



Grades 4-8

Authors and Educators Resources

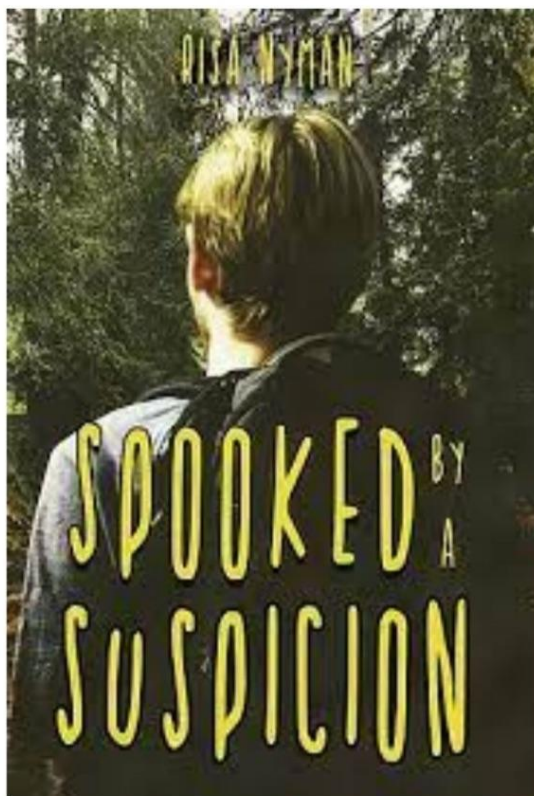


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Teacher's Guide by Pamela Brunskill

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BEFORE THE BOOK
About the Author

Risa Nyman



Risa was born in Boston and has the accent to prove it. Until a recent move to the Ocean State, Risa lived within ten miles of Boston for decades.

Her debut middle grade novel, *Swallowed by a Secret*, is a mystery featuring 12-year-old Rocky who has been told a bogus story about how his father suddenly died. Rocky is determined to uncover the truth. He eavesdrops on his mother, snoops through her things, and then takes the advice of his dead father to return to his old town to learn what really happened.

When not writing, you might find Risa reading, exercising or doing therapeutic ironing (yes, there is such a thing.)

Risa has worked as Executive Director and President of the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts and Chair of the Diversity Implementation Task Force for the League of Women Voters of the U.S. This organization is dedicated to making democracy work. The nonpartisan League is the only direct descendant of the National Woman's Suffrage Association and celebrated its 100th birthday in 2019, the year women got the right to vote.

You can learn more about Risa and her writing journey on her website at <https://www.risanyman.com>.

Summary

One major life change should be the limit for any kid.
~Rocky's theory

About to transition from middle school to high school, Rocky is shocked when his mother announces her plan to marry Ted, a devious man with a devil's beard, ominous eyebrows in constant motion, and black, beady eyes.

Rocky plans to stop the impending marriage until a series of strange accidents convince Rocky that Ted is using evil powers against him. With the help of his girlfriend Olive, Rocky devises a plan to expose Ted in an epic showdown, but a false accusation of sabotage at his summer writing program upends Rocky's plans.

Now Rocky must put aside his unfinished business with Ted to fight to clear his own name when Rocky the accuser becomes the accused.



STANDARDS

The activities in this guide fit CCSS RL.4.1, RL.4.2, RL.4.3, RL.4.4, RL.4.5, RL.4.6, RL.4.9, RL.4.10, RL.5.1, RL.5.2, RL.5.3, RL.5.4, RL.5.5, RL.5.6, RL.5.9, RL.5.10, RL.6.1, RL.6.2, RL.6.3, RL.6.4, RL.6.5, RL.6.6, RL.6.9, RL.6.10, RL.7.1, RL.7.2, RL.7.3, RL.7.4, RL.7.5, RL.7.6, RL.7.9, RL.7.10, RL.8.1, RL.8.2, RL.8.3, RL.8.4, RL.8.5, RL.8.6, RL.8.9, and RL.8.10.

