

TEACHER GUIDE

These Things Happen by Richard Kramer

ABOUT THE STORY

THESE THINGS HAPPEN takes place today, tonight, no later than tomorrow. It's the tale of an extended modern family, in New York City, the grown-ups all prominent in their professions, grooming their teenagers to make them proud and be just like them.

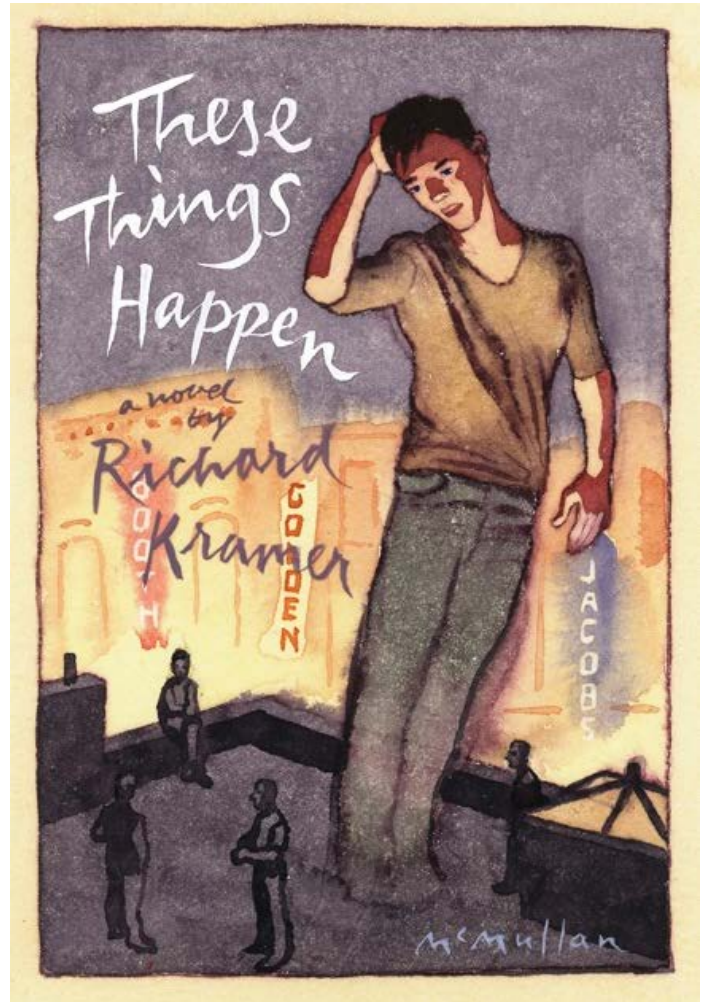
The story starts when WESLEY BOWMAN, 15, sharp and funny and occasionally a little too much so for his own good, moves from the uptown home he shares with his mom and step-dad to the downtown home of his dad and his male partner. As he's about to become a man ("in theory," to quote him), he feels the time has come to better know (to quote him again) "the actual man from whom I did, actually, spring." KENNY, Wesley's dad, who came out after the end of his marriage to his mom, is a much-honored gay-rights lawyer, an Admirable New Yorker who has more time for Rachel Maddow than his own son.

Wesley, when he moves in, finds his dad distant. But GEORGE, his dad's partner, a former actor-dancer who now runs a restaurant, connects with him right away. Almost without being aware of it Wesley finds in George the father figure he seeks, unsuccessfully, in Kenny. George shares who he is, and Wesley values that; from George's unselfconscious example Wesley weaves, over the course of the book, a sense of the kind of man he might like to one day be.

Then everything changes. When Wesley's best friend comes out in an acceptance speech following his election to the presidency of the tenth grade, the two boys find themselves at the center of an act of violence. Wesley's family prides itself on its liberalism and tolerance, but those qualities evaporate as they confront not only the bullying but the possibility that Wesley might be gay himself. George becomes suspect, and the events that result from that reveal to all the characters in the book parts of themselves they have kept hidden, even forgotten. By the end, no one is who they were at the start, and all must find the courage to truly, for the first time, face who they are.

These Things Happen is about the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, and how we forge authenticity from the extent of our willingness to rewrite and revise those stories. The book is deeply moving and laugh-out-loud funny, too. The author, who began his career writing fiction for the *New Yorker* and became a prime creative force behind such television series as *thirtysomething* and *My So-Called Life* tells a story about the way we live now that we all need to hear.

