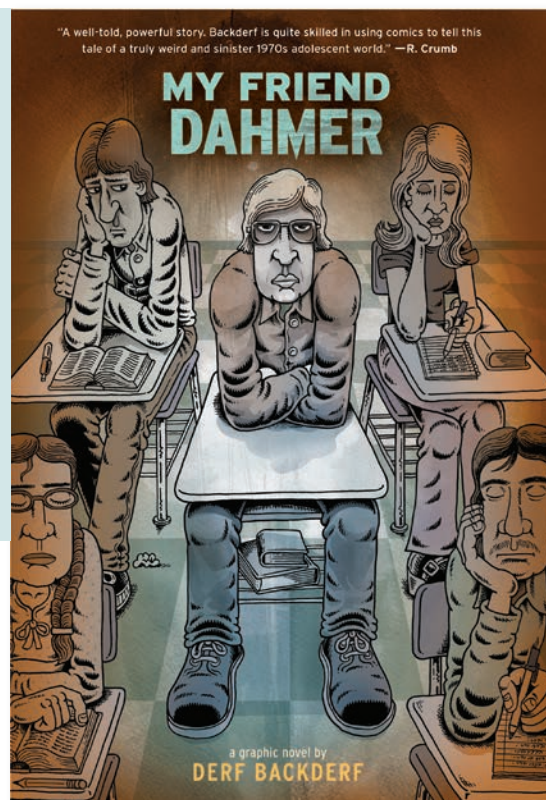


TEACHER'S GUIDE TO **MY FRIEND DAHMER** BY DERF BACKDERF

A NOTE TO EDUCATORS

Although a work of graphic nonfiction, *My Friend Dahmer* is not “graphic” in the conventional sense—while it touches on dark themes such as cruelty, morbidity, and substance abuse, much of this content occurs “off-panel.” The school setting and teen issues will resonate with students, as will the artful blend of personal narrative and research-based nonfiction. *My Friend Dahmer* should be a rewarding text for both in class and independent reading.

Backderf’s story deals with the subject of a serial killer, but it’s important to note that the book does not depict Jeffrey Dahmer’s crimes. “It’s the story *before* the story,” Backderf explains. The Dahmer he writes about was a fellow classmate. The graphic novel ends just as Dahmer takes his first steps toward becoming a criminal.



COMMON CORE-STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

Correlations to the Grades 6–12 English Language Arts “Anchor Standards,” specifically those that relate to “College and Career” reading readiness, are called out by the relevant section and standard number.

BEFORE READING

PREVIEW THE TEXT

Encourage students to make predictions about the tone, plot, setting, themes, and main characters of the book based upon the title, the cover illustration, the photo on [p. 8](#), and the art opposite the title page. Follow up on this preview later by revisiting this final image after students have encountered it again, this time in context, on [p. 169](#). Ask why they think it was chosen to appear at the outset as well.

STRUCTURE/PARTS OF A BOOK

Guide students through an analysis of the Table of Contents on [p. 7](#). What do the titles of Parts 1–5 indicate about the key themes and, given the book’s biographical structure, about Dahmer’s development during the period that the author knew him?

In addition, draw attention to the preface, prologue, and epilogue, helping students as needed to make distinctions between the different purposes of such sections. Finally, point out the sections that are specific to nonfiction: Sources, Notes, and The Players (an update). In fact, to reinforce the elements of nonfiction, you may want to advise students to refer to the Notes while they’re reading the main text.



Craft and Structure, Standard 5

Author’s Intentions

Focus on the first paragraphs of [pages 9 and 11](#), asking students to identify the author’s purpose for tackling this material, both in the ’90s and now. Suggest that they bear these goals in mind while reading the memoir that follows.

DURING READING

ANALYZING GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Standard 7

Splash Pages: Adding Emphases

In comics, a “splash page” is a single image that takes up an entire page. Since Backderf uses these with great regularity, ask students to interpret why he chooses to underscore those particular moments in the narrative. Often these are to establish a setting (p. 70) or for dramatic emphasis (p. 122), as in the super-hero comics students may already be familiar with. More compelling, however, is their symbolic function in terms of representing isolation, a key theme (pp. 13, 85).

