

## *Noggin* by John Corey Whaley Reading Guide

### Discussion Questions

(Questions from perma-bound.com and Reina Shay Broussard)

### Characters & Scenes

1. Travis Coates had cancer. Why does he agree to a medical procedure to remove his head? How do his parents respond to the decision? His best friend? His girlfriend?
2. How does Travis react when he realizes he has come back to life? How has the world Travis knew changed since his death?
3. Travis learns that his parents saved his ashes. How does Travis feel about their keeping the ashes? What do he and his friends do with them and why?
4. When Travis and his friends visit the cemetery where Jeremy Pratt is buried, they encounter Jeremy's mother and Jeremy's young sister. Jeremy's mother asks Travis to hold her daughter's hand. Why does she ask him to do so? How does Chapter 3, "From the Neck Down," set up this scene?
5. Travis's school has been saving letters from people who want to reach out to Travis after he returns to life. Why doesn't Travis want to read the letters? How does Travis's attitude toward the letters change toward the end of the story?

### Overview

6. Travis's parents, best friend, and girlfriend must all adjust to having him back. Who has the most difficulty with his return and why?
7. How is Travis's new friend, Hatton, alike or different from his old friend, Kyle? How do Kyle and/or Hatton change over the course of the novel?
8. Travis longs to see Cate, his girlfriend; however, she delays their meeting. How does their relationship evolve, beginning with Travis's illness? How does Cate express her conflicting emotions about their relationship?
9. Travis's doctor connects Travis with the only other living cryogenics survivor, Lawrence Ramsey, who appears occasionally in the story. How would the story be different without him? What would the story "lose" if he were removed?

### Themes

10. One theme in the novel is "secrets." How is this theme introduced and how does it develop throughout the story. How does the author incorporate secrets in the plot to surprise the reader?
11. What other major themes play a role in the book? How do these themes develop throughout the story?
12. Do you think the author had an intended message in this book? Did this book change the way you think about the world?

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### Author's Technique & Style

13. The author tells the story through the use of flashback. Why does the author use this technique and what effect does this technique create in the story? How would the story and the story's structure be different if the author simply narrated the story from beginning to end? What challenges would a straightforward narrative pose?

14. Review the ending of Chapter 6 and the beginning of Chapter 7. Repeat this activity with several additional chapters. What pattern do you notice? How does the ending of each chapter set up the chapter that follows, and why do you think the author made this stylistic choice? What does this contribute to the content of the chapter?

### Forming Opinions From Evidence

15. Travis goes with Kyle and Hatton to Arnie's Arcade, a place he had frequented regularly before his "death." Once they arrive, Travis heads to a familiar game: Space Invaders. How does Travis behave as he tries to beat the HIGH SCORE? What inferences can you make about the ownership of this score? What details support your inferences? Why is beating the score important to Travis?

16. Travis's school has been saving letters from people who want to reach out to Travis after he returns to life. Do you think Travis is a hero?

17. Despite all the discouragement Travis receives from both Cate and Kyle about the likelihood that he and Cate can resume their former relationship, Travis buys her a ring and even offers it to her when her fiancé is nearby. What does this act say about Travis? What emotions does this scene invoke in readers? Which words and passages does the author use to create these emotions?

18. As Travis works through his new identity, he says, "Everyone just outgrew me. Now I think I'm just haunting them." What does Travis mean by this statement? What evidence in the story would support Travis's thinking and what evidence would illustrate that his thinking is incorrect? Do you agree or disagree with his assessment of the situation? Why or why not?

### Personal Reflections

19. At the end of the story, Travis says, "We have to tell people it's okay even when we know it isn't." What is Travis's thinking behind this statement? What does the statement say about Travis's growth as a character/person? Do you agree or disagree with his comment? Why or why not?

20. Chapter 20 ends with Travis reflecting on the difficulty he is having adjusting to his new life. He says, "Truth is, I was the past and I had to find some way to exist in the future. It wasn't going to be easy, that much I knew, but I had to try. That's what people do in these situations, right? They try even when they know it's impossible." What is the meaning of this passage? Do you agree with Travis's perspective? Why or why not?

21. What is your emotional reaction (physical sensations or gut reaction) to this book?

22. What did you like about this book? What did you not like?

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23. Who should or shouldn't read this book? Who do you know whom you think would enjoy this book?

24. Do you think that the premise of this novel is something scientists will really figure out how to do? Freeze someone's head to save it, then thaw it and then attach it to someone else's body? Really, think about it. And if we *can* do it, do you think we *should* do it?