BEFORE THE BOOK

Pre-Reading Activities

The following are suggested activities you can do with your students before you read *Spooked By a Suspicion*.

1. Cover discussion—Look at the front cover and predict what the story will be about. Record your responses on a prediction chart to refer back to throughout the unit.
2. Essential questions—Explore themes of family relationships, trust, and the danger of false accusations. What do you know about these themes? Think about the following essential questions to guide your thinking throughout this literature study unit:
 - a. What makes a family?
 - b. How can you handle big changes? What helps a situation and what makes it worse?
 - c. Whom should you trust? Why?
 - d. When do you know if what you believed about someone is wrong?
 - e. How can accusations change a person's life?
3. Complete the following journal prompt—Have you ever suspected something that you weren't sure was true? If so, what happened? If not, what is something you wonder if it is actually true and why do you think that?

EXPLORING THE BOOK

Part 1: HOME IN MILTON

Chapters one through twelve



Suggested Journal Prompts/Discussion Questions

The following questions and prompts can help your students understand the book better. Choose the ones you think would best help your students.

Chapter 1

1. What themes do you see emerging?
2. Which character(s) do you relate to the most so far? What do you know about them?
3. What is the big problem for Rocky in the story? Why do you think this?
4. Some people are excited about new things and changes. If you are one of those, describe some of the changes you are wishing for. If you do not like changes, describe why.

Chapter 2

5. What are some clues that Rocky isn't ready for his mom to remarry? Why does he want her to wait until he goes to college?
6. Can Rocky trust Ted? Why or why not?

Chapter 3

7. How would you describe Rocky? What external and internal character traits make you think this?
8. This story is a mystery. How would you define this genre? What makes this story a mystery? How is it like/unlike other mysteries you've read or seen?
9. What are some of the reasons Rocky lists for being suspicious of Ted? Do you think they are reasonable suspicions?

Chapter 4

10. What time of year is it? What hints in the story provide the background information for this setting detail?
11. Rocky believes teachers give certificates for kids who excel at nothing. Do you agree? Why or why not?
12. What impact does Ms. Rotterdam have on Rocky?
13. Are the strange things happening related to Ted's predictions? Explain your reasoning.

Chapter 5

14. Have you ever tried to convince a parent of something you really wanted? What happened?
15. Why do you think Rocky usually writes sci-fi?
16. What is the Lakeside Arts and Writing program so special?
17. Why do you think Ted has all these hunches about Rocky's life? Is Ted overstepping when he mentions his hunches?

Chapter 6

18. What does Rocky really want? What prevents him from achieving this goal?

Chapter 7

19. Why is soccer so important to Rocky? What other skills/passions does he have?
20. How do you think Ted plays Xbox so well and knows about soccer?

Chapter 8

21. Why does Rocky want to go to LA so badly?
22. Why do you think Rocky's mom and Ted visit Ms. Rotterdam?

Chapter 9

23. Rocky thinks Ted is a control freak. Do you agree? If not, who is the control freak in this story?
What makes someone want to be in control?
24. Make a prediction of what you think will happen at Lakeside.

Chapter 10

25. What do you think of Rocky's story so far? Do you think his plan to write a story exposing Ted will work to convince his Mom to call off the wedding?

Chapter 11

26. Why does Ted want to be with Rocky and his friends?

Chapter 12

27. Does Olive like Rocky as a boyfriend or as just friends?
28. Why do you think Ted stutters when the bird poops on Rocky's head?

EXPLORING THE BOOK

Suggested Vocabulary for Part 1

extravagances (chp 2)	suspicious (chp 3)	humiliation (chp 4)
coincidences (chp 5)	trickster (chp 7)	jugular (chp 12)

Suggested Activities for Part 1

- Character Traits--Have students fill out notes on each main character as they read (p. 6). For example, Rocky has a fear of abandonment and a fear of losing freedom. For other characters, you might want to eventually add Althea Williams and Mr. Maxwell.
 - Have students create a cartoon of two characters in the story.
 - Using the descriptions from chapter 5, ask students to draw a picture of Grandpa in his chair.
- Consider the author's craft of portmanteau words. In chapter 2, Rocky thinks, "This guy is a big durk," which combines dumb and jerk. Can students create their own portmanteau words?
- Teach a Mini-Lesson on How to Write a Captivating Beginning
 - In chapter eight, Rocky talks about how to capture the reader's attention and hook them into turning pages. Investigate the beginnings of some of your class's favorite stories. How did the author captivate the reader? Now have students try to write a captivating beginning to a story.

