



TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 6-8

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

Z for Zachariah

Robert C. O'Brien

READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

Z for Zachariah

Robert C. O'Brien

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NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Skills and Strategies

Thinking

brainstorming, classifying and categorizing, interpreting, analyzing, evaluating, anticipating and retrospecting, imagining, synthesizing

Literary Elements

suspense, interior monologue, flashback, conflict, climax, characterization, atmosphere, dialogue

Vocabulary

synonyms, context definitions, word mapping, pictorial examples, figurative language

Comprehension

significant details, main ideas, summarizing, comparing and contrasting, cause and effect, author's purpose, drawing conclusions, fact and opinion

Writing

narrative, creative, expository, analytical

Listening/Speaking

participation in discussion and cooperative groups, entertainment of others with dramatic activities, debate

Plot Summary

Z for Zachariah, written in journal form, begins a year after a one-week nuclear war has destroyed the world as we know it. Almost 16 now, Ann Burden has been recording her thoughts and activities. She is relieved at first by the arrival of another survivor in the valley—but she soon discovers that Dr. Loomis is not to be trusted.

About the Author

Robert C. O'Brien, whose real name was Robert Leslie Conly, was born in New York in 1918. He worked as a newspaper and magazine writer and editor, and for an advertising agency. He attended Columbia University, Williams College, and Julliard School of Music, and graduated from the University of Rochester. His first book was *The Silver Crown* (1968), a fantasy novel. He won the 1972 Newbery Medal for *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, and the same year published *A Report From Group 17*, a novel for older readers set in Washington, DC. *Z for Zachariah* was not quite finished when Mr. O'Brien died in 1973, but his family was able to complete the novel from the notes he had left behind. Robert O'Brien's novels, which are wonderful examples of well-written but easily understood prose, present important moral questions for middle and young adult readers today, just as they did when first published. He enjoyed canoeing, fishing, and—like the protagonist of *Z for Zachariah*—playing the piano.

Initiating Activities

1. **Anticipation Guide:** Students discuss their opinions of statements that tap themes they will meet in the novel. Sample statements:
 - The U.S. should eliminate all its nuclear weapons.
 - There are worse things than being alone.
 - Most people are basically selfish.
 - Where there's life, there's hope.

2. **Pre-reading Discussion:**

About the Atomic Age

When were nuclear weapons developed? by whom? When were they used? by whom? What is radiation sickness? Who has experienced it? What was the "Cold War"? What nuclear treaties has the US signed? What books, movies, and songs do you know that are about nuclear disasters? What is the black box? What are some of the debates going on right now with respect to nuclear armament and disarmament? For instance—why do some people argue that we should reduce nuclear arms and/or alter the "automaticity" with which nuclear weapons might be released in the event of an "accident"?

About Survival/Self-Preservation

What are some survival situations in which one might find oneself? What are some survival stories you have read? What are some common problems the central characters must solve? What do you think you would find hardest about living on your own? Would you say a survival situation usually brings out the best—or the worst—in survivors?

3. **Literature Log:** Have students keep a response log as they read. There are several possible formats, including those in which students—
- a) —assume the persona of one of the characters (Ann or Loomis) and write in the first person on one side of the paper about one episode in the assigned section of the story. A student partner—or the teacher—responds on the other side of the paper, as if talking to the character.
 - b) —jot down brief summaries and reactions to each section of the novel, beginning with a prediction about the novel based on a glance at the cover and a flip through the book:

Pages	Summary	Reactions
		These might begin: "I wonder if Ann...", "This part reminded me of the time...", "Ann reminds me of another character...", "If I were Ann..."

- c) —write down one quotation from each section of the book that particularly strikes them—and respond to it. (What does it mean to them? How does/doesn't it apply to their own lives?)
- d) —respond to the novel in three columns: comments to the author, comments to the central character, and personal reactions, comments, and questions.

As an alternate to a separate journal, students might jot personal responses on sticky notes and attach them to the relevant pages for later reference during class discussion.

4. **Verbal Scales**

After students finish a section of the novel, have them chart their feelings and judgments about Ann, Loomis, or the story in general, using the scales on the following page. Students should discuss their ratings, using evidence from the story.

Chapters 17-19, pages 163-184

One evening Loomis asks Ann to play piano for him—then startles her by rapping his cane. The next night Ann awakens to Faro’s growling and finds Loomis in her bedroom. He tries to grope her and she runs to the store, then to the cave. Loomis ties up Faro and Ann realizes he will use the dog to track her.

Vocabulary

inconsequential 167	wary 171	ironic 172	belfry 173
purposefully 173	pretense 175	rent 176	dogtrot 177

Discussion Questions

1. What does Ann make of the fact that Loomis has asked her to read and play piano for him? (She feels that he is trying to trick her by gaining her confidence.) Do you think she’s right? Did she do the right thing by agreeing?
2. Why doesn’t Ann undress before going to bed (p.174)? (She feels uneasy.) How does that turn out to be a good thing? (Loomis attacks her and she flees.) What would have happened if Faro hadn’t been in the room? (Ann would have had no warning; Loomis might have overpowered her.)
3. What does Ann do after running away from Loomis? (She goes to the store for candles and clothes, then to the cave.) Does she have a plan? (She plans to stay hidden from Loomis until she can decide what to do next.) What could she have done besides running away?
4. Ann feels she is in danger as she leaves the store. Do you think she is? Does Loomis intend to harm her?
5. Ann returns to the cave. What do you see in your mind’s eye as you imagine it?
6. Why does Ann wish she had thought of feeding Faro the hash in the cave? (Hungry, he returns to Loomis, who ties him up.) What new problem is created by Faro’s leaving? (Loomis will follow Faro to Ann.)
7. Even as Ann hides from Loomis, she is thinking about whether she should continue to bring him supplies? Why? (He is still unwell and she doesn’t want him to starve.) Would you care about him? Would it be wrong if she decided not to?
8. Why does Ann feel that she and Loomis need to work out a compromise? (She doesn’t trust him, but feels that he may not survive if she leaves him on his own.) Do you agree? What sort of compromise do you think she will suggest? Will they be able to work something out?

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9. What new problem does Ann need to solve? (how to build a fire that Loomis won't see) What are the pros and cons of building a fire by day or by night? (By day he might see the smoke, by night the flame.) What are some ways she could hide her fire?
 10. **Prediction Question:** Will Loomis track Ann down?
 11. What would you like to ask Ann and Loomis?

Supplementary Activities

Literary Analysis: Atmosphere

Explain that the **atmosphere** is the overall mood, the dominant emotional tone of a literary work. Atmosphere is created by the handling of setting, character, and theme. It is often described by adjectives that are used to describe the weather such as *gloomy, cheerful, threatening, tranquil, unsettling*.

Ask students how they would describe the atmosphere of this section. How has O'Brien developed this atmosphere? For example, what words convey a sense of danger as Ann leaves the store?

You might put the following chart on the board as you elicit suggestions about how the author creates a menacing atmosphere.

page	Phrases to describe setting	Phrases to describe Loomis	Tone

Writing Idea

Suppose you are responsible for filming this section for a movie version of the story. Make a list of the images you would show to capture what happens—and suggest the atmosphere.