



Death by Toilet Paper

by Donna Gephart

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Common Core Standards

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.1](#)

Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4.a](#)

Use context (e.g., definitions, examples, or restatements in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.5.a](#)

Explain the meaning of simple similes and metaphors (e.g., *as pretty as a picture*) in context.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.3](#)

Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.3](#)

Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.7 Conduct short research projects that use several sources to build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic.

Questions for Discussion (During Reading)

Pages 1 -34

1. Take a close look at the cover. What do you think the book will be about?
2. What do you think Benjamin means when he says, "It's gotten worse, much worse?"

3. Could you live without cable? Explain.
4. What does Toothpick pay Ben for? How?
5. Why do you think Ben likes sweepstakes?
6. What do you think happened to Ben's dad? What do you think happened to Toothpick's mom?
7. Why doesn't Ben take the lasagna? Should he have? Would you have?
8. What important news does Ben learn on page nine?
9. From Ben's attitude about his landlord, what can you conclude about Ben and his mom?
10. What happened to Ben's dad nine months ago?
11. Do you think Ben should stop entering sweepstakes?
12. What has Ben won so far? Do you think these prizes are worth the time Ben spends entering sweepstakes?
13. What is Ben's mom studying for? Do you think that Mom and Ben will have a better life if she is successful with the Grand Plan?
14. On page 20, Ben says, "I'd never thought about it, but maybe she's as disappointed as I am that we had to switch to the cheap stuff [toilet paper]." Do you think Ben's mom is disappointed?
15. What does Mrs. Schneckle mean when she says that the apartment isn't the Palace of Versailles?
16. Why doesn't Ben want to leave the apartment?
17. Does Ben seem angry about his dad? What makes you think that?
18. Do you think Ben should tell his mom how he is feeling? Explain.
19. Do you think the letter on page 34 will make a difference? Explain.

Pages 35- 63

1. What do you think Ben's plan is?
2. Why doesn't Ben tell his mom that he sold the grill?
3. Do you think Ben should get in trouble with the vice principal?
4. Who told on Ben? Why?
5. Ben says that Mr. Sheffield's quiet voice is scarier than a loud voice. Do you think quiet voices can be scary? Explain.
6. What warning does Mr. Sheffield give Ben?
7. Do you think it is right for Ben to lie to his mom about the toilet paper?
8. How do Ben and his mom handle the news about the landlord filing eviction papers?
9. Do you think they should go out to dinner or save the money? Why?

Pages 64- 96

1. Do you think Ben's zeyde will make things better or worse for Ben and his mom? Explain.
2. Should Ben tell his mom that zeyde called him Mary? Explain.

3. What is the funny (or not-so-funny) incident that happens to Ben when he drinks his grandpa's water?
4. What do you think Ben's slogan will be?
5. Do you think Ben should have let his grandpa do the laundry?
6. Would you be embarrassed by the eviction notice? Why or why not?

Pages 97-124

1. Is Mrs. Schneckle a good neighbor? Why?
2. Do you think Ben's mom should be more worried about Grandpa?
3. How does Grandpa help?
4. Were you surprised when Ben decides not to sell the candy bars? Why?
5. Do you think Ben is letting everyone down, especially his dad? Explain.
6. How much more money does Ben's mom need?
7. Why does Ben decide to sell the candy bars?
8. Do you think Ben should tell his mom about his zeyde forgetting how to play War? Explain.

Pages 125- 155

1. Do you think Ben should sell the candy bars door to door? Explain.
2. Should Ben sell candy bars to Angus Andrews? Explain.
3. What happens to Ben's mom at work?
4. Do you think Ben should keep his money in his backpack? Explain.
5. What does Angus do to Ben in the locker room? Is there anything that Ben could have done differently?
6. Why does Ben run away from school? Do you think he will get in trouble? What would you have done if you were in that situation?

Pages 156-183

1. How does Ben feel after he runs away from school?
2. Where does Ben go after running away from school?
3. What were the last words Ben's dad said to Ben?
4. What happens to Barkley? Does Ben have a right to be angry with his zeyde?
5. How do Toothpick and Mr. Taylor help Ben feel better at the sleepover?

Pages 184- 213

1. What is the Mütter Museum like?
2. What contest does Ben find out about at the museum? Do you think he will enter?
3. Do you think Ben ruined Toothpick's birthday? Explain.
4. What does the costume contest give Ben?

5. Were you surprised that Ben removed the stars from his bedroom?
6. Should Ben feel guilty for not giving Zeyde the good toilet paper?
7. Do you think Ben can win the grand prize? Explain.

Pages 215- 250

1. Who volunteers to wear the toilet paper wedding dress? Were you surprised?
2. Whom do the police arrest? Why?
3. What important mail is Ben's mom waiting for?
4. What important mail is Ben waiting for?
5. Based on the costume that they create, do you think Ben and Toothpick will win the contest? Explain.
6. Do you think Toothpick should give Ben all of the prize money, or do you think Toothpick should take half?

Pages 250-261

1. What good news does Ben's mom have?
2. What do you think is in the big box from the Royal-T bathroom tissue?
3. How does the story end?
4. Is the ending happy?
5. Is the ending realistic?

Understanding Figurative Language

1. *"He [Toothpick] does an awkward dance step that makes him look like an ostrich whose feet are on fire."*

This simile means that Toothpick's dancing is

- a. graceful
- b. original
- c. scary
- d. clumsy

2. *"Just thinking about it [the lasagna] makes my mouth water like Niagara Falls."*

This simile means that Ben

- a. is feeling sick
- b. hates lasagna
- c. loves lasagna
- d. is thirsty

3. *"Just when I think Zeyde's snores can't possibly get louder, they ramp up to earthquake level."*

This means that the snores are becoming

- a. shaky
- b. dangerous
- c. annoying
- d. softer

4. *"Her tiny word hangs in the air, a speck— a molecule— next to the giant word sucking all the air out of the apartment building: EVICTION."*

This means that

- a. Mom is too quiet to hear.
- b. Mom talks less than Mr. Katz.
- c. Mom's words are not powerful enough to stop the eviction.
- d. Mom is not strong enough to stand up to Mr. Katz.

