Unwind

By Neal Shusterman

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Publisher: Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers Reprint Edition
Brief Plot Summary:

*Unwind* tells of the near future where the process of unwinding has been accepted as an alternative to abortion. It occurs after the Second Civil War and follows the lives of three teens, Connor, Risa and Lev, who have been selected by those around them to be unwound. This novel tells their story as they attempt to escape their fate and all the while question who they are and the world that they were born into.

Grade Level and Organizational Patterns:

This novel is being examined with high school seniors in mind as it deals with controversial subjects that students will need to be mature enough to discuss. There are also some graphically disturbing parts that would not be appropriate for younger students. For example, Part 6, Chapter 60 describes the process of unwinding or the process of slowly removing parts of a person (not gory) to be given to another person.

The novel is broken up into six parts with each part foreshadowing, through its title and the excerpt that is included on its intro page, what is to come in the following chapters. It is told primarily from the perspective of the three main characters, Connor, Risa and Lev. However, their parts are laced with the perspectives of all those that the three encounter. The many different parts and perspectives that are presented to the reader create a maze-like story in which the reader will not reach the end until they have read the last page.

The Big Question:

What is the value of a human being and who determines that value?

Background Knowledge:

In order to read this novel for its full potential impact and understand the gravity of what it is describing, students will need to understand the intensity of the abortion debate and how it is the one issue where people on
both sides feel equally as strong in their opposite opinions. They will also need to understand why people might have chosen teenagers as the ones that could be unwound. In order to know this, they would need to have some information on the trouble that teens get into and the strained relationships that they can have with their parents. Students would also need to be prepped in the appropriate way to conduct a debate on such a sensitive topic through a discussion of respect of other people’s thoughts and opinions. Also, students will need to be introduced to and taught Argumentation skills to use for their writing. Finally, they would need some basic knowledge of how politics works and how laws are passed so they would be able to understand why the law regarding unwinding was created and put into practice.

Issues Related to this Study of Literature:

Themes: The major theme in Unwind would be related to making choices in the face of adversity. It is also filled with other minor themes such as:
- The effects of a character/person’s background
- Is what is accepted by the majority the best option?
- Motives and results of greed
- Hero’s Journey

Setting: While the setting changes many times throughout the entire novel as the three main characters run away from their homes and travel around the United States in hopes of finding a safe haven, the main settings where significant portions of the novel take place are Akron, Ohio, Joplin, Missouri and Southern Arizona. Within these three main settings the characters visit many sites including people’s homes, places of business, an airplane grave yard and a harvest center where unwinding occurs.
**Point of View:** The novel is told through an omniscient narrator focusing primarily from the points of view of three main characters: Connor, Risa and Lev. Their view of events in the story are supplemented by the views of others that they encounter on their journey so a more complete story is told regarding things that are happening. Some of these secondary characters play a larger role than others and have their perspective represented many times throughout the novel and others appear a couple times until they fade out of the story as Connor, Risa and Lev continue on their journey.

**Characterization:** The first major character that is presented in the novel is Connor. He is a troubled teen who is sent to be unwound by his family because of his repeated delinquent behavior. Connor can best be defined as a teen that hasn’t come to terms with life and his identity. This is best expressed at the beginning of the novel when Connor describes himself. “The idea of kicking-AWOL by himself terrifies him. He might put up a tough front, he might act like the bad boy at school—but running away on his own? He doesn’t even know if he has the guts” (4). Throughout the course of the novel, Connor faces many challenges more difficult than deciding to run away from home and realizes who he is as a person and just how much he can handle through the way he deals with them.

The second major character is Risa. She is an orphan who at the beginning of the novel is studying piano at the Ohio State Home, a state-run orphanage. She is sent to be unwound due to lack of funding and space for her at the Home. When her path crosses with Connor’s she must make the decision on whether or not to take her life into her own hands and through the challenges that she is faced with, learn to trust and eventually love. “Risa is the first to notice something’s wrong with Connor. Risa is the first to care that something’s wrong with Lev. In a moment of selfishness, she finds herself aggravated by it, because
things are going so well for her now. She finally has a place to be” (231).