#### About the Author

John "Corey" Whaley grew up in the small town of Springhill, Louisiana, where he learned to be sarcastic and to tell stories. He has a B.A. in English from Louisiana Tech University, as well as an M.A. in Secondary English Education. He started writing stories about aliens and underwater civilizations when he was around ten or eleven, but now writes realistic YA fiction (which sometimes includes zombies...). He was a 2011 National Book Foundation 5 Under 35 Honoree for his debut novel, *Where Things Come Back*, which also was a Michael L. Printz Winner. He taught public school for five years and spent much of that time daydreaming about being a full-time writer...and dodging his students' crafty projectiles. He is terrible at most sports, but is an occasional kayaker and bongo player. He is obsessed with movies, music, and traveling to new places. He is an incredibly picky eater and has never been punched in the face, though he has come quite close. One time, when he was a kid, he had a curse put on him by a strange woman in the arcade section of a Wal-Mart. His favorite word is *defenestration*. His favorite color is green. His favorite smell is books. He currently lives in Los Angeles.

#### An Excerpt from *Noggin* (from Chapter 1)

Listen—I was alive once and then I wasn't. Simple as that. Now I'm alive again. The in-between part is still a little fuzzy, but I can tell you that, at some point or another, my head got chopped off and shoved into a freezer in Denver, Colorado.

You might have done it too. The dying part, I mean. Or the choosing-to-die part, anyway. They say we're the only species on the planet with the knowledge of our own impending doom. It's just that some of us feel that impending doom a lot sooner than expected. Trust me when I tell you that everything can go from fine and dandy to dark and depressing faster than you can say "acute lymphoblastic leukemia."

The old me got so sick so fast that no one really had time to do anything but talk about how sick he got and how fast he got that way. And the chemo and the radiation and the bone marrow transplants didn't do anything but make him sicker faster and with much more ferocity than before.

They say you can't die more than once. I would strongly disagree. But this isn't a story about the old me dying. No one wants to hear about how I told my parents, my best friend, Kyle, and my girlfriend, Cate, that I was choosing to give up. That's a story I don't want to tell. What I do want to tell you, though, is a story about how I suddenly found myself waking up in a hospital room with my throat sore, dry and burning, like someone had shoved an entire bag of vinegar-soaked cotton balls down it. I want to tell you about how I was moving my fingers and wiggling my toes and how the doctors and nurses standing around me were so impressed with this. I'm not sure why blinking my eyes earned a round of applause and why it mattered that I was peeing into a bag, but to these people, it was like they were witnessing a true miracle. Some of the nurses were even crying.

I want to tell you a story about how you can suddenly wake up to find yourself living a life you were never supposed to live. It could happen to you, just like it happened to me, and you could try to get back the life you think you deserve to be living. Just like I did.

They told me I couldn't talk, said it was too early to try that just yet. I didn't know why, but I listened anyway. My mom and dad walked in, and she cried big tears and he went in to touch my face, and the nurse asked him to wait, asked him to please step aside until they were sure everything was working okay.

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They gave me a small white board and a marker and told me to write my name. I did. Travis Ray Coates. They asked me to write down where I live. I did. Kansas City, Missouri. They asked me to write down my school. I did. Springside High. They asked me to write down the year. I did. Then the room got suddenly quiet, and even though it was bright and clean and I could smell medicine and bleach, I knew something was wrong.

#### Synopsis (from Simon & Schuster)

Travis Coates has a good head...on someone else's shoulders. A touching, hilarious, and wholly original coming-of-age story from John Corey Whaley, author of the Printz and Morris Award-winning *Where Things Come Back*.

*Listen—Travis Coates was alive once and then he wasn't.*

*Now he's alive again.*

*Simple as that.*

The in between part is still a little fuzzy, but Travis can tell you that, at some point or another, his head got chopped off and shoved into a freezer in Denver, Colorado.

Five years later, it was reattached to some other guy's body, and well, here he is. Despite all logic, he's still 16 and everything and everyone around him has changed. That includes his bedroom, his parents, his best friend, and his girlfriend. Or maybe she's not his girlfriend anymore? That's a bit fuzzy too.

Looks like if the new Travis and the old Travis are ever going to find a way to exist together, then there are going to be a few more scars.

Oh well, you only live twice.

#### What People Are Saying About *Noggin*

\*"Travis Coates has lost his head—literally.... [A] wonderfully original, character-driven second novel. Whaley has written a tour de force of imagination and empathy, creating a boy for whom past, present, and future come together in an implied invitation to readers to wonder about the very nature of being. A sui generis novel of ideas, *Noggin* demands much of its readers, but it offers them equally rich rewards."

