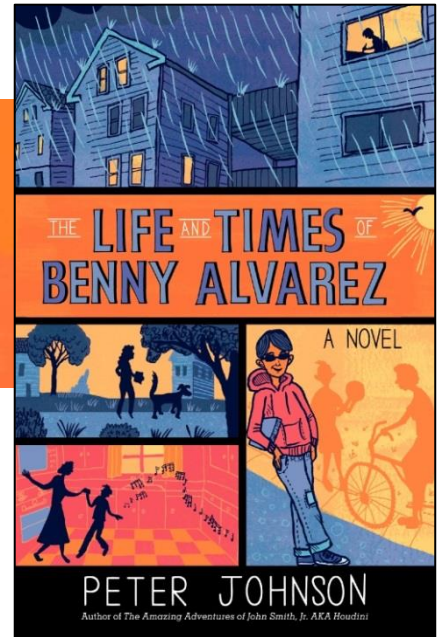


# THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BENNY ALVAREZ



## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### ABOUT THE BOOK

Benny Alvarez is said to come from a long line of negative men and boys, and, at first, he doesn't seem very interested in changing his image. In fact, when he and his two friends Jocko and Beanie discover the pleasures of playing with words and commonly used expressions, Benny often uses that knowledge to further his own ends. Things change, though, after Benny confronts the antics of his little brother, Crash; a poetry contest, which he reluctantly participates in against his archenemy, Claudine; and the inevitable decline of his beloved grandfather's health. Eventually, Benny realizes that all the words in the world can't protect him from some of the unpleasant things we all have to experience.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Benny doesn't think "negative" is the right adjective to describe him, and he gives a few different synonyms for the word. Do you think Benny is negative, according to the dictionary meaning of the word? Look up the word in a thesaurus and choose a synonym that you think fits Benny. What are a few scenes where Benny's behavior resembles your definition of *negative*? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4.
2. How would you describe Benny's relationship with his brother, Crash? How are they alike? How are they different? What makes Benny decide to sleep next to Crash on the pool table? Are there any other times when Benny helps out Crash? What are his motives for doing so? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.3; 5.3; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.3; 8.6.
3. Why does Benny dislike Claudine? Read the chapter "Samuel Morse," in which Benny recounts his relationship with her, and Jocko tries to set him straight. Do you trust or question Benny's version of events? Do you think Benny is fair to Claudine? How does his relationship with her change during the book? In what chapter does the turning point in their relationship occur? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.6

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

4. Very often the cover of a novel has one or more images that represent key moments or themes in a book. Looking at the cover of this book, describe how each image on the cover points to a key scene or theme. Which image do you think is the most important? Would you have included any other images—the glass half full or empty, for example? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.7; 4-8.2; 7.7.
5. What are the characteristics of Benny’s grandfather that make everyone like him? What are the similarities between how Benny, Crash, and Benny’s father respond to Benny’s grandfather? What are some of the differences? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.6; 5.3; 6.2; 7.6; 8.5.
6. Everyone is afraid that Benny’s grandfather is going to die. What other suggestions of death are in the book, and how does the knowledge and fear of death change Benny? In what way does the hawk symbolize death? What is Benny’s attitude to the hawk? What are Crash’s, Grandpa’s, and Aldo’s feelings about the hawk? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.5; 4.7; 4-8.2; 5.3; 6.3; 8.4.
7. Very often a character can be summed up by looking at something they say. What are some snippets of dialogue from Benny, Claudine, Jocko, Beanie, and Crash that sum up their characters? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4; 8.3.
8. When the boys discover A. J. Logos is an eighty-five-year-old librarian from Enid, Oklahoma, Benny says, “Is it just me, or is it creepy we’re obsessed with a book written by an old lady?” Why do Benny and his friends care so much about who wrote *Proteus*? How do they expect Ms. D. to look and act, and why are they disappointed when she’s getting married? Do you see any similarities between their responses to A. J. Logos and Ms. D.? 4.4-8.4; 4.3; 5.3; 6.4; 7.3; 8.3; 8.5.
9. It seems from the beginning that Benny and his father have their doubts about Aldo. Why? List a few quotations in which they actually criticize him. What do Irene, Benny’s mother, Crash, and Grandpa think about Aldo? Why do Crash and Aldo get along so well? What do they have in common? After discussing these questions, ask yourself how Aldo’s presence helps Benny and his father to grow in the story. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.3; 5.2; 6.2; 6.3; 7.3; 7.6; 8.5; 8.6.
10. Look up the word *epiphany* in a dictionary. At what moments in the story do you think Benny experiences epiphanies, and which one changes him the most? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4; 8.2.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

11. Grandpa tells Benny that “trouble can’t hit a moving target.” What “troubles” does Benny try to avoid during the novel? What techniques does he use to dodge trouble at home, with his friends, and at school? Do you think it’s best to work around trouble or to confront it? Give an example from a situation at home, playing sports, or another activity during which you think you did the right thing by confronting a problem head on. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.2-4.
  
