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An Absolutely Remarkable Thing

A Novel

By Hank Green

Guide written by Chris Gilbert

Dutton

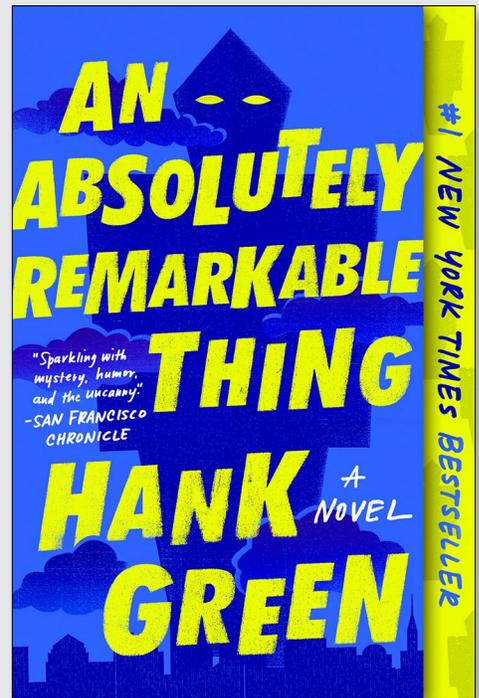
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Reading Level: 11th-12th Grade

I. INTRODUCTION

In Hank Green's *An Absolutely Remarkable Thing*, the reader encounters April May, a young woman who makes a profound discovery that sets herself and others on a remarkable—and unpredictable—path. While the narrative itself is certainly captivating, it also beckons the reader to consider a number of themes and issues situated firmly in the present: the consequences of social-media driven fame; the addictive nature of our online interactions with others; the intersections and divergences of offline and online selves; the “branding” of human identity, and much more. This is a timely, thought-provoking book, and this guide was written to assist teachers and students as they engage with it. Through the questions, activities, and resources featured within, students are encouraged to adopt an analytical view of *An Absolutely Remarkable Thing*, relevant personal experiences, and related topics. This guide contains five sections: discussion questions, various classroom activities, research opportunities, service learning projects, and other resources for students, teachers, and programs. Each section is applicable to multiple curricular areas, and as such, this document has an interdisciplinary focus. Activities can also be easily modified and scaled, as they were constructed with flexibility in mind. Lastly, students are encouraged throughout to utilize technology and work collaboratively as they complete their First-Year Experience® (FYE); this guide should provoke meaningful analysis and reflection, and it supports the overall purpose of the FYE: to fuse rigorous classroom study with immersive, communal learning experiences.

First-Year and Common Reading Guide



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions can be posed to an entire class, given to small groups, used to initiate online discussions, etc.

1. In what ways do you believe April May changes throughout the book?
2. “My Instagram, on the other hand, had been blowing up all week. I had ten times more followers than I had before. It was a weird mix of exciting and stressful” (p. 40). How would you characterize April May’s relationship with her followers? Relatedly, in what ways is April’s self-concept shaped by her interactions with her online audience?
3. “And so we did what we’d been taught to do in school: We built a brand. Branding is something designers think about a lot . . . You try to end up in a place where you understand a product as if it is a person” (p.69). How does April May become a “brand”? Relatedly, what larger point does the book make about the relationship of fame and dehumanization?
4. “People would later accuse me of being a careful and calculating marketer using the situation as an opportunity to get rich and famous. I would deny it, saying it was just a bizarre thing that happened to me, but that was a lie” (p. 71). Do you take issue with April using the Carl incident as a form of self-promotion? Why? Why not?
5. In what ways does the book illustrate both the positive and negative sides of social media and online connectivity?
6. “A competing ideology was bound to pop up, I just didn’t realize that at the time. And so I was legitimately shocked that people were paying attention to Peter Petrawicki” (p. 155). How does the conflict between April May, Peter Petrawicki, and their respective followers serve as a metaphor for contemporary political discourse?
7. From your perspective, what forms of internal conflict does April May experience throughout the book?
8. In what ways does April May’s live-streaming of herself during the warehouse fire serve as a form of social commentary? What larger point do you think Green was trying to make?
9. How does humanity’s reaction to the Carls, and the factions that form in response to them, function as a form of commentary on our own political climate?
10. What forms of power does April May wield over others as she expands her online presence and celebrity status?
11. If you could ask Hank Green a single question about *An Absolutely Remarkable Thing*, what would you ask and why?

