

Discussion Guide & Activities for *When Life Gives You O.J.* by Erica S. Perl

Summary

Like most kids, almost-11-year-old Zelly Fried desperately wants a dog. Unlike most kids, Zelly has a very unusual, Yiddish-speaking grandfather named Ace. So when Zelly begs for a dog in *When Life Gives You O.J.*, Ace intervenes and Zelly ends up with a “practice dog” named O.J. instead. And O.J. is definitely *not* an acceptable substitute for a real dog. Now Zelly’s not just the new girl or just the weird new girl (tongue sandwich for lunch, anyone?) -- she’s dangerously close to becoming the weird new girl who walks around dragging a dumb old plastic jug. Zelly’s parents tell her to stick with it, but Zelly’s not sure it’s worth the ridicule, or the harm that’s threatened when a bully shows he can push a joke too far. Is Ace’s plan so crazy it just might work, or is it just plain – as Ace would say – *meshugge*?

208 pages, 3rd grade and up
Knopf Books for Young Readers
ISBN 978-0375859243

Discussion questions

Warning! Some of the questions contain key elements of the plot. Do not read if you don't want to know what happens!

1. Can you think of a grandparent or other older person who reminds you of Ace or Bubbles? In what ways? What are some of the things that you like about the older people you know? Are there things about the older people that you know that are challenging for you? Have you ever been surprised to discover something that you have in common with a grandparent or someone else who is a lot older than you?
2. At first, Zelly doesn’t tell Jeremy the truth about O.J. What makes her change her mind about trusting him? Is this a good decision on Zelly’s part? Why or why not?
3. What are some of the things about Allie’s life that Zelly wishes she could have, too? What things do you think Allie envies about Zelly’s life?
4. At Jeremy’s suggestion, Zelly does a couple of other things – in addition to caring for O.J. - to show her parents she is responsible enough to have a dog. Can you think of other things Zelly could have tried to prove she was ready to get a dog? Do

- you think any of them would have helped?
5. Have you ever had to do a job or regular chore in order to earn something you wanted? If so, was the experience like Zelly's? Why or why not?
 6. Jeremy and Zelly disagree about the best way to deal with bullies like Nicky. Can you explain what each of them thinks and why? What do *you* think?
 7. If you were Zelly, what would you have decided about taking O.J. to the sleepover party? Would you have done what Zelly did? Why or why not?
 8. What happened at the sleepover party that made Zelly question her decision about O.J. and wish she hadn't gotten rid of him? Have you ever made a decision, like Zelly did, that turned out to be difficult to "undo"?
 9. Why do you think Ace rescued O.J.?
 10. Have you ever had to stand up for something you liked or believed in - like a band or a movie or something you were wearing - that none of your friends liked? What gave you the courage to do this?
 11. When Zelly sees Nicky at the Dairy Barn, were you surprised by her reaction? What do you give her the idea to do what she did to help him? What would you have done if you were in Zelly's shoes?

Activities

1. Have a bagel brunch for your discussion group or book club meeting (no matter what time of the day you meet). Serve bagels or mini-bagels, a variety of flavors of cream cheese to *schmear* on them and, of course, plenty of O.J. to drink. Happy *noshing*!
2. Get crafty! Collect enough clean, empty, plastic orange juice or milk jugs (any size) for each group member to have one. Cut and decorate them to make them into dogs like O.J., other animals, or anything you like. They are terrific for Earth Day or any day, they make great banks or storage containers or sculptures, and if you start taking one out for walks... well, who knows what might happen! Here's a [gallery of ideas](#) from Family Fun magazine to start you off.
3. Make a plan to deliver old towels, dog food and biscuits to your local animal shelter (call first to see what they need - most shelters love donations and visitors). Want to bake the dog biscuits yourselves? Here's a recipe:

Ace-the-Dog's Peanut Butter Num Nums*

2 cups whole-wheat flour

1 tbsp. baking powder

1 cup peanut butter

1 cup milk

1. Preheat oven to 375°F.
2. In a bowl, combine dry ingredients (flour and baking powder).
3. In second bowl, mix peanut butter and milk till blended.
4. Add dry ingredients to wet and mix well.
5. Place dough on a lightly floured surface and knead.
6. Roll dough into a log and wrap in wax paper.
7. Place in the refrigerator for about an hour.
8. Remove paper from cookie dough and either slice into disks and place on cookie sheets or roll dough to 1/4 inch thickness and use a cookie cutter to cut out desired shapes.
9. Bake for 15-20 minutes on a greased baking sheet until lightly brown.
10. Cool on a rack, then store in an airtight container.

* If any group members have peanut allergies, many peanut-free dog biscuit recipes can be found online and the dogs definitely won't complain!