

**NOTHING INTERESTING
EVER HAPPENS TO**

ETHAN FAIRMONT



EDUCATORS' GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK



***E.T.* meets *Stranger Things* in this middle-grade novel series from author and award-winning filmmaker Nick Brooks. With crossover appeal, this fun, engaging series has plenty of nostalgia nods for adults to appreciate as well as young readers.**

Something cool happening in Ferrous City? Not a chance. Until one day . . . when self-proclaimed genius inventor Ethan Fairmont runs into an abandoned car factory to avoid a local bully and accidentally stumbles across his ex-best friend Kareem, new kid Juan Carlos, and an extraterrestrial visitor. Cheese (the alien) is stuck on Earth and in need of some serious repairs, spicy snacks—and absolute, total secrecy. That’s easier said than done when mysterious agents descend on Ferrous City to search for Cheese. With time running out

and their family and friends in potential danger, can Ethan, Kareem, and Juan Carlos pull off an intergalactic rescue before they’re all found out?

Weaving issues of racial profiling, community struggles, and everyday life in a fast-paced science fiction adventure, Brooks’s debut middle-grade series is destined to be a favorite out-of-this-world adventure for kids 9–12. A timely—and timeless—sci-fi epic for fans of *Tristen Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky* and the *Artemis Fowl* series.

ABOUT THE CREATOR: NICK BROOKS

Nick Brooks is an author and award-winning filmmaker. His short film *Hoop Dreamin’* earned him the George Lucas Scholar Award and he was a finalist in the Forbes 30 Under 30 Film Fest. His short film *Bee* won the James Bridges and Jack Larson Award for Writing and Directing and premiered at the American Black Film Festival. A rising star, Brooks is poised to be a breakout author with his debut middle-grade novel, *Nothing Ever Happens to Ethan Fairmont*, and his YA debut title, *Promise Boys*. Nick currently lives in Los Angeles, California, and is originally from Washington, D.C. Visit Nick at thenickbrooks.com.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The Common Core Standards push readers to look closer when reading a text including examining author's craft, analyzing word choice, and exploring narrative elements. Nick Brooks's novel *Nothing Interesting Ever Happens to Ethan Fairmont*, includes complex characters, imagery, and compare/contrast opportunities that allow the reader to deeply delve into the text. This teaching guide includes discussion questions and language arts activities to be used in grades 4th through 8th as this text is read as a whole group, small group, or a combination. This guide could also be modified to be used with a student who is reading the novel independently.

The Common Core Anchor Standards in English Language that can be addressed using the discussion questions and activities in this guide are:

English Language Arts

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4

Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4

Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.10

Read and comprehend complex literary texts independently and proficiently.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Use these questions as reading check-ins, writing prompts, or classroom discussions throughout *Nothing Interesting Ever Happens to Ethan Fairmont*.

1. How are The Factory and Gadget Beach affecting the environment of Ferrous City? How did the closing of The Factory change the city in general?
2. After Ethan and Juan Carlos first interact with the unidentified object in the factory, Ethan states, “I think we have to go back in” (page 23). What does this tell you about Ethan’s personality?
3. Ethan doesn’t want to tell the adults in his life about anything that is happening (page 24). Why is this? What does this tell you about Ethan’s relationship with adults?
4. Ethan shares that some of his best thinking happens in his bed under his warm blankets (page 24). When and where do you get your best thinking in?
5. The smell of breakfast is the only thing that gets Ethan out of bed after his exciting night at the factory. What is the breakfast smell that will immediately get you out of bed? Use imagery and figurative language to describe the smells.
6. We learn that Ethan’s brother calls him “Matchstick” because of one accident with setting a toilet on fire. What nicknames have you been called? Do you like them? Why or why not?
7. On page 27, when Ethan’s dad points out that he knows Ethan is smart, Ethan states that it makes him “feel all warm inside” (page 27). What is a compliment you have been given that meant a lot to you? Why?
8. What is the difference between being mean (like Ethan was with Juan Carlos at first) and bullying (RJ and Di)?
9. Ethan’s dad uses the phrase “Cheese and Crackers” when he is amazed (page 45). What is a funny/unique phrase that is said in your family or you have heard and what does it mean?
10. How does Juan Carlos use his family’s experiences learning how to speak English to try to communicate with Cheese (page 53)?
11. If you found a “little alien [that] is lost, hungry, and...alone” (page 61), what would you do?