**VARIOUS
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

The following are activities applicable to a variety of curricular areas.

1. Paideia Seminar

A Paideia Seminar is a student-centered, Socratic discussion. In it, the teacher serves as facilitator by providing students with open-ended questions, prompting students to respond, and linking student comments. There are three main question categories: *opening questions*, *core questions*, and *closing questions*. *Opening questions* identify main ideas from the text (What larger points does the book make about fame?). *Core questions* require students to analyze textual details (What do you consider to be some of the central turning points in April May's journey? Why?). Finally, *closing questions* personalize textual concepts (What sort of lessons did you take from the book? What makes it such a timely text?). Construct multiple questions like these and have students gather in a large circle.

Establish group goals for the discussion and have students create individual goals as well. Some group goals could include practicing active listening strategies, disagreeing constructively, and having each participant express at least two thoughts. Individual goals could include referring to specific passages, building on another's comment, and making consistent eye contact with others. Facilitate the conversation and concentrate on eliciting student responses. When the discussion concludes, have students self-assess and provide feedback on the seminar. Note that many of the discussion questions in this guide can be used during this activity.

For more information, consult <https://www.paideia.org/our-approach/paideia-seminar/index>

2. Student Generated Questions (QAR)

When students are able to generate their own questions, they are typically more invested in the analytical process. Allow them to take ownership of inquiry and explore *An Absolutely Remarkable Thing* through this activity. QAR refers to Question-Answer Relationships, and this activity works well in terms of encouraging both close analysis and personal connections. The types of questions include:

- **“Right there” questions**
Answers to these questions are found explicitly in the text. (What leads to the emergence of the Defenders?)
- **“Think and search” questions**
Answers lie in the text, but may only be found by examining several different sections and piecing them together. (How do April May's personal relationships change throughout the course of the book?)
- **“Author and you” questions**
Answers require personal interpretation based on textual evidence. (Why do you think April May was chosen by the Carls?)
- **“On my own” questions**
Answers connect personal experience with themes of the text. (In what ways does the book's commentary on social media echo your own online experiences?)

**VARIOUS
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**
(CONTINUED)

Have students work independently or in pairs to generate several questions per category for a specific section of the book. After these questions are generated, instructors have several options:

- Have students trade and answer each other's questions in writing
- Have students pose their questions during small-group discussions
- Have students select one question to expand upon in an extended written response or brief presentation ("Right there" questions do not work well for this).
- Have students answer each other's questions via collaborative documents on Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>).*

For more information on this strategy, consult this resource: <http://www.readingquest.org/qar.html>

**All Google resources mentioned in this guide are accessible with a free Google account.*

3. Social Media Self-Assessment

"Reasoned, caring conversations that considered the complexity of other perspectives didn't get views. Rants did. Outrage did. Simplicity did. So, simple, outraged rants is what I gave people" (p. 213).

Similar to April May, your students are likely highly active online. Invite students to use this activity to assess their own social media habits and determine the extent to which their online communication mirrors what April noted in the passage above. To begin, have students access all of their social media accounts, and ask them to review their activity over the past few weeks. As they review their online activity, have them consider the following questions:

- What style of communication do you typically employ? Do you communicate with short bursts of information, or do you strive for nuance and complexity?
- What emotions are apparent in your online communication with others? Do your posts typically reflect anger, happiness, or something else?
- How do you characterize your typical interactions with others? Are these interactions generally supportive, combative, or something else entirely?
- Based on what your social media self-assessment reveals, choose several communicative habits you would like to change moving forward.