Page Flips: Structuring Text, Building Reader Anticipation

Unique to the comics medium, the term “page flip” refers to that intentional break in the narrative that occurs when readers move from an odd- to an even-numbered page. Explain to students that, unlike prose writers, graphic creators must structure their text on a page-by-page basis. As they read, encourage students to observe how Backderf uses the final panel on a spread to make readers want to find out what will happen next (e.g., pp. 37 and 57).

Visual Metaphor: Developing Characterization

As an artist, Backderf frequently uses shading on Dahmer’s face in a figurative sense. Have students identify such instances and challenge them to explain how these visuals underscore the idea of the character as “shadowy,” “dark,” or “hiding”/“concealed” while in plain sight.

DISCUSSING CENTRAL THEMES

Key Ideas and Details, Standards 1-3;

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Standard 8

Friendship

Challenge students to discuss the book’s title in light of the events it depicts. Was Backderf really Dahmer’s “friend”—why or why not? And if not, is the title meant ironically? Ask students to consider the meaning of “The Dahmer Fan Club,” and the mall stunt (pp. 134–143) in particular. Moreover, have them respond to the specific claims of the author that his clique could not have made a difference in Dahmer’s life (p. 66) and that its mockery of others was mostly harmless (p. 100). Do they agree or disagree?

Isolation

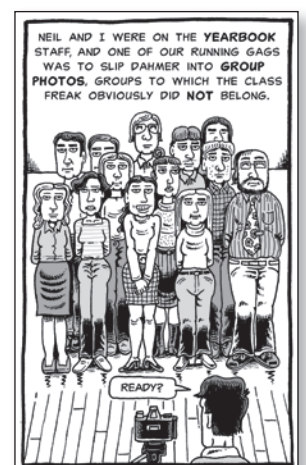
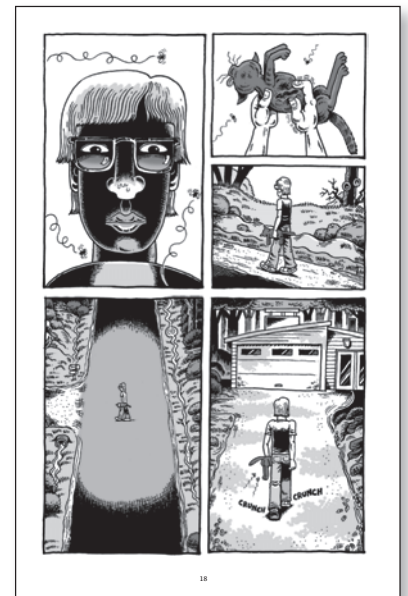
In an online review of *My Friend Dahmer* for *Time*, Lev Grossman writes about the feeling of isolation that Dahmer felt. In the late 1970s, “there was no Internet and no cell phones. Back then you could actually be alone, truly, deeply alone and isolated in a way that’s almost impossible now. There was no Twitter, no Facebook, no global network of electronic confidences and confessions open 24/7. Whatever was going wrong in your house, and in your head, you dealt with it, or not, by yourself in your room.” Invite your students to explore the concept of solitude by making text-to-self connections: discuss how they rely on current modes of communication, contrasting it with the way Dahmer dealt with his demons in isolation.

Responsibility.

A key theme sounded throughout, and made explicit on pages 11 and 67, is “Where were the adults?” Invite students to assess the author’s claims (pp. 84, 87, 149, etc.) that teachers and other adults were negligent in detecting the early warning signs of a larger problem with Dahmer. How does the textual evidence for this argument fit with the theme that Dahmer was a master of blending in and not attracting the suspicion of authority figures? (pp. 124–125, 158–159, 178–185)

Empathy and Insanity

In his preface, Backderf exhorts readers to “pity” but not “empathize with” Dahmer. Ask students whether the incidents—and the authorial interpretations of them—that follow support such a stance. Discuss in particular Backderf’s recurring motifs of social isolation and family dysfunction: Were these really the critical components in Dahmer’s developing insanity? Moreover, is there adequate support for the notion that Dahmer was a “tragic figure” but not a “sympathetic one”? (p. 88)