Name _____

Notes on Characters from *Spooked By a Suspicion*

Rocky	Ted
Olive	Malik
Other Characters	

EXPLORING THE BOOK

Part 2: LAKESIDE ARTS AND WRITING PROGRAM

Chapters thirteen through eighteen



Suggested Journal Prompts/Discussion Questions

The following questions and prompts can help your students understand the book better. Choose the ones you think would best help your students.

Chapter 13

1. When Rocky meets twin bunkmates from different races, he thinks about Ms. Rotterdam's class and backstory. How does knowing literature techniques help him recognize there's more to their story?
2. How do the other kids' parents interact with their children?
3. What do you think of Malik?

Chapter 14

4. What is Rocky's new goal?
5. Can you add to what you know about Rocky and his character traits? What new information do we learn about him once he leaves home and goes to Lakeside? Do you ever act differently when you go to different places or interact with different people?

Chapter 15

6. One of Risa Nyman's author's crafts is similes. For example, in chapter 15, she writes, "Everyone scatters like raccoons in the light to find some privacy." What does this mean? How does using similes elevate the writing style? Can you find other similes in this book?
7. Rocky thinks Ted might be "a real-life Draco." In this line, he's alluding to Harry Potter. What does this tell you about Rocky?
8. Should Rocky trust Malik?

Chapter 16

9. Who do you think dumped the clothes in the room?

Chapter 17

10. What do you know about Malik's motivation and what hurts him?
11. Why might Ted and Rocky's dad have the same shirt?

Chapter 18

12. Malik tells Rocky he's up against the next Rick Riordan. What does this mean?
13. What do you think happened to Malik's papers?

EXPLORING THE BOOK

Suggested Vocabulary for Part 2

exquisite (chp 14)	imminent (chp 15)	plagiarism (chp 15)
embroidered (chp 16)	renowned (chp 17)	memoirist (chp 17)

Suggested Activities for Part 2

- Compare and Contrast Rocky and Malik using a Venn Diagram (p. 9).
- In chapter 14, Rocky talks about the powers of observation in writing. Have students keep a notebook in a pocket like Rocky does and write down details of what they observe (see image below).
- In Part 2, Risa Nyman uses allusions to draw comparisons between her characters and other stories. Some allusions include Harry Potter, Rick Riordan, and Forrest Gump. Have students research what allusion means and see how many other allusions they can find in this story and others. Keep track of these in a writer's notebook.