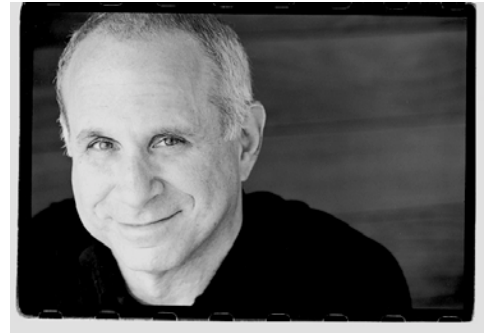
This Teacher's Guide to THESE THINGS HAPPEN provides resources and ideas to strengthen depth of understanding and promote students to take action regarding the book's central ideas and themes. The recommended inquiries and experiences are designed in accordance to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts.



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SPEAKING WITH AUTHOR RICHARD KRAMER

Richard Kramer is the award winning writer/producer of such classic television programs as *thirtysomething*, *My So-Called Life*, and *Once and Again*. *THESE THINGS HAPPEN* is his first novel.



You've had a long and exciting career writing and producing for television. Why write a novel?

I'd always wanted to see if I could. I like movies, tv, and music, but I worship books, and grew up in a house filled with them. I tried to write a novel several times, but other things got in the way. Every night, before I went to sleep I'd say "Another day you didn't write a novel." While I enjoyed the other writing I was doing, somehow it didn't seem to *count*. Now I say, "Another day you didn't write a *second* novel."

What inspired you to write this particular story and choose this particular title?

A kid came to read for a part on *My So-Called Life*. He told us, without being asked, that his dad had just come out and would be leaving the house in a week. The kid told this with bravado but we could see he was heartbroken. He stuck in my mind for fifteen years. Over time I started, bit by bit, to figure out who he might be as an imagined character, a guy in a book.

I like titles with roots in conversation. *These Things Happen* is a phrase we all use, to try to explain the essential mysteriousness of life. The *things* that happen are often bigger than our ability to imagine them. Each character has at least one moment when *these things happen* for them, an unforeseen event that changes everything, for everybody, forever.

Which character do you most identify with?

Each character, as I wrote him or her in his or her own voice, felt natural to me. I could *hear* them, and hear myself in all of them, sometimes in ways that weren't flattering. If I had to pick one, I'd say George. I think authors sometimes identify most with the characters they'd *like* to be. I'd like to be him.

Oprah Winfrey acquired the rights to *THESE THINGS HAPPEN* to produce it as a series for HBO.

How will this strengthen or change the story you hope to tell?

I have more time. The audience and I can get to know the characters better. The book takes place over a pretty eventful thirty-six hours, so everyone is revealed by how they respond in crisis. I'm having a blast writing the first script now, because I know the trouble ahead and I can slowly manipulate the characters toward those pivotal moments.

What do you hope readers take away from the story and the characters? Is there a lesson to be learned here or are you more concerned with starting a conversation?

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield famously says that the test of a book is if after reading it you want to call the author. I want readers to want the email addresses of my characters. Is there a lesson? I hope not. I want each reader to come away from the book with something that is personal to him or her.

I wrote the book for young adults and what I guess one would call old adults. The task of acquiring self-knowledge begins as a teenager and goes on, forever, from there. I hope the book is a place for those on either end of the age spectrum to meet and share what they're learning on their search. Laughter—remember, I come from tv—included.

Questions for General Discussion

What emotions did you experience while reading *These Things Happen*? How did the author intentionally evoke those feelings?

Why do you think the author chose the structure of multiple narrators?

Select an event in the story; how might this be narrated by a different character? How might this affect your understanding or response? Are there any characters you wished you'd heard from?

What in the story is most memorable? Is it an event or a person?

Come up with a word or phrase to capture the essence of each character. Are you similar to any of them? Do you know anyone like them?

How does setting—Manhattan, subways, taxis, small buildings—impact the novel?

What enables Wesley to talk more openly with George than with his own father?

What happens when friends realize that they may not have complete understanding of what the other is thinking?

Select an instance in the book when a parent does not handle things well.

- What are the consequences of each character's actions?
- What happens when parents behave badly or make poor choices?
- How do the characters respond?
- Have you experienced this?
- How did you respond?

What character would you most want to meet? What would you want to discuss? What might you share about yourself that you had never shared before?

If you could step in and influence any part of the story, where would you appear and what would you do?

Richard Kramer says that the “things” of the book's title are those unforeseen events that, after they're over, change everything, for everybody, forever. Identify one of those events for a character in this book, another book, and one you have experienced yourself.