12. Ethan says “Normal is a lie. Normal means people keep stuff from you so everything looks okay” (page 62). What does he mean by this?
13. Jorge is an adult that Ethan likes and seems to trust. Who is an adult in your life that you can go to when you need something and that you trust?
14. Ethan describes the darkness in the factory as hanging around them like “inky black curtains” (page 71) and shared how freaked out he, Kareem, and Juan Carlos were. Why is the dark so scary?
15. One of Ethan’s favorite memories is winning the Science Fair with Kareem, and he has kept the picture for years because it means so much. What is something in your life that has meant that much to you? Why did it mean so much? Do you have any kind of memento from it? If so, what?
16. On page 100, Ethan’s parents describe the discrimination faced by Black Americans by comparing it to a game. What did they mean by this comparison?
17. Ethan keeps a Ready-to-Go Backpack (page 118) just in case. What would you keep in your Ready-to-Go Backpack? What are some reasons why you may need a backpack like this?
18. Ethan and Cheese do not speak the same language, but Ethan shares that he “knew when somebody was feeling sad” (page 143). What are some ways that you can convey emotions without speaking?
19. Backdoors, when it comes to technology, are mentioned often in *Nothing Interesting Ever Happens to Ethan Fairmont*. A backdoor is another way, usually undocumented, to gain access to a piece of technology. Why do you think Ethan talks about backdoors so much?
20. On page 155, when Ethan gets in trouble with his mom, he does not argue with his mom, and he shows humility. How is his apology and what he said to his mom better than what he could have done?
21. Mrs. McGee shares with Ethan some Black History about how her husband had to break a rule to sit close to her ballet performance (page 161). How does Mrs. McGee’s story connect with the racial discrimination talk Ethan’s parents had with him on page 100?
22. Why do you believe that RJ and Di changed? (page 185)
23. On page 191, when Cheese is preparing to leave, how does the author’s use of similes help with the imagery of the scene?
24. Were you surprised by the reveal on page 196? Were there any clues along the way that could have hinted at this surprise?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Use these activities to extend your students' thinking and experience with *Nothing Interesting Ever Happens to Ethan Fairmont*.

Ethan Analysis

- When students finish the book, have them create a two column notetaker tracking Ethan's motivations, thoughts, preferences, personality, etc.; anything they find that is truly important to Ethan's character.
 - The left column of the notes will be the character trait while the right column will have more details.
 - Example:**

Ethan's Character Trait	Details (page #)
Likes to experiment	Built Piggy Pack (page 8)
Doesn't give up on his experiments	On trial 32 for Handy-Bot 2.0 (page 8)
Doesn't always make the best choices	Used his mom's vacuum cleaner for his experiment without asking (page 12) Didn't greet Juan Carlos well the first time they met (page 18)
Explores	Goes to the factory to get items (page 14)
Doesn't like forced interaction	Likes that his neighborhood doesn't have a lot of kids (page 13)

- If students do this electronically, they can easily go back and add other details from the book as they continue reading to support their character traits.

- Once students are done with their notetaking, group them and have them synthesize all of their notes and put them into a character traits graphic organizer, grouping the traits by personality, actions/choices, and thoughts/feelings/motivations.

<p><u>Ethan's Personality</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doesn't give up Likes to experiment 	<p><u>Actions/Choices</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doesn't always make the best choices Explores
<p><u>Thoughts/Feelings/Motivations</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doesn't like forced interactions 	

- Then, have each group create a character autopsy of Ethan.
 - Give each group a large sheet of paper and have them draw a body outline.
 - They can draw one or, if the paper is big enough, they can outline one of their group members.
 - Canva also has a template that could be used to accommodate as needed: https://www.canva.com/design/DAFeE0i5ZCl/u3zQTxQCq329zj7T2eON_w/edit
- Have students place the character traits strategically around the body showing who Ethan is.
 - Examples:**
 - Thoughts would go by the head.
 - Feelings would go by the heart.
 - What others say would go by the ears.
 - Actions would go by the legs.
 - Motivations would go by the body.
 - If time allows, students can decorate the character to match how Ethan looks.
- Finally, have students answer a question about Ethan in a short character analysis essay.
 - Choices of questions:
 - What made Ethan perfect for this "case" and helping Cheese? What are times that Ethan made a mistake and how did he fix them?
 - Ethan states that he is the "future mayor of Ferrous City" (page 201). What about Ethan will make him a good mayor? What aspects does he need to work on as he grows up to be the best mayor he could be?
- Each group would then turn in each student's notetaker & essay and the group's character trait graphic organizer & character autopsy.