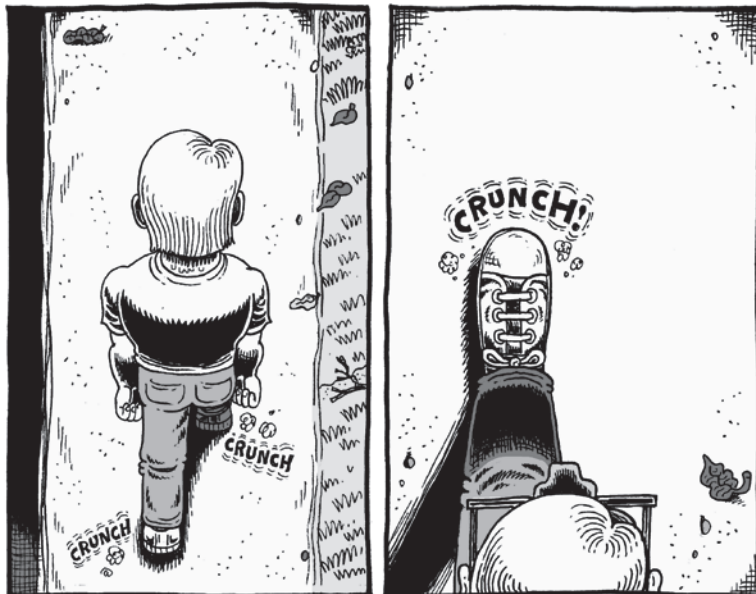
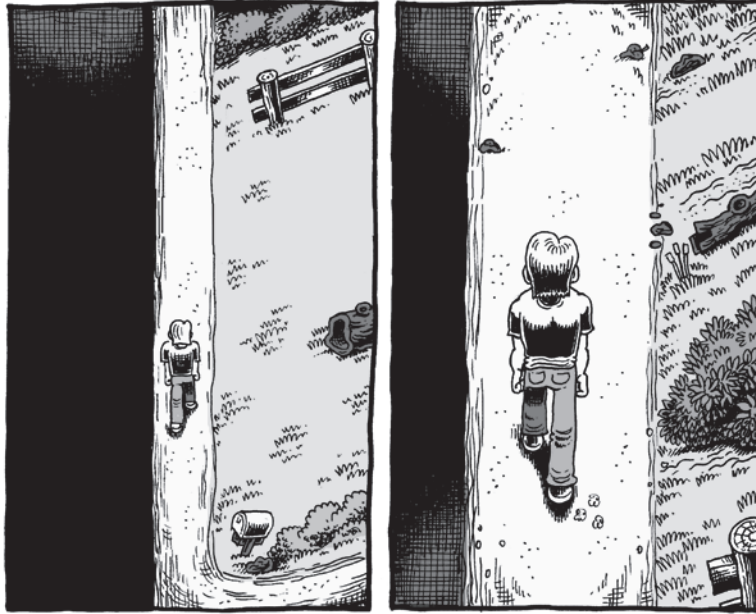


WORKSHEET

ADD WORDS TO SILENCE

Name _____ Date _____

DIRECTIONS: Use your knowledge of the people, events, and feelings in *My Friend Dahmer* to add text to the silent passage below from the book's prologue. Choose a perspective—Dahmer's, using thought balloons, or Backderf's or a neutral narrator's, using captions above or below the panels—to clarify or expand upon what the art shows. What is happening here? What are Dahmer's emotions?