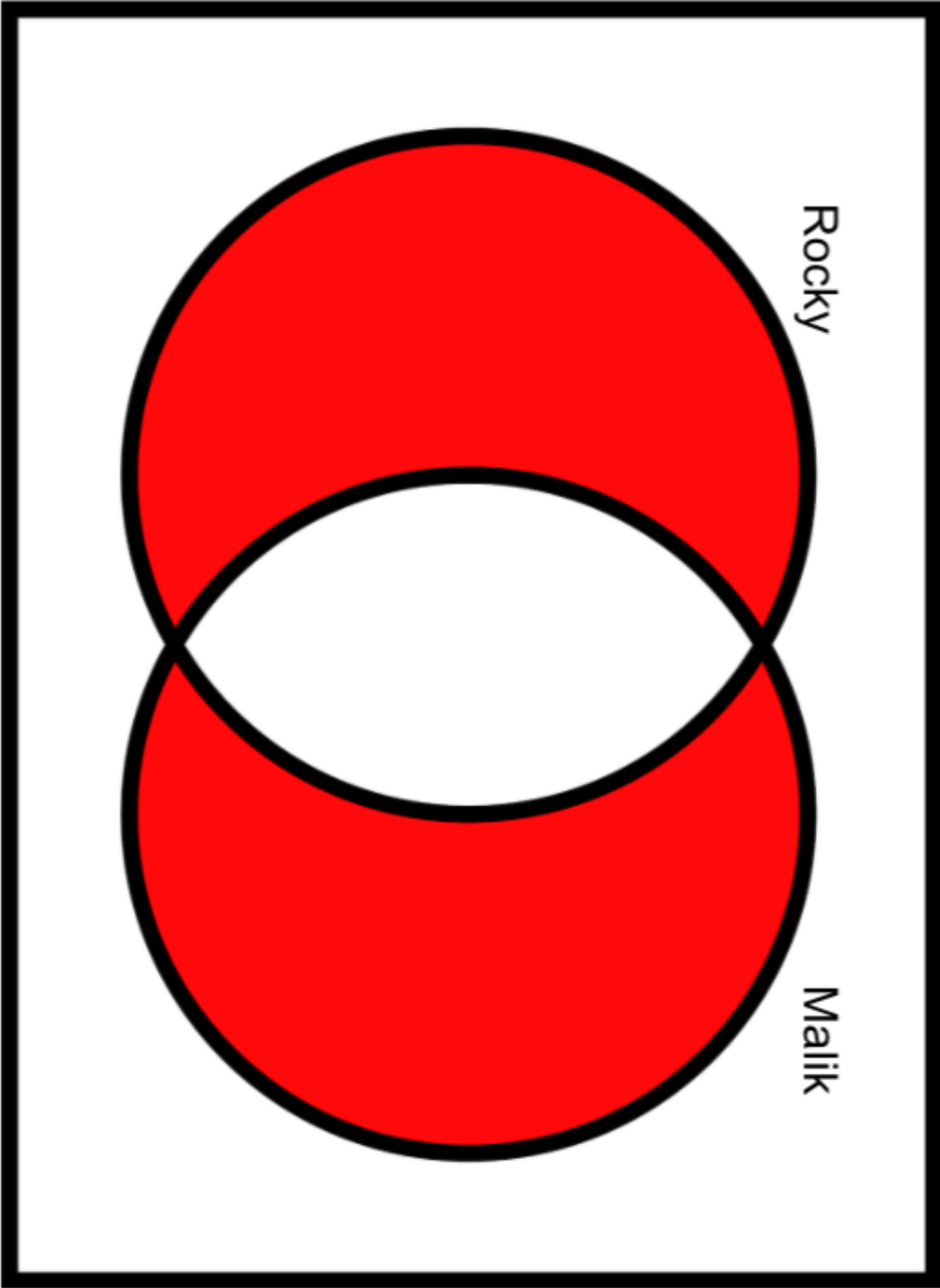
Go to a special place.

Use your powers of observation to write down details.

Hint: Use all 5 senses to capture the essence of the place.

Once you're done, turn those notes into a description of a story setting.





EXPLORING THE BOOK

Part III: IN THE WILDERNESS

Chapters nineteen through twenty-four.



Suggested Journal Prompts/Discussion Questions

The following questions and prompts can help your students understand the book better. Choose the ones you think would best help your students.

Chapter 19

1. When the setting shifts again in part III, what new things do we learn about Malik?

Chapter 20

2. What do you think the theme (life lesson) of the book is now?
3. What does writing have to do with the theme?

Chapter 21

4. What is the Innocence Project? What does it have to do with Rocky's story?
5. With changed circumstances, Rocky has a new goal. What is it?

Chapter 22

6. Does Rocky make a wise choice in trying to get help? Explain.

Chapter 23

7. Should Rocky judge the man by his appearance? What does this man's appearance suggest?
8. Why does Rocky surmise the man has "gallons of guilt"?