The final main character, Lev, has known since birth that he was going to be sent to be unwound as he is the tenth child born to his religious parents who believe in giving away ten percent of everything they own as a tithe. Lev unlike Connor and Risa is happy at the thought of being unwound. "It’s no use trying to explain to this godless pair that tithing is all about. How giving of one’s self is the ultimate blessing. They’d never understand or care. Save him? They haven’t saved him, they’ve damned him” (42). It is only through his interaction with the other two main characters and through his challenges in the story that he sees the falseness of the life he once knew and begins to build a new understanding for his relationship with God and the world around him.

**Plot:** The plot of this novel is presented in linear form. It progresses through the points of view of various characters although Connor, Risa and Lev provide the most insight into events of the novel. There are times when scenes or events are presented through the perspective of different characters; however, this is done simply to create a more complete picture of an event and the plot continues to move forward naturally.

**Foreshadowing:** This technique is used on every title page for each of the six different parts of the novel. It is used through the presentation of an alternate piece of text that if paid attention to, gives the reader clues as to what will happen in the following pages. For example, on the title page for part five, an excerpt from a news article discussing an airplane graveyard provides the reader with knowledge of the destination that Connor and Risa are bound for and where they will eventually end up.
Resolution: Neal Shusterman ends the story not in providing a glimpse of change for the future and in giving the main characters reasons to prevent them from being unwound. This can provide discussion for students regarding Shusterman’s choice of ending the novel in this way and why it was important when considering the themes of the novel.

Affective Issue Related to the Work:

Students will be able to connect to the idea of self-discovery which is a challenge that each of the three main characters is dealing with in their own way. They will also have greater potential to connect with one of the main characters over the others. This would provide the teacher with topics for discussion as the class examined the actions and decisions of each of the characters and determined if it was the right course of action and what they the beginning of the novel Lev makes the decision to turn Connor and Risa over to the authorities by approaching a secretary at the school that the three of them are hiding at and says, “My name is Levi Calder, and I’ve been kidnapped by two runaway Unwinds” (78). Students who can sympathize and connect with Lev will be more likely to defend or at least explain his behavior whereas other students who connect more with the other two characters would view this as a huge betrayal.

Vocabulary Issues:

The author’s word choice in this novel is an important element to study. Shusterman uses neutral-sounding words to identify and describe people and actions that are disturbing. Unwinding, storking, clappers, chop shop, harvest camp, divided, tithe—these words are non-threatening in our world. But in the novel, they have very different implications. Using these words as pre-reading vocabulary, then comparing the definitions during and after reading shows how meaning changes depending on the context. One simple example that illustrates this concept is the response to someone being storked, having a baby placed on their doorstep to be raised as their child. “The door of the house opens. There’s a fat little kid at the door—six, maybe
seven. He stares down at the baby. ‘Aw, no way!’ Then he turns and calls back into the house, ‘Mom! We’ve been storked again!” (62).

**Glossary of Words:**

Clapper: a person that has injected explosives, and has enough in his bloodstream that when he claps his hands, he becomes a suicide bomb (5).

Chop shop: this is slang for the building at the harvest camp where kids are brought to have their bodies divided into parts for organ donation (270).

Divided: when unwound, a person is not killed, but separated into parts which are then kept alive in other people through organ donation (24).

Harvest camp: This is where people are sent to be unwound (26), where they will “receive the finest possible care from our board-certified staff as they make their transition to a divided state” (263).

Stork: when an unwanted baby is placed on the doorstep of a home, where the family is then legally obligated to raise the child as their own (23).

Tithe: a child that is given to be unwound as a way to “serve God and mankind” (31). This child is “chosen” as a special person to be divided as a sacrifice (28).

Unwind:”the process by which a child is both terminated and yet kept alive” (1). A person’s body is divided into parts for organ donation purposes. A parent may choose to have a child retroactively “aborted” between the ages of 13-17 (1).