Ask students to share their findings through writing and class discussion. To extend this activity, ask students to share their analysis of their own online habits by creating a vlog and sharing it online. For more information, direct students to this resource: <https://www.wikihow.tech/Make-a-Great-First-Vlog>

4. Identity/Persona Analysis

"But one thing that I didn't anticipate was that, in creating the April May brand, I was very much creating a new me. You can only do so much pretending before you become the thing you're pretending to be" (p. 71).

VARIOUS
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES
 (CONTINUED)

An Absolutely Remarkable Thing invites readers to question what boundaries actually exist between a person's online persona and his or her "actual" human identity. Use this activity to prompt students to closely consider this important question.

To begin, have students address the following questions through paired or whole class discussion:

- To what extent does April May's "true" identity become subsumed by her online persona?
- How porous would you say the boundary is between her offline and online identities?
- How does this boundary change throughout the book, if you believe it changes at all?

To build on this analysis, invite students to examine the persona they have crafted via their own online behaviors. Have them consider the following questions:

- What information/content do you share online? What information/content do you choose to withhold? Why?
- In what ways does your profile picture, and other visual content, reflect a specific version of yourself geared toward specific audiences?
- Does your online persona contrast the "real" person you are, or are they essentially one and the same?
- Which adjectives would you use to describe the online version of yourself? Would you use the same adjectives to describe your offline identity?

Ask students to share their findings with their classmates. To deepen this activity, have students use a graphic organizer or Venn diagram (with their "real" identity on one side and online persona on the other) to visually chart their analysis.

5. Scroll Free September

"But addiction isn't necessarily about the specific thing; it's about mental reliance, it's a bug in your brain software, and even with the support of some truly remarkable people working to keep me in line, I never went cold turkey. Even after the apps were off my phone, I would go to twitter.com using its browser" (p. 288).

Challenge your students to quit social media "cold turkey" by having them participate in "Scroll Free September," a campaign initiated by the Royal Society for Public Health that asks participants to refrain from social media use for a full month, or as long as he or she can tolerate it. To begin, ask students to consider and discuss the following questions:

- How do you believe the narrative would have changed if April May had successfully curtailed, or completely eliminated, her social media use for a period of time?
- How do you think your life would be changed if you curtailed, or completely eliminated, your social media use for a period of time?

**VARIOUS
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**
(CONTINUED)

Next, ask students to navigate to <https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/campaigns/scroll-free-september.html>, where they can view resources related to Scroll Free September and sign up to participate. During this social media break, ask students to keep an offline journal where they record their thoughts and emotions related to this experience and the challenges it presents.

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

The following topics are designed to provide students with opportunities for extended inquiry and analysis. In response to these, students could:

- Compose a research paper
 - Deliver a presentation
 - Design a lesson plan and teach a class
 - Record a podcast (<https://lifehacker.com/how-to-start-your-own-podcast-1709798447>)
 - Create a website (<http://www.wix.com>, <http://www.weebly.com>, and <https://sites.google.com> are excellent free resources for this)
 - Use Adobe Spark (<https://spark.adobe.com>) to create and share a variety of graphics and videos
1. April May noted the addictive potential of social media, stating, “I was addicted to the attention and to the outrage and to the rush of being involved in something so huge, but more than any of that I was just addicted” (p. 288). Perform research to investigate the addictive potential of social media. What are the physical/biological processes that underlie social media addiction? To what extent is this specific form of addiction comparable to others? How common is it, and for which groups? What can be done to mitigate the negative physical effects of social media?
 2. Perform research to learn more about the phenomenon of internet virality. What does it mean when content, like April May’s video of Carl, goes “viral”? In what ways do businesses and ordinary citizens harness the power of online virality? Consider researching a single instance of virality and trace its online life cycle. Which individuals and/or organizations (perhaps even behind the scenes) spurred on the viral campaign? Also, consider issues of power as they relate to your chosen example of online virality: who ultimately benefited from it? Who, if anyone, was disadvantaged by it?
 3. *An Absolutely Remarkable Thing* invites the reader to consider both the negative and positive aspects of online connectivity. For example, toward the end of the book, April makes a plea and subsequently moves people around the world to take action. Perform research to learn more about the real-world intersections of social media, social movements, and activism. How has social media been used by citizens around the world to catalyze social movements? What are the affordances and constraints of social media as a tool for civic action? On the flip side, in what ways has online connectivity been used to suppress uprisings and silence political dissent?