Chapter 24

9. In this chapter, the man tells Rocky he needs to stay and fight. What do you think Rocky needs to do? How does this relate to the theme?
10. In this chapter, Rocky thinks "Jealousy can be like a slithering snake coiling around you as it squeezes the life out of you." What does this simile mean?
11. Rocky stumbles to find the right words in response to the hermit's story. What is a good thing to say to someone in a sad situation?
12. Do you think Rocky might be jealous of Malik about more than his writing talent? Did you ever experience a major bout of jealousy?

EXPLORING THE BOOK

Suggested Vocabulary for Part III

fantasies (chp 20)	ballistic (chp 20)	DNA (chp 21)
Dark Ages (chp 23)	evacuate (chp 23)	hermit (chp 24)

Suggested Activities for Part III

- Research the Innocence Project (p. 11). Note: You may want to change this task to researching and completing a KWL on the law for younger students. For students needing an additional challenge, they can also read Janae Marks' *From the Desk of Zoe Washington* and see how the Innocence Project plays a role in that story as well.

Name _____

Date _____

The Innocence Project

Background: The Innocence Project works to clear the wrongly convicted and reform the criminal justice system responsible for unjust imprisonment.



Your Task: Determine the role of the Innocence Project in the criminal justice system.

Step 1: Fill in what you know about criminal justice and the Innocence Project in the first column.

Step 2: Think about some questions you have regarding criminal justice and the Innocence Project. Write these in the second column.

Step 3: Visit the Innocence Project at <https://innocenceproject.org/>. Search for the answers to your questions. Write these answers or when you learn something new in the third column.

What I KNOW About Criminal Justice and the Innocence Project	What I WANT TO KNOW about Criminal Justice and the Innocence Project	What I LEARNED about Criminal Justice and the Innocence Project

Step 4: Compare your findings with others in the class. What new questions arose from this task? How will you find these answers?

EXPLORING THE BOOK

Part IV: BACK AT LAKESIDE

Chapters twenty-five through thirty-four



Suggested Journal Prompts/Discussion Questions

The following questions and prompts can help your students understand the book better. Choose the ones you think would best help your students.

Chapter 25

1. Why do you think Risa Nyman chose to describe the fish as swimming carefree?
2. Why do you think Mr. Maxwell told his name to Malik but not to Rocky? Is this significant?

Chapter 26

3. What references to guilt and incarceration can you find in this chapter? What do you think this has to do with Rocky's identity and what he has to learn?
4. Why does Rocky run away?
5. What role does Olive play in this chapter?

Chapter 27

6. How would you describe this type of mystery?
7. What is the serious crime Rocky is accused of?
8. Can the truth heal?

Chapter 28

9. How would you describe Olive?
10. Do you think Rocky gives up too easily, as Olive suggests? What would you do?
11. Did Rocky judge a book by its cover?

Chapter 29

12. What impact does Althea's support of not believing Rocky would steal Malik's work have on Rocky?
13. What similes can you find in this chapter? How do they help the story?

Chapter 30

14. Where does Rocky find Malik's papers? How do you think they got there?

Chapter 31

15. How did Rocky let a misguided suspicion cloud his thinking?

Chapter 32

16. What mysteries does Rocky unpack?
17. Have you ever not given someone the benefit of the doubt? What happened? And would you like people to give you the benefit of the doubt.
18. What should you do when you realize you have an erroneous belief?

Chapter 33

19. How much do you rely on facial expressions to understand where we stand with people?
20. What was Ted's secret? Is it a big deal?
21. Rocky thinks, "Secrets and I have a troubled past." What does that mean?

Chapter 34

22. What do you think the theme is now? How has it changed or deepened?
23. Rocky tells Olive, “Maybe it isn’t anything bad. Sometimes our minds go haywire and we head down roads we shouldn’t be traveling.” How is this evidence that Rocky has learned a lesson?
24. What do you think of Rocky’s story?