Kareem

- Kareem is another character who we learn a lot about while reading who ends up being quite different than when we first meet him.
- Have students complete the Kareem activity:

Kareem

Directions: Think about the Kareem we meet at the beginning of the book versus the Kareem we know at the end of the book. Complete the left side based on the Kareem we first meet and the right side based on the Kareem we ultimately know.

The worksheet is designed for a character analysis activity. It features a central silhouette of a person's head and shoulders, split vertically down the middle. On either side of the silhouette, there are three distinct shapes for students to write in: a thought bubble at the top, a heart shape in the middle, and a rounded rectangle at the bottom. The word 'Thoughts' is written next to the thought bubbles, 'Feelings' is written next to the heart shapes, and 'Actions' is written next to the rounded rectangles. The entire activity is titled 'Kareem' at the top, with directions explaining that the left side should be based on the Kareem first met in the book, and the right side should be based on the Kareem known at the end of the book.

- Then have students compile their observations by answering: How is the Kareem we initially meet different than the Kareem we get to know? What made him change? Make sure to include textual evidence to support your answer.

Being a Friendly Neighbor

- Ethan does not treat Juan Carlos the way that his mother instructed him to and not in the way that a friendly neighbor would. As a class, discuss how should Ethan have treated Juan Carlos.
- Have students create a manual on how to treat a new kid when they meet them.
- **Extension:** Use this as an opportunity to talk about text features, such as side bars, charts, graphs, index, pictures & captions, and even a table of contents and have students include them in their manual.

What is a friend?

- On page 144, Kareem says, “Friends are there for you when you feel like everything is going wrong, and they take you back even if you made a mistake.”
- On a blank sheet of printer paper, have students complete the same sentence (Friends are _____) then display their definitions around the classroom or school.
- **Extension:** Have students use their definitions with the book by having them find examples of a character showing the friend characteristic they chose. They can then write a paragraph explaining how a character in the book was a friend using their definition and evidence from the text.

Robots & Other Inventions

- In the book, we are introduced to inventions by Ethan including Food-o-Tron 1000, Magna-gloves, Piggy Pack, Handy-Bot, and the greenhouse with the grow-lights, but there is one invention that he has yet to master. He shares, on page 41, that he has been thinking about ways to improve a flashlight but that “sometimes a flashlight is just a flashlight.” But could a flashlight be more?
- Have students brainstorm ways that flashlights could be improved as a class.
- Then each student should choose a problem or two to tackle in their new flashlight invention they are going to create.
- Then, like Ethan states on page 29, “Good inventors always work out possible problems on paper before building things” – students should create their invention on paper showing how they would improve the flashlight.

Cheese

- Cheese is described on page 49. Have students draw how they picture Cheese and share them with each other.
- Have students look at the difference between each of their aliens and double check in the writing if that aspect was described or not. If not, use this opportunity to discuss how that left visualizing aspects up to the imagination of the reader.

Mentor Text: Imagery

- On page 70, Nick Brooks wrote a paragraph where he describes Kareem's basement.
- Use this piece of text as a mentor text for students to create their own paragraph full of imagery.
- First, read the text to the students directly pointing out the more complex elements, like similes.
- Second, have the students read the mentor text and share anything they notice.
- Third, have students continue the paragraph that ends with a dash. Have students share their writing and discuss if they continued the same use of imagery that the author had set up.
- Finally, have students create their own paragraph describing something using the paragraph as a mentor text.

Virtual Field Trip: Botanical Gardens

- Ethan shares how his fifth-grade class took a trip to the city's Indoor Botanical Gardens and that "The Gardens turned a rowdy bunch of preteens into an awestruck group of students" (page 84).
- Take your class on their own virtual field trip to botanical gardens.
 - <https://thespaces.com/take-a-virtual-tour-of-beautiful-botanical-gardens/>
- Have them write what they see, similar to what Ethan shares on page 84.
 - Use steps similar to the "Mentor Text: Imagery" activity above to use the writing on page 84 as a mentor text.
- **Extension:** Ask students why they believe the author chose to include this anecdote about Ethan's field trip. What was its purpose? How does it relate to the rest of the chapter?

This guide was created by Kellee Moyer, a middle school teacher-librarian in Orlando, FL. Kellee is the author of various teaching guides for all levels; the co-author of the blog [Unleashing Readers](#); a past committee member & chair of the Schneider Family Book Award and Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award; on the 2016-2018 ALAN Board of Directors; and a member of NCTE, ALAN, and ALA. Kellee can be reached at Kellee.Moyer@gmail.com.