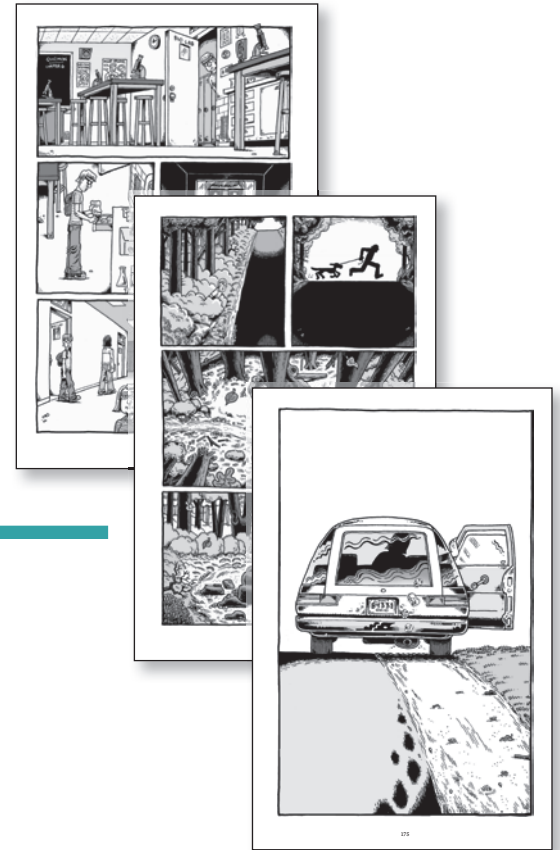
AFTER READING

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity, Standard 10

Assess understanding of story elements and themes by having students complete the reproducible worksheet on page 3 of this guide. Consider first modeling the activity by having them provide text verbally for any of the book's many wordless panels.

Facilitate “text-to-self” connections by having students write a brief persuasive essay or oral presentation that compares and contrasts Backderf's school and community in the 1970s with their own. How have things changed, or not, in the past thirty-plus years? Are there more similarities or differences?

Foster critical thinking by having students evaluate the book based upon the author's own stated goals (p. 10). For example, does the narrative achieve the flow and clarity that Backderf wanted?



DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS . . .

Clarify cultural references that may be unfamiliar

- *Monty Python* (p. 20)
- *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (p. 41)
- *Letterman* (p. 126)

Define slang and idioms as needed

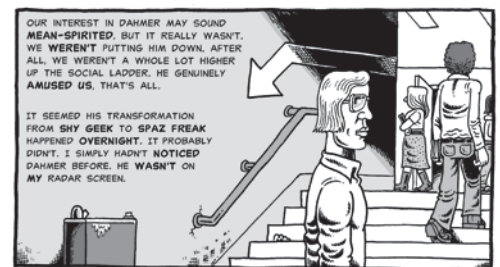
- *radar screen* (p. 51)
- *shtick* (p. 64)
- *does a number* (p. 126)
- Explain puns and phonetic, non-standard English in dialogue:
 - *fulla* (p. 21)
 - *Dumber* (p. 122)

BELOW-LEVEL READERS

Use the Notes section to help students distinguish between the parts of the narrative that are based upon firsthand observation and those the author discovered, and perhaps then speculated about, based upon research.

Enhance comprehension by pointing out that the artwork does not always precisely illustrate what the text is describing—sometimes it runs “in parallel” or presents a fantasy. (pp. 51, 54)

Aid text navigation by explaining that some text and some images (p. 139) are meant to apply to more than one panel at a time



ADVANCED STUDENTS

Inspire outside research by having students “translate” the book's psychological terms and conditions (usually in lay-person's language) into the actual clinical terms that forensic specialists might use. They can share their findings via a chart or an electronic slideshow.

Prompt text-to-text connections by asking students to compare and contrast the teens in *My Friend Dahmer* with those typically found in YA fiction or in forms of popular culture.

Enhance critical thinking by having students explore in depth the same primary sources that Backderf cites in the Sources and Notes sections at the back of the book. Are there any episodes or ideas that Backderf omitted that they would have included, or incidents that they would have portrayed differently?

My Friend Dahmer copyright © 2012 John Backderf. Photograph on page 1 copyright © 2012 William S. Henry.

Teacher's Guide conceived and written by Peter Gutiérrez. Peter is a spokesperson on comics and graphic novels for the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and is a frequent contributor to *School Library Journal*. He can be reached at fiifgutierrez@gmail.com