EXPLORING THE BOOK

Suggested Vocabulary for Part IV

persona non grata (chp 26)	guillotine (chp 27)	sleuth (chp 27)
devious (chp 29)	reservoir (chp 31)	befuddled (chp 31)

Suggested Activities for Part IV

- Explore story structure. Risa Nyman uses the Five Act Story Structure to follow the location shifts which forward the story. How are other stories structured? Compare and contrast the structure of *Spooked by a Suspicion* with other novels or mysteries.
- Explore misinformation and the danger of jumping to conclusions. One excellent resource is the News Literacy Project’s [conspiracy theories](#) poster (shown below). Using this poster, have students debate what type of conspiratorial thinking Rocky was using in his beliefs towards Ted.

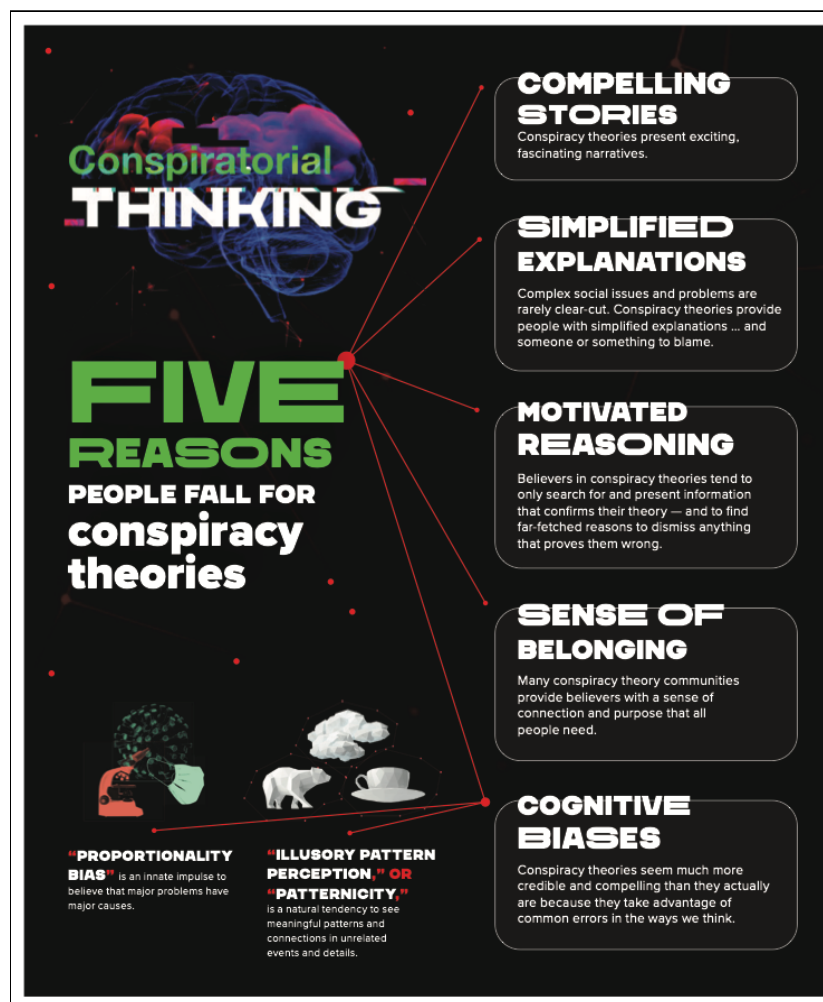


Image courtesy of the [News Literacy Project](#)

EXPLORING THE BOOK

Part V: HOME IN MILTON

Chapters thirty-five through the end



Suggested Journal Prompts/Discussion Questions

The following questions and prompts can help your students understand the book better. Choose the ones you think would best help your students.

Chapter 35

1. Why does Rocky cheer louder than anyone for Malik? Would you?
2. What does Rocky learn about his ability to handle change?
3. How would you describe Ted now?
4. Why do you think Risa Nyman ended the story with Olive suggesting Rocky may become a member of Max's new baby barf club?

