

# An Educator's Guide to **IT WASN'T ME** by Dana Alison Levy

*Aligned to the Common Core for Grades 5, 6, and 7*

## ABOUT THE BOOK

When Theo's self-portraits at school are vandalized, there are five kids at the scene: the Nerd, the Princess, the Jock, the Weirdo, and the Screw-Up.

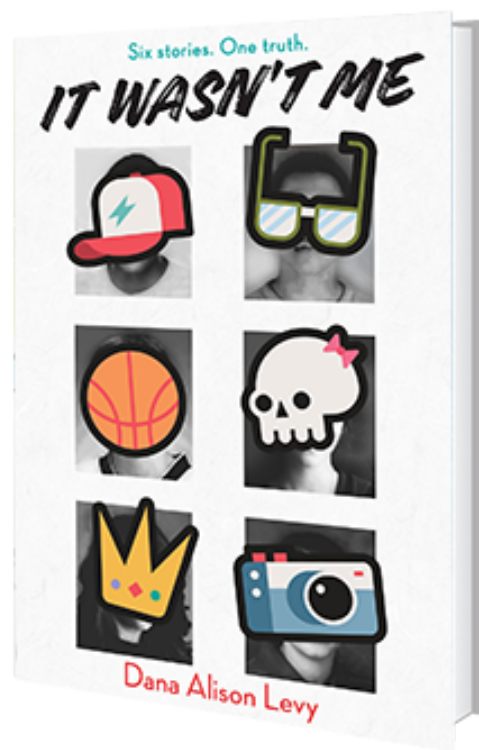
All anyone will say is "It wasn't me."

Theo doesn't care who it was: he just wants to stop being the victim. The sooner the school forgets the whole humiliating thing, the better. But his favorite teacher is asking the six of them to spend vacation week together "learning to trust" and getting to the truth. She calls it a Justice Circle. Theo calls it his worst nightmare.

But soon Theo realizes that he doesn't know anyone as well as he thought, not even himself. And the truths they share might change their lives forever.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Dana Alison Levy's* books about the family Fletcher have garnered starred reviews, been named to multiple Best Of lists, and were Junior Library Guild selections. Also her kids like them. Dana was last seen romping with her family in Massachusetts. If you need to report her for excessive romping, or if you want to know more, head to [www.danaalisonlevy.com](http://www.danaalisonlevy.com)



## PRE-READING QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

### The Cover

1) Based on the title, what do readers expect from the book? Will it be a mystery? Will it be funny or more serious? Discuss why the different emojis might be masking the students' faces on the cover. What do readers think they might mean?

2) Read the book's cover blurb to the class then ask, what do readers think? Do they have a different opinion of what the various emojis might mean? Do they want to guess who's lying when they say "It wasn't me"?

### The Format

Discuss the format of the book, how most of it is told in Theo's voice, but that there are written assessments that the five other characters answer each day. What might be the reason for including those sections? What can the author use them to tell us?

### Connecting to Readers' Lives

Discuss readers' past experiences. Have they ever had something happen where no one was willing to come forward? How was it handled? How did everyone feel afterwards? How do you think an incident like this would be handled at your school?

## *Taking Another's Perspective*

### Analyzing the Day 1 Assessments

Based on the Day 1 assessments at the very beginning of the book, create an identity web for each of the main characters, including what's important to them and what they are worried about.

### Tracking the Five Days of the Justice Circle

The book takes place over five days, and each day starts with the five suspects filling out an assessment of what happened the day Theo's photos were vandalized. Using the Reader's Assessment handout provided, have readers fill out their own assessment after they read the events of each of the five days of the Justice Circle. Who do they suspect? What are their opinions of the five characters? What evidence do they have to support their suspicions? How do their opinions change as they read further? By the

end of the book, how do their earlier opinions of the characters shift? Discuss how viewing each character from Theo's biased perspective impacts how readers see the characters.

### Analyzing the Power of Perspective

Have readers work in pairs to write a short school newspaper article about the vandalism of Theo's photos with as little bias as possible. Then, have them choose one of the characters and rewrite the newspaper article from that character's perspective. Have them share with the rest of the group their revised article and have the group guess which character's perspective it is. How could they tell?