Key Words

Consider what these words mean to you, how the words are represented in the story, and how reading the story influences your thinking.

Identity	Perspective	Friendship	Attention
Choice	Bias	Nurture	Honesty
Gay	Prejudice	Trust	Communication

About this Guide to *These Things Happen*

These Things Happen is rich in varied content and topics to be discussed and explored. Several themes have been selected for further inquiry and exploration. Within each theme you will find categories for enriching study. You can easily adapt this design for your students, selecting appropriate sections as you use this book.

Explore—Use these questions and activities once or several times to examine and revisit the development of characters, plot, and theme and to help students make personal connections with the story as they read. The questions were designed with the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts Anchor Standards for Reading in mind. They focus on *Key Ideas and Details, Craft and Structure, or Integration of Knowledge and Ideas*.

The activities may be interchanged for each theme. For example, though Role Play is listed under Family, it could easily be used for Identity, Perspective and Bias, or Friendship.

Take Action—Engaging students in transforming words on the page into ideas that lead to action brings learning to life. These ideas are presented to spark conversations and stimulate students to think of meaningful ways to address relevant everyday issues with purpose and intent. Along the way students are utilizing their reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills to communicate with an authentic audience. For more information on this teaching approach called *Service Learning*, visit www.cbkassociates.com.

This TEACHER GUIDE is authored by Cathryn Berger Kaye, M.A., and Maureen Connolly, Ed.D. of CBK Associates. Cathryn is the author of several books including *The Complete Guide to Service Learning*. Maureen is the coauthor of two books including *Getting to the Core of English Language Arts, Grades 6-12: How to Meet the Common Core State Standards with Lessons from the Classroom*. **You can find us at www.cbkassociates.com.**

Identity

Explore

The author has said he wanted to write a book about identity in all its forms, and how young people build identities from those around them. A boy comes out in a school assembly, but the book is **not** about him. It is, instead, about how that minor character's action catalyzes change and self-realization in others, causing them to question identities they thought were fixed. Choose one or more of the following questions to explore the concept of identity further.

- In what ways does the author explicitly and implicitly show characters struggling with identity?
- How does Wesley feel about Theo having this sense of himself during a time in life when many teens are struggling with who they are?
- Many adults are forced to question their own identities. Is it different for an adult to question identity versus a teen? Why? How?
- Theo's question about how characters knew they were gay leads to introspection for George and for Kenny. What are the consequences of this introspection? How do we determine the personal identifiers that shape our most critical and essential choices?

In what ways do a character's efforts to better know himself or herself compare with your own?

Select a statement made by or about one character and tell how this exemplifies who the character is to you. Pay careful attention to phrasing and word choice as well as context.

WESLEY, page 20: "When I get to Grand Central I remember something George once said, that every person moving through it has one secret they believe they could never tell ... [I] wonder: What would my secret be? Is it something you know, or a thing you *discover*, but that's been there all along, waiting? And say you never discover it; what then? I worry about these things."

THEO, page 97: "I didn't plan it; in a way, it seems, it planned *me*. I won, and I was making my acceptance speech, and then the words were there, all excited, like kids going off to camp. *I. Am. Gay*. It might have been part of a phenomenon that Wesley and I have noticed, which is how you think *you're* living your life, but your life has ideas of its own. I should point out that I don't actually remember what I said up there, but Wesley will, for my biographers (ha). He remembers most smart or funny things a person says. I do, too. But it's different, with yourself. It just is. You need the other person.

What is something that you have said that exemplifies who you are? Have you ever heard someone describe you or say something about you that truly represents how you would like to be perceived or that goes against how you want the world to see you? Explain.

Take Action

The great Renaissance artist, Michelangelo, said, "The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it." Find and use words of wisdom to inspire others to boldly and courageously discover and claim their identity. Post these as quote art or employ other means to inspire and support your peers.

PERSPECTIVE AND BIAS

Explore

This text is driven by conflict. What role does perspective or bias play in each of these conflicts?

Choose a conflict that characters are struggling with, for example:

- Wesley wants to know his father.
- Theo has specific questions about being gay, how to know, and his choices.
- George is struggling to identify his role in Kenny and Wesley's lives.
- Kenny wants to balance his work and his family obligations.
- Lola is sorting out her assumptions about George, Theo, and Wesley, while she tries to be a good mother to a unique and challenging teenaged boy.
- Ben does not have answers for Wesley.

Choose one or more of the following questions to explore that conflict further:

- What evidence do we have of this conflict?
- Explain how character's thinking regarding this conflict is logical or illogical.
- What are the ramifications of this conflict on the other characters?
- Is there bias to be considered?