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

(CONTINUED)

4. “So I signed up for Twitter, and we linked to it from the YouTube channel, and I tweeted some things, and by the end of the day I had five hundred real, human people waiting to hear my every word...” (p. 40). Perform research to learn more about social media and celebrity culture, especially as it relates to younger people. What forms of technology enable and encourage our ever-growing celebrity culture? What are the physical, mental, and emotional consequences for followers?
5. What does it mean to be an “online influencer” like April May? Perform research and identify some currently active online influencers. Who are these individuals and how did they get their start? In what ways do they leverage their fame and associated platforms? What drives these influencers? Is it money? Ego? The desire to support a social cause? Or perhaps something else? Lastly, consider researching and analyzing the broader role online influencers currently play in our society.

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

These projects are designed to connect students’ learning experiences with the larger community.

1. Become an Expert and Educator

Have students select a topic related to *An Absolutely Remarkable Thing* to research in small groups. Some suggested topics include:

- Social media, surveillance, and privacy rights
- Social media and online bullying/harassment
- Online communication and echo-chambers
- The search for extraterrestrial life
- Media saturation and desensitization

The purpose of this activity is for students to become experts on their topic so that they may effectively educate other members of the campus community. First, student groups should read and analyze the applicable sections of *An Absolutely Remarkable Thing* while performing secondary research as well. After students have sufficiently researched their topic, have them answer the following two questions:

1. What is the essential information that others must know about my group’s topic?
2. What are controversial elements of my topic?

Finally, have students present their research to the campus community in such a way that it both informs and invites debate. Groups could:

- Staff an information booth (be sure to obtain permission first) in a visible area and distribute brochures, fliers, or other documents. Free web resources such as <https://www.canva.com> will work for this, or students could use programs such as Microsoft Publisher to create documents.

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

(CONTINUED)

- Launch an online campaign through social media or a designed website. Encourage students to create captivating presentations through Prezi (<http://www.prezi.com>), Google Slides (<http://www.google.com/slides/about>), or Microsoft Sway (<https://sway.com>).
- Design and publish infographics. An infographic is a visual representation of information that features short sections of text and multiple charts, graphs, and other visuals. The digital medium offers students a unique way to package and convey knowledge while sharpening their digital literacy skills. Free resources for this include <http://piktochart.com>, <http://easel.ly>, and <https://spark.adobe.com>.

Regardless of the format students select, their presentations should invite their audience to ask questions and engage in dialogue.

2. Participate in “Project for Awesome”

“Project for Awesome” is a charity campaign that was started by John and Hank Green. According to the official website (<http://www.projectforawesome.com/about>), “The very first Project for Awesome was organized in 2007, and has been held each December.... During Project for Awesome, thousands of people post videos talking about and advocating for charities that decrease the overall level of world suck. As a community, we promote these videos and raise money for the charities.” Direct students to the website listed above to have them learn more about ways to get involved. There is also a helpful FAQ located here: <http://www.projectforawesome.com/faq>.

Whatever students decide to do, at the conclusion of the project, have them come together with their classmates to debrief; ask them to share what worked, what could be improved upon, and their broader thoughts on the potential of social media to do good.

3. Disrupt the Echo Chamber

An Absolutely Remarkable Thing invites readers to consider the increasingly polarized nature of online communication and the consequences of communicating primarily with those who share our opinions and values. Invite students to challenge the echo chamber of social media through this activity.