### *Vocabulary Words*

Have readers keep a list of interesting and unfamiliar words they come across in the text. They should include the page number and their best guess on the word's meaning, based on the context in the book. Then have them look up the words and compare the dictionary meaning to what they hypothesized. Have them discuss why an author might choose one specific word rather than another with a similar meaning. Does it reveal anything about the character who used it?

RL 5.4, 6.4, 7.4; RF 5.4; SL 5.1, 6.1, 7.1; L 5.4, 5.5, 6.4, 6.5, 7.4, 7.5

## POST-READING QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

### *Character Study*

There are several different ways an author tells readers about a character

- the physical description
- what the character says
- how the character acts
- what others say about the character

Use pages 13-14 as one example. How does each character respond to Mrs. Lewiston's request to move their desks into a circle. What does that say about each of them?

### Understanding Theo

Have the readers work together to illustrate how the author portrays Theo. Using each of the four elements above, have readers list what they know about him. How do others view Theo? How does he view himself? What do his clothing or style choices tell us? How do his actions match up with these other elements?

### Understanding The Other Characters

Once the class has worked together on this, have readers work individually to create character studies of one of the other characters. Which of the four elements provides the most information about the character? Does the format of the book — being mostly in Theo’s voice — make it harder or easier to develop character studies of his classmates?

RL 5.1, 5.3, 6.1, 7.1; W 5.4, 6.4, 7.4; SL 5.1, 6.1, 7.1

### **Point of View**

*It Wasn't Me* is mostly written in the first person, with Theo telling his own story. Can readers think of other books told in this point-of-view? As a class, discuss the benefits and challenges of telling a story this way. What do they like about first-person stories? What would be different if this was told from a third-person point of view?

### First Person Perspective Vs. Third Person Perspective

Have each reader choose a short selection from the book and rewrite it in the third-person. Ask them to think about what would be different. Working as a class or in small groups, have the readers compare their versions with the original. How does this shift in perspective change the story?

### Comparing the Perspective of Two Different Characters

Now have each reader rewrite the same selection in the first-person point of view of a different character. What’s going on, compared to how Theo describes it? Would s/he use different words or phrases? What different assumptions would s/he make about the other characters? Working in pairs or small groups, have readers share and revise based on peer feedback. As they share their work with the class, ask readers to explain, using evidence from the text, why they made the choices they did around word choices, perspective, and character development.

RL 5.1, 5.5, 5.6, 6.1, 6.5, 6.6, 7.1, 7.3, 7.6; W 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, 5.10, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, 6.6, 6.10, 7.3, 7.4, 7.5, 7.6, 7.10; SL 5.1, 6.1, 7.1

### **Themes**

Have a class discussion about what some of the main themes of *It Wasn't Me* might be. How does the plot underscore those themes? How do the characters' actions express them? Have readers identify what they believe is one of the most important themes of the book, then explore that theme using the graphic organizer provided. Readers can use examples from the text to illustrate how the authors uses plot, character development, and description to show the importance of this theme. Consider having readers use the graphic organizer to write an essay further exploring the theme and discussing what the author might be trying to say about it. Working in pairs or small groups, have readers share their work and revise based on peer feedback.

RL 5.1, 5.2, 6.1, 6.2, 6.5, 7.1, 7.2; W 5.1, 5.4, 5.5, 5.10, 6.1, 6.4, 6.5, 6.10, 7.1, 7.4, 7.5, 7.10; SL 5.1, 6.1, 7.1

### **Photography and Extra-Curricular Activities in the Text**

Theo's photography plays a vital role in the both the plot of the story and in how he thinks of himself.

#### Understanding Theo Through his Photography

Have readers find examples in the text for when Theo defines himself through his photography. How does his discussion of photography act as a metaphor for other issues?

#### Understanding Other Characters Through their Activities

What activities do other characters use to define themselves? Have readers find examples in the text of places where different characters use their outside interests to reveal more about themselves. Do each characters' interests inform the language they use or the actions they take? Ask readers to provide several examples for a given

character. Compare how Theo thinks of his fellow students at the beginning of the book, in the middle of the book, and at the end of the book. How have their outside interests changed his perspective?

### Application to Real Life

Breaking into pairs or small groups, or working as a class, have readers discuss whether their own outside interests play an important role in how they define themselves. Do their friends see this differently?

RL 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.5, 7.1, 7.2; SL 5.1, 6.1, 7.1

## **Humor**

*It Wasn't Me* is full of humorous moments, from slapstick physical humor to wordplay.