-Booklist, November 2013, \*STARRED REVIEW

\*"Like baseball great Ted Williams, Travis Coates has his head surgically removed and cryogenically frozen after he dies (of leukemia at age 16). Unlike Williams, Travis is a fictional character, and five years after his death, technological advances allow doctors to attach his head to a donor body that's taller and more muscular than the original. Whaley's second novel (following his Printz-winning *Where Things Come Back*) is far more concerned with matters of the heart than with how head reattachment surgery would work. Travis awakens to restart where he left off—sophomore year—but everyone he knew has moved on. Best friend Kyle is struggling through college; former girlfriend Cate is engaged to someone else. As only the second cryogenics patient successfully revived, Travis is in uncharted territory; he's "over" high school, but not ready to be anywhere else. Travis's comic determination to turn back the hands of time and win Cate's love is poignant and heartbreaking. His status in limbo will resonate with teens who feel the same frustration at being treated like kids and told to act like adults."

-Publishers Weekly, January 2014, \*STARRED REVIEW

"The madcap story of a boy who loses his head and finds it again. . . . Readers will recognize the Printz winner's trademark lovable characterizations. . . . They'll also recognize the poignantly rendered reflections on life, love, death and everything in between. . . . Whaley's signature cadence and mad storytelling skillz are worth every page. A satisfyingly oddball Frankenstein-like tale of connectivity."

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-Kirkus Reviews, February 2014

"Whaley's sweet and raunchy first-person narrative provides a thought-provoking look at the notions of self-awareness, the nature of identity, and the angst of a very special teen. The lively, conversational style will engage teen readers in search of an unusual, but relatable, character. At times hilarious and heart-wrenching, *Noggin*, with its eye-catching cover art, belongs in all library collections serving young adults."

-VOYA, February 2014

### Interviews with John Corey Whaley

#### FAQ (from johncoreywhaley.com)

Q: Where do you get the nerve?

A: I'm not sure.

Q: Do you like writing books?

A: Of course I do.

Q: Can I tell you about a book I think you should write?

A: You can tell me, but I'm not going to write it.

Q: How did you get published?

A: I harassed a lot of strangers for many years. Then one of those strangers liked my book. There were some very emotional moments somewhere in between those two. And several years of public school teaching.

Q: What's your favorite book?

A: I have three favorite books. *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *The Catcher in the Rye* by JD Salinger, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. There are so many runners-up that I can't name them.

Q: What is your favorite movie?

A: This is another tie--but it's between five films. *The Hours*, *Adaptation*, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and (more recently) *Life of Pi*. These are all brilliant and beautiful films for many different reasons, some shared and some not. But I change my top five about once a month, so take this list with caution.

Q: What's your greatest bit of advice for others?

A: Learn to say no to people. If you can do that without being a jerk about it, the world is your oyster. And always wash your hands.

Q: Really, where do you get the nerve?

A: I'm telling you, I just don't know.

### PREMIERE: Check Out The Trailer For Cryogenic Love Story *Noggin*

What if you woke up with your head screwed on wrong — literally?

by brenna ehrlich 3/13/2014 MTV News

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If you've always been fascinated by that story about Walt Disney's cryogenically frozen head — and/or the tale of Rip Van Winkle — then we have a YA book for you: “Noggin,” by John Corey Whaley.

Whaley gave MTV News an exclusive look at the book's trailer Thursday (March 13), and the cheerfully creepy clip will definitely leave your head spinning.

[Noggin Trailer](#)

“Noggin” tells the tale of Travis Coates, a former cancer patient and current recipient of a brand-new body. Coates is the second person ever to undergo this experimental surgery successfully, waking up five years after his head was lopped off and frozen with a 6-foot frame and the skills of an aspiring pro skateboarder.

Coates becomes a kind of hero and marvel in his community and beyond, but his newly revivicated life is thrown into disarray by the transplant. While it feels like he just woke up after a short nap, during the years in which he's been slumbering his friends have grown up and moved on, while he remains stuck in his 16-year-old past. Worse, his love, Cate, is engaged — to a fully grown man.

“I wanted to write a story with an absurd premise and ground it in reality,” Whaley told MTV News. “I thought about how fun/challenging it would be to write a literal ‘out of body’ experience story. And voila.”

“[Travis is] definitely based on some version of me,” he added. “Maybe the version who grew up too fast or who is still, as a 30-year-old, realizing how relationships and people change as we grow older.”

Like nearly all YA books nowadays, “Noggin,” which is due out on April 8, has already been optioned to become a film, with a screenplay in the works by Jamie Linden (who previously penned “We Are Marshall”).

When it comes to casting, Whaley already has a few thoughts: “I'm a huge movie nerd,” he said. “I like Nick Robinson (from “Kings of Summer”) — he sort of reminds me of Travis quite a bit.”

I don't know — the kid in the trailer seems to have the heady role on lock.

Check out the teaser and let us know in the comments: What do you think would be the hardest part about waking up after a five-year nap?