- First, ask students to identify a social or political issue they feel strongly about. Next, have them seek out and follow several individuals via social media that actively endorse opposing positions.
- Have students engage with these individuals in a respectful manner (you may first need to discuss what exactly respectful behavior entails), asking them to engage in constructive dialogue and civil debate. Tell students they are not allowed to mute conversations or block the individuals they interact with unless these discussions become uncivil. The central goal of the activity is for students to advance their own positions while also seeking to understand the opposing positions of others. If possible, students should also attempt to locate common ground.

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS (CONTINUED)

- Finally, ask students to report on what they found out about “the other side.” What did they learn about those who hold opposing opinions? What did they learn about their own opinions and values? Does common ground exist?

4. Initiate an Online Awareness Campaign

Just as April May used social media to spread awareness of Carl, your students can use social media to broaden awareness of an important issue and move others to act on it.

- To begin, have students assemble in small groups. Next, ask them to identify an issue at the local, state, or regional level they would like to make others aware of.
- The next step is to require students to research the issue and create media related to it. For example, if the issue is environmental, students might record a video and/or take pictures of an affected location for the purpose of documenting it. Students might also consider interviewing those citizens affected by it.
- Lastly, have students utilize social media platforms to initiate an awareness and action campaign. They should disseminate their images, videos, texts, etc. by sharing them widely and using hashtags and other online tools to widely circulate content. Students could also include an action item in the campaign using resources such as <https://resist.bot> or <https://www.change.org/start-a-petition/entry>.
- For additional, useful tips on social media campaigns, direct students to <https://resources.mojomedialabs.com/blog/8-steps-to-creating-a-social-media-campaign-that-gets-results> and <https://www.yesmagazine.org/people-power/yes-social-media-can-be-used-for-positive-change-20180423>

OTHER RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PROGRAMS

The following are resources useful for extending a study of *An Absolutely Remarkable Thing* and its related subjects:

- <https://www.theverge.com/2018/9/17/17832948/youtube-youtubers-influencer-creator-fans-subscribers-friends-celebrities>
A piece from Vox on online influencers and their relationships with viewers.
- <https://www.youtube.com/vlogbrothers>
Hank and John Green’s “Vlogbrothers” YouTube channel.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXf-hxolcOA>
Footage of Hank Green reading from *An Absolutely Remarkable Thing*.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vK2wodJjEL8>
An interview with Hank Green about *An Absolutely Remarkable Thing*.
- <https://www.vox.com/2018/10/8/17908288/hank-green-interview-book-an-absolutely-remarkable-thing>
An interview with Hank Green from Vox.

OTHER RESOURCES
FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS,
AND PROGRAMS
(CONTINUED)

- http://cmscontent.penguinrandomhouse.com/DRM/AART-PB-BookClubKit_v1.pdf
A book club kit for *An Absolutely Remarkable Thing*.
- <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/generation-like/>
“Generation Like,” a film from PBS that explores the intersections of social media, marketing, and celebrity status.
- https://www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cellphones_twitter_facebook_can_make_history?language=en
“How social media can make history,” a TED talk from Clay Shirky.
- <https://www.theguardian.com/media-network/2015/sep/24/online-offline-personality-digital-identity>
A piece from *The Guardian* that explores the relationship between offline and online identities.
- <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/social-media-democracy/600763/>
A piece from *The Atlantic* on the dark side of social media.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
OF THIS GUIDE

Chris Gilbert is a former high school English teacher and current education doctoral student who lives in the mountains of North Carolina. He is also an avid writer. His work has appeared in the *The Washington Post*'s education blog, “The Answer Sheet,” NCTE's (National Council of Teachers of English) *English Journal*, Kappa Delta Pi's *The Educational Forum*, and *Critical Studies in Education*. He has also written a number of educational guides for Penguin Random House and Patagonia.



Penguin Random House Education
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

www.commonreads.com

Queries: commonreads@penguinrandomhouse.com