept is that when the story evokes feelings that flow from the heart of the audience, the actors and the filmmakers don’t have to work at showing the sentiment; understated presentations (acting, music, lighting etc.) will work much better. The imagination of the audience supplies the emotion. One example is when Charlie is telling Sam about Michael’s suicide. 21. People have a tendency to repeat flawed relationships. Does that apply to the relationship between Charlie and Sam? Explain your reasoning. Suggested Response: The following is a theory and there are counter-arguments that students may come up with: Sam is an older nurturing female, as Aunt Helen was older and claimed to be nurturing. Sam gives Charlie what she thought was his first kiss in order that he be given by someone who loved him. She gave him a typewriter and an instruction to write, to assist him in developing his talents as a writer. Charlie describes Aunt Helen as his best friend until he met Sam. There is definitely an element of repetition in Charlie’s relationship with Sam, but it is also common for young boys to have strong feelings for older girls. The obvious difference between the two relationships is that because Charlie is older now and because of his relative closeness in age with Sam, the relationship with Sam is not tainted with sexual abuse. That makes all the difference. Note, however, that if Sam had been over 18, in many jurisdictions, she could have been prosecuted for child sexual abuse of Charlie who was probably 15 or 16. Prosecutions based on this type of age difference have been known to occur on rare occasions. 22. In the cafeteria, why did Charlie become so enraged that he could beat three senior football players and then not remember what he did? Suggested Response: Any well-reasoned answer will suffice. Here is one possible answer: Charlie had been so hurt by his Aunt Helen and he loved Patrick so much that he couldn’t bear Patrick being hurt. The reason that this incident is tied to the abuse that Charlie had suffered is that he blacked out. The fact that Charlie was defending his friend was no reason for him to black out. However, at that point, his mind was repressing everything that related to the sexual abuse. Seeing Patrick attacked brought that issue up for him and since it was too close to the surface his mind repressed the memory. 23. This film has an expository phase. Where does it end and what do we know by the time that occurs? Suggested Response: It ends at the end of the first letter, where we see the words, “Love, Charlie.” What we know includes something about Charlie’s background, about his supportive family, Charlie’s hopes for the school year, and his isolation at school. 24. After the “truth or dare” debacle, Charlie has lost the acceptance of the group, most importantly Patrick and Sam didn’t want to see him. He panics and calls people frequently. He tells Mary Elizabeth that, “I got so messed up inside like I’m not there.” What is Charlie experiencing? Describe it. Suggested Response: Dissociation, which is detachment from immediate surroundings. A severe form involves detachment from physical and emotional experience. 25. Most seniors in high school won’t even talk to a freshman. Why did Patrick, Sam, and Mary Elizabeth, all of whom were seniors, allow Charlie into their circle of friends? Suggested Response: A good discussion will mention the following two points. First, these were just really nice and compassionate kids. The toast in which Patrick formally welcomes Charlie into their circle of friends, occurred right after Sam told Patrick about the suicide of Charlie’s best friend and that she didn’t think Charlie had any friends. The second reason was that these seniors were very low in the social pecking order of the school. Patrick refers to their parties as “The Island of the Misfit Toys”. Seniors with higher social standing would probably have been afraid that they would lower their position in school society by associating with a freshman, especially one who had been in a mental hospital the year before. 26. For each of the items of dialog below, describe its role in the development of plot or characterization or its relation to the theme. Suggested Response: You can’t just sit there and put everyone else’s life ahead of yours and call it love. This one moment when you know you are not a sad story and you’re alive. Charlie: My aunt had that same thing done to her two and she turned her life around. Sam:She must have been great. Charlie: She was my favorite person in the world until now. I don’t know if I’ll have time to write another letter, I’ll be too busy participating. In this moment I saw we are infinite . . . The weird kid who spent time in the hospital . . . 27. What was the significance of Charlie giving Sam the books? Suggested Response: Charlie gave Sam the typewriter? Suggested Response: Charlie gave Sam the books that had been important to him to give her part of himself. Sam gave Charlie a typewriter to encourage him to become self-realized. See Discussion Questions #s 2, 3, 5, 11 & 16. COURAGE See Discussion Questions #s 4 & 14. GBLTQ 1. What should Charlie have done when Patrick suddenly kissed him on the mouth? Suggested Response: Pretty much what he did, which was to still be his friend. Patrick was despondent and not really thinking of what he was doing. Sometimes people just do inexplicable and stupid things. Had Patrick persisted, then it would have been a different matter. 2. What will it take for Brad to come out of the closet and to acknowledge to his friends and family that he is attracted to males rather than females? Suggested Response: It will take maturity and acceptance of himself for who he is. It may take him moving away to be physically distant. A group of supportive friends would also be helpful. Support networks such as It Gets Better Project can also help. See also Discussion Questions 17 & 18. FRIENDSHIP See Discussion Questions #s 1, 9 & 24. ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS See Discussion Questions #s 1, 6, 8, 10, 19, & 21. MENTAL ILLNESS See Discussion Questions #s 7, 12, 16 & 22. SUICIDE See Discussion Questions #s 12 & 16. Any of the discussion questions set out above can serve as essay prompts. 1. Write a narrative memoir about any one of the following incidents in your life or in the life of a fictional character: The first day of high school (or at any new school); Eating alone in the school cafeteria when you (or the subject of the narrative) had no one to sit with; The first kiss; The first date; The first party; Taking a risk to strike up a friendship (or at least a conversation) and meeting with either acceptance or rejection; and any important incident in your life that you feel relates in some way to the story told by the movie. 2. Sam asked Charlie to “write about us.” Pretend that you are Charlie. Charlie had stopped writing to his friend when the book/movie ended. It’s now five years later. For some reason (a reason you are to create) Charlie has decided to write another letter to his friend describing what had happened to Sam, Patrick and Charlie over the past five years. Use your imagination. If you wish, you can introduce new characters. You do not need to keep Sam or Patrick in Charlie’s life after they left for college. 3. Research and write a report on one of the following topics: Why children often do not report sexual abuse by an adult; The prevalence of childhood sexual abuse; Treatments available for childhood sexual abuse; Criminal and civil penalties the can be imposed on perpetrators of childhood sexual abuse; the prevalence of suicide among teens and the reasons for this; steps that can be taken to prevent suicide in a teenager who is despondent. See also Additional Assignments for Use With any Film that is a Work of Fiction. Multimedia: Anchor Standard #7 for Reading (for both ELA classes and for History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Classes). (The three Anchor Standards read: “Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media, including visually and quantitatively as well as in words.”) CCSS pp. 35 & 60. See also Anchor Standard # 2 for ELA Speaking and Listening, CCSS pp. 48. Reading: Anchor Standards #s 1, 2, 7 and 8 for Reading and related standards (for both ELA classes and for History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Classes). CCSS pp. 35 & 60. Writing: Anchor Standards #s 1 – 5 and 7-10 for Writing and related standards (for both ELA classes and for History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Classes). CCSS pp. 41 & 63. Speaking and Listening: Anchor Standards #s 1 – 3 (for ELA classes). CCSS pp. 48. Not all assignments reach all Anchor Standards. Teachers are encouraged to review the specific standards to make sure that over the term all standards are met. While it’s best for this film to be shown after students have read the book, they will also enjoy reading the book after seeing the movie.

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