In what ways do any of these conflicts inform how you respond to conflicts in your own life? Where are there similarities? Where are the differences? Any lessons learned?

The structure of the novel allows for an examination of perspective and bias regarding Theo coming out. This topic is in the news. Find news articles that provide real-world examples of how bias and prejudice surrounding sexual orientation influence people's lives, and still provoke anti-gay hate crimes in communities including in schools. Compare statistics between communities. Where does your community stand? How do we make a change?

<http://www.itgetsbetter.org/> It Gets Better provides LGBTQ youth with reaffirming messages to provide hope when they face harassment. Everyday people and celebrities alike have joined this movement to promote this positive message. Is this an effective campaign? Why is it important?

www.project10.org Friends of Project 10 is an organization that supports LGBTQ youth through events, workshops, and ensuring that public schools are in compliance with state and federal laws related to sexual orientation and gender identification. Is this an effective organization? What do you know about laws related to sexual orientation and gender identity?

Take Action

How do we stand up to reduce and eliminate bias or prejudice when aimed at another person? If a group is underrepresented, are they easy targets? Consider who is targeted in your school or community, as exemplified by name-calling, harassment, or even violence. At a school in NYC, a group of straight students stood up in support of their gay peers by creating the Straight Up Campaign. Check out their website at <http://www.loveislouder.com/straight-up/> Start a Straight Up chapter or a similar type of campaign at your school.

FRIENDSHIP

Explore

The two most prominent friendships in the book are between Wesley and Theo, two teenaged boys, and Wesley and George, a teenaged boy and an older gay man. Choose one or more of the following questions to explore one or both of these friendships further:

- What makes these friendships so strong?
- How does the author show the strength of the bond that exists between these characters?
- In what ways do the characters try to connect with and nurture each other?
- How does the author explicitly and implicitly show the depth of these friendships?
- Do the characters seem to value the friendship in the same way?
- How do the similarities and differences in their thinking about events and themes affect your understanding of their friendship?

In what ways do either of these friendships resemble or are completely different from a relationship that is important to you?

Find a piece of artwork, music, or poetry that speaks to what friendship means. If you could share the artwork with a character in the story, who would you choose? Why? Would the message relayed in this work of art teach the character something? Reinforce the character's beliefs? Help the character communicate better?

Take Action

What can you do at your school to help people connect in your school and local communities?

The cafeteria is a place where you can see friendships that are strong and how people avoid crossing lines and reaching out to those they do not know well. Mix it Up Day is used in schools across the globe to break down social barriers and make new friends over lunch. Check out the Mix it Up website at <http://www.tolerance.org/mix-it-up/what-is-mix> Hold a Mix it Up Day at your school by using their resources or creating activities of your own.

A group of schools in urban and suburban areas in New York joined together to form SPARC—School Partnership Collaboration. So often schools come together only for academic and athletic competition. SPARC endeavors to bring students together to work for a common good. Check out their website at <http://carle.ny.schoolwebpages.com/education/components/scrapbook/default.php?sectiondetailid=4873> Model a program similar to SPARC in your area. Reach out to other schools to see if they have service programs that might consider partnering with you. Chances are they will jump at the opportunity!

FAMILY

Explore

Wesley's family represents several ways that family structure has evolved while Theo's family represents the "traditional" family structure. How does each family interact? Choose one or more of the following questions to explore:

- What is the connotation of each of the "titles" of each family member (father, mother, stepfather, husband, wife, partner, sister, brother, stepchild, grandchild, only child, grandmother)?
- How are each of the family members portrayed?
- How is each character shaped by his or her role in the family?
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In what ways do these characters remind you of people in your own family? Are there traits that these characters have that you would like for a member of your family to have? Are there traits that you would not want a member of your family to have? Explain.

In groups of four, choose two characters from *These Things Happen* and two characters from another work of literature. In the voices of those characters, have a conversation (role play) about what matters in a friendship. Be mindful as you do this. What makes you say what you say? How are you staying true to the way the character is represented in the story? What insight does this activity give you into the thinking of your character and the characters played by others in your group?

Take Action

Could parents benefit from a tutorial on how to talk to their teens? Write a guide for parents on how to talk to your teenager. If you search this topic on the Internet, you will find many websites, but most are written by adults. Who better to guide parents in talking to teens than teens themselves? Once the written materials are created, plan and lead a workshop for parents to make the information accessible. Help them practice and role play, though not with their own teens, and receive helpful feedback. Go for it!