### Analyze a Humorous Moment from the Book

Have readers pick their top three humorous elements of the book. Ask them to write a description of the funny moment, along with an analysis of what makes it funny. As a class, discuss these moments. Do readers agree on the parts that are funny? What makes them funny? Discuss how humor is used by the author to introduce more serious subjects.

### Write Your Own Humorous Moment

Using a funny moment from the book as inspiration, have readers write a short piece of humorous creative writing. Prompts might be something that happened on the way to school, or something a younger sibling said, or a time when a pet acted silly. What can they learn about the challenge of writing humor? Ask them to discuss if it is harder or easier than writing something serious.

RL 5.1, 6.1, 7.1; W 5.1, 5.4, 5.10, 6.1, 6.4, 6.10, 7.1, 7.4, 7.10; SL 5.1, 6.1, 7.1

## **Serious Topics**

While *It Wasn't Me* uses humor throughout, it also touches on more serious issues. For much of the story Theo acts as though he is not really affected by the vandalism, but by the end he admits, to himself and others, how hurt and upset he really is. Other

characters also share more personal information about painful and challenging subjects. What changes throughout the book that allows Theo and the other characters to address these serious issues? How does Ms. Lewiston’s Justice Circle help them talk about them? If you were in the Justice Circle with them, do you think you would have been willing to share personal information by the end? Why or why not? Are there places in real life where that kind of honest sharing can happen? Why or why not? What does Theo mean at the end when he writes, “We got to the truth, and the truth isn’t as simple as it seems.”?

RL 5.1, 5.2, 5.6, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.5, 7.1, 7.2, 7.3; SL 5.1, 6.1, 7.1

### **Additional Discussion Questions**

1. At the beginning of the book, Theo makes it clear that he knows everything he needs to about the five students in the Justice Circle. Why does he think he knows them so well? What is he basing his opinions on?
2. What activities does Ms. Lewiston choose to have the group undertake in the first two days, and what is her goal? Is she successful? Why or why not?
3. In Chapter Nine, the students talk about lying. Theo says that he lies fairly often. What are some of the reasons he lies? Does he talk about them with the group? What about the other kids? What do their lies reveal to Theo or to the reader?
4. By the middle of the book, Theo is learning more about his fellow classmates, leading him to question his assumptions. What is one thing he learns about each of them that starts to change his mind?
5. What do you think is easier for Theo to express, anger or sadness? Why is that? Do any other characters in the book mirror this trait? Which one(s)?
6. At the beginning of the book, on the first day, Theo says “I did my part by showing up.” How has his attitude changed by the last day? What caused this change?
7. In the Author’s Note, Dana Alison Levy writes about the practice of Restorative Justice. Do you think this is a better way to deal with problems than traditional punishment? Why or why not? Give examples of the kinds of issues that could be dealt with using Restorative Justice. Are there some problems that it is *not* suited for? Why or why not?
8. Fill in this sentence: “This book is about \_\_\_\_\_, but deep down it’s *really* about \_\_\_\_\_.” Discuss why you chose the answer you did.

## RELATED ACTIVITY: SELF PORTRAITS

Using a pinhole camera (see below), or a conventional one, have students take photos of things that are important to them, and that help symbolize their identity. These photo collections will form a kind of self-portrait. Present each collection anonymously, and have the class try to guess who made each portrait. Discuss how much students really know about their classmates, and whether they had made assumptions that may not have been true.



## RELATED ACTIVITY: MAKING A PINHOLE CAMERA

There are numerous resources online for making pinhole cameras. Below are some links, as well as a basic set of instructions.

From Wikihow:

<https://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Pinhole-Camera>

Did you know that you can make a working camera out of items that you probably already have lying around the house? While they seem complex, cameras are, at the most fundamental level, dark boxes with a small hole for transferring light from an outside subject to a light-sensitive material. Follow the steps below to make a cardboard or metal pinhole camera.

### **Making the Shutter and Viewfinder:**

- Cut a shutter out of dark paper. Opaque cardstock that does not allow any light through works best for this step. Make sure that the paper is thick enough not to fold as it is used.
- Cut a square about two inches by two inches out of the dark cardstock. Make sure that the square is large enough to entirely cover the hole you cut in the bottom of your container.
- Tape the square to the body of the camera along one edge above the pinhole. This piece of tape will act as a hinge that allows you to open and close the shutter when you want to filter light.
- Use any type of sturdy tape such as electrical or duct
- Put a piece of tape on the bottom of the shutter flap. Use a less-sticky tape for this side, (electrical tape works great, duct is too strong) and tape down the opposite end of the shutter underneath the pinhole when you are not taking a photo to prevent light from entering the inside of the camera.