Suggested Vocabulary for Part V

mischievous (chp 35)	strangulation (chp 35)	treading (chp 35)
sidelong (chp 35)	wayward (Rocky's story about Ted)	obnoxious (Rocky's story about Ted)

Suggested Activities for Part V

- Have students act out Rocky's story that he wrote to expose Ted.
- Rocky talks about how family is unique in his speech. To further this concept, ask students to describe in words or pictures unique families and name three characteristics of each person in students' families that describes their uniqueness.



Family by Nick Youngson CC BY-SA 3.0 Alpha Stock Images

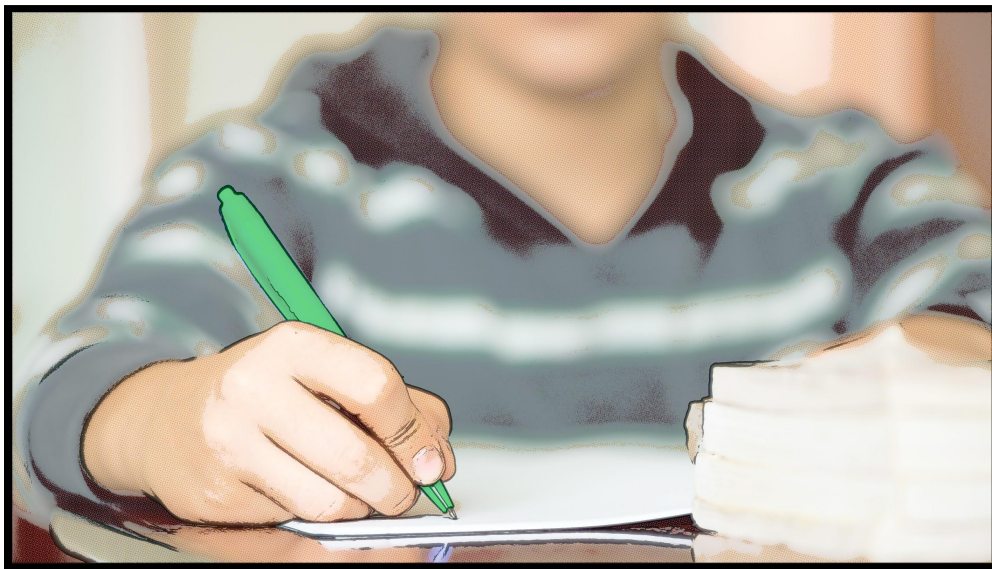
AFTER THE BOOK

- Visit Risa Nyman’s Website at <https://www.risanyman.com>. Learn about her other writing journeys by reading her blog or contacting her for a virtual visit.
- Revisit the essential questions:
 - What makes a family?
 - How can you handle big changes? What helps a situation and what makes it worse?
 - Whom should you trust? Why?
 - When do you know if what you believed about someone is wrong?
 - How can accusations change a person’s life?

Project Suggestions for *Spooked by a Suspicion*

The point of a book project is to show evidence of story comprehension as well as increased understanding of a major theme. Instruct students to choose one theme and create a project that displays their comprehension of the book as well as their understanding of their chosen theme. Below is a list of project suggestions for this book.

1. Watch and critique the book trailer for *Spooked by a Suspicion*. (Click [here](#) or on the image below.) Does it capture all of the major parts of the book? If you were to create a trailer, what would you do differently?
2. Write a science fiction story just like Rocky did!
3. Write the next scene to this story.
4. Decorate an original book jacket and write an accompanying advertisement to try to sell *Spooked By a Suspicion* to an entire middle school.
5. Write a movie script of one important scene. Act it out for the class or record it into a video to share with the class.
6. Change one detail from the story. How does that affect the rest of the story? The plot? Rocky’s character and development?
7. Make a large, colorful, pictorial timeline of the story’s main events.
8. Podcast a book review to a “radio” audience. Get permission first if it’s going to be publically available!
9. Write a book review and publish it on Amazon.com. Get permission first!
10. Compare and contrast this book with another mystery such as the prequel, *Swallowed by a Secret*.
11. Develop a digital photo album belonging to a book character. Add captions to each photo that make it clear why each photo is included.



Risa Nyman’s Book Trailer for Spooked by a Suspicion