5. *"No, we're fine, Mom says. And her words hang in the air like a lie-filled rain cloud."*

This means that

- a. Mom does not like to tell the truth.
- b. In hard times, Mom has a very positive attitude.
- c. Mom thinks that it is going to rain.
- d. Mom is pretending that everything is fine.

6. *"Heartache washes over me like a wave— a tsunami— but I keep trudging forward."*

This means that

- a. Ben is overwhelmed by sadness.
- b. Ben is finding it hard to walk.
- c. Ben wants to destroy everything in his path.
- d. Ben is having chest pains.

Understanding Words in Context

1. *"My throat **constricts**, but I manage to squeeze out one syllable."*

As used in the sentence above, **constricts** means:

- a. squeezes
- b. hurts
- c. gets dry
- d. scratches

2. *"Thinking of Dad gives me new **resolve** for selling the candy bars."*

As used in the sentence above, **resolve** means:

- a. wish
- b. fear
- c. determination
- d. hope

3. *"Please find a coupon for a **complimentary** four-pack of Royal-T Bathroom Tissue."*

As used in the sentence above, **complimentary** means:

- a. nice
- b. free
- c. new
- d. comfortable

4. *"And I'm so happy Zeyde gave me the word that provided my entry with that certain **zing** that might make it stand out from the rest."*

As used in the sentence above, **zing** means:

- a. energy
- b. phrase
- c. quickness
- d. sound

5. *"His partner is **bearing down on** him, not letting him give us any more time."*

As used in the sentence above, **bearing down on** means:

- a. yelling at
 - b. putting pressure on
 - c. avoiding
 - d. staring at
6. *"And we'll have enough toilet paper to last until I graduate from college...or medical school, if we're **conservative** in our usage."*

As used in the sentence above, **conservative** means:

- a. careful
- b. generous
- c. kind
- d. easy

Questions for Discussion (After Reading)

1. Ben takes comfort in his pet fish. Do you have a pet? How is a pet a best friend? If you don't have a pet, what pet do you wish you had? Why?
2. Do you think you would like to visit the Mütter Museum? Why or why not?
3. Is Toothpick a good friend to Ben? Is Ben a good friend to Toothpick? Explain.
4. How does Ben's mom handle her problems? How does Ben handle his problems? Which way is better, in your opinion?
5. Which one of the facts at the beginning of each chapter did you find most interesting? Explain.

Activities

1. Ben discovers his dad's hobbies, such as bowling and punching the dummy. Talk to your parents (or even your grandparents) about their favorite hobbies now or their favorite hobbies when they were younger. How are your hobbies alike? How are they different?
2. Ben enjoys looking through old photos of his family. Ask your parents for help to make a collage of favorite family photos. Then write a poem, a story, or a reflection telling about the special moments that are shown in the photos.
3. Ben creates several slogans. Choose one of the products mentioned in the book or select a product of your choice. Create a slogan, a poster, or a commercial for the product. Be as creative as you can!

4. Mr. Taylor and Mrs. Schnecke both use food to comfort Ben and his family. What is your favorite recipe? Write down your favorite recipe, using plenty of descriptive words to make the recipe sound appealing. Be sure to explain each step of the recipe carefully. Ask your teacher if you can make the recipe and bring it in for the class.
5. Research one of the following topics and share what you find with the class:
Author Donna Gephart, the Mütter Museum, careers in the advertising, accounting, or restaurant industry, the invention of the toilet, the World Toilet Summit, or any topic of your choice related to the book.
6. In *Death by Toilet Paper*, Ben gets in trouble for selling candy bars. Are there any rules at your school that you think are unfair? What are they? How would you change the rules? Write a letter to your principal explaining why the rule is unfair and why it should be changed. What happens to Ben, Toothpick, Ben's mom, and Ben's grandpa next? Write an epilogue telling what happens.
7. Write a letter to Ben's dad explaining Ben's feelings. Be sure to consider how Ben felt throughout the book.
8. Toothpick's dad and Ben's neighbor help out a lot. Pretend that you are Ben, choose a character, and then write a thank-you note to that person.
9. Ben faces a lot of challenges. Pretend that you are a friend of Ben. Write Ben a letter to give him encouragement and advice for dealing with his problems.
10. *Death by Toilet Paper* deals with the invention of toilet paper. In your opinion, what is the invention that changed the world the most? Research that invention and make a poster, a Power Point, or prepare an oral presentation for your classmates.

Journal Questions

1. Robert Brault said, "Enjoy **the little things**, for one day you may look back and realize they were **the big things**." Richard Carlson said, "Don't sweat the small stuff." Which opinion do you agree with? Why?
2. Ben realizes how important something like toilet paper can be. What are some of the things that you take for granted?
3. Ben tries to earn money by selling candy bars and creating costumes and slogans. What would your dream job be?
4. In the story, Toothpick has an unusual hobby. Do you have an unusual hobby? Explain.
5. In poorer countries, toilet paper is a luxury. What is something that you can do to help those who are less fortunate than you?
6. Ben deals with a lot of hard things—grief from losing his dad, his zeyde's memory problems, a bully, and financial difficulties. What is something that you, a close friend, or family member has had to deal with? What was the situation? How did you or the close friend or relative deal with the problem?