Create a viewfinder out of cardboard. The viewfinder allows you to replicate the geometric relationship of the pinhole to the film and helps you visualize what your final photo will look like.

- The front viewfinder should imitate the shape of the film and be constructed directly above the pinhole. Secure it with strong tape or hot glue.
- The rear viewfinder should sit on top of the camera and act as a peephole that allows you to visualize your photo. You can make a peephole out of a metal washer

or cut a perfect circle out of cardboard and attach it to the rear viewfinder. Again, secure it with strong tape or hot glue.

- For taking photos of subjects closer than five feet away, position your subject low in the viewfinder to account for the difference between your perception and the angle of the pinhole.

### **Loading the Camera**

- Choose photographic paper or film. If you choose to use photographic paper, you can load it into your camera under specific lighting conditions. For photographic paper, you have to load it either under a safelight, or a flashlight filtered through at least three layers of red cellophane attached to the lighted end.
- The flashlight must be six to eight feet away, so hanging it from a ceiling and working underneath it is a good way to accomplish this distance.
- Unlike photographic paper, film must be loaded under completely dark conditions. Practice loading your camera with a simple piece of paper in lighted conditions, and then with your eyes closed to get the feel of loading the film before you attempt to do so in complete darkness.

Determine the size of your light-sensitive material. You will have to cut the film down into smaller frames. The size of the frame will depend on the overall size of your camera's body.

- For most moderately-sized cans, you can use a strip of film cut into 2 3/8 to 3 1/2-inch pieces. For a camera made from a one-gallon paint can, cut a 4 by 5-inch piece of film. A camera made from a 2-pound coffee can will take a 2 1/4 by 3 1/4-inch piece of film. These measurements apply to the use of photographic paper as well.
- Use sheet film if possible, which is easier to manipulate as it is completely flat.
- Make sure to cut down your paper or film in complete darkness. A closet should work fine as long as no cracks allow light to seep through.
- If you are unsure about the ratio between the size of your film and the size of the camera body, err on the side of cutting too large of a strip of light-sensitive material. You can always trim down the edges of your photo after you develop it.
- Load your camera. Place the photographic paper or film on the inside of the camera, opposite the pinhole.
- In total darkness, secure the film or paper from the back using a piece of tape rolled into a loop. You may need to place tape in each corner of the film in order to prevent it from rolling up. Do not place any tape on the front side of the film or paper, as this may cause damage and obstruct the image formation.

- Make sure that the emulsion side of the paper is facing the pinhole. You can tell which side is the emulsion side of photographic paper from its shiny appearance. The emulsion side of film is the side rolled up on the inside of the spiral as you unfurl it. (If you are having trouble determining the emulsion side, wet your finger and touch either side of your paper or film in the corners. The side which feels sticky to the touch is the emulsion side.)
- Close up your camera. Make your camera completely light-proof by ensuring that any cracks or openings are completely covered by black paint, aluminum foil, or black tape. Any unwanted light that gets through could ruin your picture.

### **Taking a Photo**

- Place the camera on a flat surface. You can either simply set it on a table, counter, any other completely flat surface, or attach it to a tripod using rubber bands or tape. Because of the sensitivity of the shutter, you need the camera to be extremely still as you take photos.
- Determine the exposure time. For film, you only need to expose the camera to light for a few seconds, but photographic film can take up to a few minutes.
- If using film, the duration of exposure depends on the ISO of the film. The higher the ISO, the shorter the exposure time. For 400 ISO film, you will expose it to light for between 2 and 12 seconds depending on the brightness of the external light. For 100 ISO film, the exposure time can range between 8 and 48 seconds, and for 50 ISO film, the exposure time may range between 16 seconds and 1 minute and 36 seconds.
- If using photographic paper, the exposure time will most likely range from one minute to several minutes, though there are photo paper products made specifically for longer exposures, even up to several months!
- You will have to practice to determine the exposure time that works for you, but remember the general rule of thumb for exposure time: the brighter the external light, the shorter the exposure time.
- Point the camera at your subject. Remember to account for the distance between the pinhole and the viewfinder by aiming a bit lower than you might perceive.
- Open the shutter flap. Pull the bottom tape up to allow light to stream through the pinhole. Do so very carefully so as not to shake the rest of the camera.
- If your exposure time is several minutes or hours, you can carefully tape the shutter open so that you don't have to hold it open manually.
- You can also place some sort of weight such as a rock or a shoe on top of the camera if it is windy where you are photographing.