**Implications for Students of Diversity:**

A major issue that could result from the diversity of students’ background is their thoughts and feelings that they already have based on their different cultures regarding abortion. Feelings of tolerance and a respect for other people’s opinions and their rights to these opinions would have to be stressed along with idea of agreeing to disagree before beginning the novel so class dialogue would never turn into a heated discussion.
A second issue might arise for reluctant readers because of the way that the novel is structured. It might be difficult for reluctant readers to follow the story with the constant change in perspective and multiple presentations of the same event. In order to assist them in their reading of the novel, it might be beneficial to have them interact with shorter simpler texts that utilize the same techniques before beginning Unwind so they would have experience reading this type of work. They could also keep a notebook or story map where they would be able to track the story as it progressed.

Gender Issues:

There is a gender issue that deals with unwed girls and women. Abortion has been outlawed and storking has replaced it, but the issue of unwanted children is still an unsolved elephant in the room. Society’s attempt to appease everyone has still left women alone in their struggle to deal with children they can’t or won’t raise and virtually ignored and abandoned them to stork their babies. “Still aching from the trauma of delivery, she holds her newborn close. It’s just after dawn on a chilly morning. . . . She chooses the home shrewdly. . . .She gingerly climbs the porch steps, careful not to make a sound, then kneels down, placing the sleeping baby on the welcome mat. . . . She considers ringing the bell and running, but she realizes that would not be a good idea. If they catch her, she’s obliged to keep the baby” (54). There are examples in the novel where a baby is found on a doorstep and passed to another house to avoid responsibility of raising a child. Outlawing abortion has only changed the problem, not solved it, leaving women again neglected in their time of greatest need for help. This is an important issue for teens to consider and discuss current women’s issues.

When it comes to unwinding, however, all things are equal. Gender is not a consideration in the decision to unwind a teenager. The issue of how coldly society deals with unwinding teenagers is a valid discussion. Why teens are so easily disposed of would be an engaging subject for more mature students.

Research Issues/Project Ideas:
*The Hero’s Journey through Connor: Have students compare Connor’s journey to the traditional Hero’s Journey. They could create a “Road Map” for his story and the Hero’s Journey or they could visually represent Connor as a Hero by creating an image of Connor that incorporated the different parts of the Hero’s Journey that he underwent.

Research the Intensity of the Abortion Debate: Have students put their personal feelings aside and simply research the abortion debate and the consequences of it. They would answer questions such as: How does each side feel? Are there any issues that the different sides would be willing to compromise on? Why does each side believe what they do? They would present their findings through a traditional research paper. This could be done with a T-Chart which would provide students with a visual of the two sides.

Words of Power: Students would determine how words are given power in a society through looking at the various words with power in *Unwind* like storking and unwinding. They would then determine which words in their own lives were words of power and why and then do the same for society as a whole. The class would then put all their findings onto a Wordle in order to get visual representation of what ideas are important to students and to people in general. Students could then reflect on these in a small writing assignment.

Create a brochure for a harvest camp. It must market the camp as the best place for their teens to be unwound. This would be an excellent multimedia project for students to engage in their technological expertise. They would be able to explore the concept of marketing and advertising. Using an alternate genre to assess their knowledge of the novel and having them investigate their topic in an innovative way would be an engaging assignment for them.

Text Sets and Enrichment Resources:
Informational Texts:


Graphic Novel

* American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang

Picture Books

Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day by Judith Viorst (Aladdin, 1972)
Once Upon a Cool Motorcycle Dude by Kevin O’Malley (Walker Childrens, 2005)

Short Story:

“The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson
“The Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut

YA Novels:

Matched by Ally Condie (Speak, 2010)
The Giver by Lois Lowry (Bantam, 1993)
Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins (Scholastic, 2008)
The Maze Runner by James Dashner (Delacorte, 2009)
Witch and Wizard by James Patterson (Little, Brown, 2009)
1984 by George Orwell (Signet, 1950)
Films

*Blade Runner* directed by Ridley Scott (Warner Bros., 1982)
*The Island* directed by Michael Bay (Dream Works, 2005)
*V for Vendetta* by James McTeigue (Warner Bros., 2006)

Music

*If I Die Young* by Kimberly Perry, The Band Perry (Republic Nashville Records, 2010)
*Another Brick in the Wall* by Roger Waters, Pink Floyd (Columbia, 1979)