12. Benny has to write a poem about “love and loss,” which is appropriate because love and loss could be considered themes of the novel. In which scenes do we find these themes played out? Some of the scenes about loss are sad, but why are they necessary for characters to grow? Give a specific example. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.2; 5.5; 6.5;
  
13. *The Life and Times of Benny Alvarez* is about the importance of family.  
*The Life and Times of Benny Alvarez* is about the importance of friends.  
*The Life and Times of Benny Alvarez* is about the importance of language and words.  
*The Life and Times of Benny Alvarez* is about the importance of change.  
Referring to specific chapters, show how each one of these statements is true.  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.2.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. **Making Objects Come Alive.** The object poems Benny and his classmates write have a long history, and poets use the term *object* very loosely. To them, an emotion or an animal are also suitable objects for a poem. The poet Charles Simic wrote object poems on pain and fear, and the poet Robert Bly’s object poems were often about animals. Find some of these poems and bring them into class. Then divide your students into groups and stage a contest similar to the one Ms. D runs in Benny’s class. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-7.7.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

2. **Understanding Metaphor.** Understanding metaphor is crucial to writing poetry. One way to understand metaphor is by looking at clichés, which are overused metaphors. One reason Benny and his friends like *Proteus* is because it contains familiar expressions that people use, even though those people have no idea where the phrases come from. These expressions were originally new metaphors but were used so often that they became clichés. An example of such a metaphor-turned-cliché is “kick the bucket.” We all know this phrase means “to die,” but what does kicking a bucket have to do with dying? This expression actually refers to a hanging. Authorities would place a noose around a criminal’s neck, have him stand on a tall bucket, then kick it from underneath him. So there was once a literal, real bucket, and then at some point after a person died, someone somewhere was the first to say, “He kicked the bucket.” Here is one more example:

*Fly off the handle.* “Benny wanted to tell Claudine he was sorry about Hobo but he thought she’d fly off the handle.”

Meaning: Losing one’s temper.

Origin: When swinging an axe, if the head flies off the handle, it goes out of control.

Have your students find these clichés and others on the Internet. Then let the class guess what literal facts helped to create the metaphor. A great source for these phrases can be found at: <http://www.phrases.org.uk>. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.2.

3. **Ambrose Bierce’s *The Devil’s Dictionary*.** At the end of *The Life and Times of Benny Alvarez*, Claudine gives Benny a copy of Ambrose Bierce’s *The Devil’s Dictionary*. Originally published in 1906 as *The Cynic’s Word Book*, it was retitled in 1911 as *The Devil’s Dictionary*, and continues to be a favorite of people who like to make fun of other people and concepts. Bierce does this by reinterpreting words and phrases, often parodying real dictionary entries. For example, one entry reads: “Apology, v.i.: To lay the foundation for a future offence.” Here, Bierce plays the cynic, suggesting that people apologize so that they can set up someone for something bad later. Here are two more examples from Bierce’s work:

**Bore**, n.: A person who talks when you wish him to listen.

**Circus**, n.: A place where horses, ponies, and elephants are permitted to see men, women, and children acting the fool.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

Have students find more examples from Bierce's book (they are free online). Then have them invent a comic entry for their own *Devil's Dictionary*. For example:

**Summer Vacation**, n.: A trick conjured by parents and teachers to make you work harder during the summer than during the school year. Examples of this torture are:

- Summer reading lists, with much fatter books because “you have a lot of time on your hands.”
- Camps where you're reminded every day of just how inferior you are to your peers, especially in sports.
- Cutting the grass and digging a new garden for your mom because “idle minds are the devil's workshop.” CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.7; 4-7.9; 4-8.4.

4. **Prose Poetry vs. Verse Poetry.** Have the students study a short verse poem. Discuss it in class as a verse poem, and then hand out a prose version in paragraph form. Does the sound or meaning of the poem change, depending on whether it's in verse or prose? By creating line breaks is the poet trying to create a sound that mimics the meaning of the poem? Look at William Carlos Williams's famous poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” as an example. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.7.
5. **Hawks.** The hawk is an important symbol in the book. Ask students to research hawks and make a list of things they associate with hawks. Then discuss what characteristics of the hawk make it a perfect symbol. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.9; 5.9; 6.9; 8.9.
6. **Families I.** Families are made strong or collapse, depending on how they respond to adversity. Have students write a short essay on a crisis their family faced, and ask them to describe how members of the family rallied around each other to battle that crisis. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.9.
7. **Families II.** Benny believes that there are certain Alvarez traits that have been passed down from generation to generation. Some of these traits are physical; others are personality traits. Have students create a family tree of characteristics (they can be serious or funny or both) that they see in their extended families, both past and present. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-8/9.
8. **Rewriting.** Why do you think the author felt his ending of the book was perfect? In what ways does it work for you? Write a new one- or two-paragraph ending, or cross out paragraphs and end earlier. Explain why any of these new endings might also work. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8. 5.