- Close the shutter. Once you've held the shutter open for the desired exposure time, retape the flap down to prevent any more light from entering through the pinhole. During the time that the shutter was open, an image was created on the film or photographic paper. All that's left to do is develop your photo.

### Developing a Photo

- Choose whether to develop your photos yourself or take them to a developer. Developing your own photos takes a considerable amount of resources, including several chemicals and solutions, a darkroom, and (if using film) an enlarger. Film and photo paper from a pinhole camera can be taken in to a photography store and developed just like any other type of film. If you choose to develop your film yourself, however, read on to find out what you'll need.
- Learn how to develop black and white film. The basics of film developing include three solutions: developer, stop bath, and fixer.
- Gather your developing materials. In addition to a darkroom, you will need developer solution, fixer solution, water, tongs, towels, a sheet of glass, and a safe light in your dark room. Your darkroom must be completely black other than having the safe light on.
- You can also use orange LED halloween bulbs as safe lights.
- You will also need three plastic dish washing tubs. Fill one with about two inches of developer, the second with about two inches of water (called a stop bath) to stop the developing process, and the third with fixer solution.
- Take the film or photo paper out of the camera. Only do so once you are in a darkroom lit only by a safelight. White light will destroy your photo.
- Use a photo enlarger to transfer the negative to photo paper. If you used photo paper in your camera instead of film, skip this step. Otherwise, place your negative on the negative slide, turn the enlarger on, and choose the appropriate f/stop for your photo.
- You may want to create a contact sheet to test out different f/stops before settling on an f/stop. Do so by covering the paper with a piece of black cardstock and gradually uncovering it while changing the f/stop in order to create strips of different brightness.
- Place your photo paper into the developer. Once you have transferred the negative image to photo paper, place it in the developer using a pair of tongs. Watch as the image appears on the paper and take the image out of the solution using tongs as soon as it is as dark as you want it to be.
- Gently rock the tray back and forth to spread the solution over the photo paper.

- Keep in mind that the image will appear a bit darker in white light once you are outside of the darkroom.
- Transfer the photo paper to the stop bath for about ten seconds. The stop bath should consist of room temperature water.
- Using tongs, place the photo paper in the fixer for two minutes.
- Remove the photo and rinse over running water for two minutes. Allow the photo to hang dry completely or dry with a hair dryer

Other Pinhole Camera Resources:

- <https://www.pinholeresource.com>
- <https://www.diyphotography.net/23-pinhole-cameras-that-you-can-build-at-home/>
- <https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/books/pinhole-camera/>
- <https://learning-center.homesciencetools.com/article/how-to-make-a-pinhole-camera-science-project/>
- <http://www.muslimheritage.com/article/childrens-activity-how-make-pinhole-camera>

## About This Guide

This guide was created by the author in collaboration with Ann Braden, former middle school educator and author of *The Benefits of Being an Octopus*.

Visit the Common Core State Standards website to read about the individual standards listed in this guide: <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards>

*What Do YOU Think Happened?*

Day of Justice Circle (check one)

1

2

3

4

5

What do you think happened to Theo's photos?

What is your general opinion of the five suspects?

Who do you suspect?

What evidence do you have to support your suspicions?

Do you have the same opinion as you did after finishing the previous day's section?

Why or why not?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# Analyzing a Theme in *It Wasn't Me*

**Theme:**  
Choose one that stands out to you.)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

<b>The PLOT</b>
Describe how you see this theme in the plot: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____

<b>The CHARACTERS</b>
Describe how you see this theme in the characters: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____



<b>Specific Examples from the Plot</b>
List 3 examples from the plot that demonstrate this theme (cite page numbers if possible): 1) _____ _____ _____ 2) _____ _____ _____ 3) _____ _____ _____

<b>Specific Examples from the Characters</b>
List 3 examples from the characters that demonstrate this theme (cite page numbers): 1) _____ _____ _____ 2) _____ _____ _____ 3) _____ _____ _____